

INDEXICALISM AND ITS RISKS: A RESPONSE TO BENSUSAN

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ABSTRACT: This article covers three objections I have to Hilan Bensusan's otherwise interesting book *Indexicalism: Realism and the Metaphysics of Paradox*. First, I assess Bensusan's fruitful combination of the philosophies of Whitehead and Levinas and point to some small problems with the way this is done. Second, I respond to his critique of my own philosophical position, object-oriented ontology (OOO). Third, I review his allegiance to the "multinaturalist" position of Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, challenging the idea that specific ontologies can be correlated with particular political results.

KEYWORDS: Bensusan; Object-oriented ontology (OOO); Multinaturalism

Hilan Bensusan's *Indexicalism* has already created a significant amount of excitement in the few months since its release, and has already been the subject of a stimulating online conference.¹ Not since before the COVID-19 pandemic has a collective intellectual discussion seemed so lively to me. For disclaimer purposes, I should say that I have a vested interest in the success of this book, since *Indexicalism* was published in the Speculative Realism series at Edinburgh University Press, for which I serve as Series Editor. This followed the earlier publication of Bensusan's *Being Up For Grabs* in the New Metaphysics series at Open Humanities Press, where I am Series Co-Editor along with Bruno Latour.² Nonetheless, I am not just Bensusan's editor, but also a colleague in philosophy who is subjected to criticism in the *Indexicalism* book. This second hat – of a

¹ Hilan Bensusan, *Indexicalism: Realism and the Metaphysics of Paradox*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2021. An earlier version of the arguments in this book can be found in Hilan Nissior Bensusan, "Towards an Indexical Paradoxico-Metaphysics," *Open Philosophy* 1 (2018), 155-172.

² Hilan Bensusan, *Being Up For Grabs: On Speculative Anarcheology*, London, Open Humanities Press, 2016.

professional colleague responding to criticism— is the one I will be wearing in what follows. Although Bensusan and I agree on some important philosophical issues, the reader will see that we are very much at odds on others. This article is a brief exploration of our differences rather than an effort to summarize *Indexicalism* as a whole.

I. BENSUSAN'S INTERPRETATION OF WHITEHEAD AND LEVINAS

Above all, Bensusan's plan of bringing together the insights of Alfred North Whitehead and Emmanuel Levinas is a good one, since the respective virtues of these two thinkers are complementary. In the words of Bensusan himself: "The indexicalist project emerges from an encounter between the philosophy of organism of Alfred Whitehead— with its attention to experience as ubiquitous and to the immanence of process— and the transcendence of the Other in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas."³ Whitehead brings a speculative cosmological dimension to philosophy that has been all too rare in the post-Kantian period, which has timidly granted natural science a monopoly on all treatment of non-human entities.⁴ As for Levinas, his ethical focus on otherness introduces a radical conception of exteriority that Bensusan (and I myself) do not find in Whitehead's ultra-relational metaphysics.⁵ That said, whenever combining the strengths of two thinkers we need to be careful not to combine their weaknesses as well.

But first, I would like to note Whitehead's unusual status in contemporary philosophy, insofar as he slips through the nets of both the analytic and continental schools. Just consider A.W. Moore's book *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, so wonderfully ecumenical in its selection policy: Moore includes both hardball analytic figures such as Gottlob Frege and Rudolf Carnap and such continental mainstays as Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze.⁶ As might be expected, Moore's book was confronted with the usual quibbles from those whose favorite philosophers were left out of the survey; there is no way to satisfy everyone when making such lists, and I would hate to contribute to such predictable nitpicking of an assiduously researched and executed work like

³ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, xi.

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, Free Press, 1978.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

⁶ A.W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Moore's. There is nonetheless something astonishing, even unjust, about his failure to include a chapter on Whitehead, one of the most ambitious and original metaphysicians in all of history. The omission of this great English philosopher is perhaps best explained if we imagine that Moore, with the best of intentions, was making a heroic effort to be fair to both analytic and continental approaches to metaphysics. If this was in fact the case, then it is suddenly little wonder that Whitehead would slip his mind: for as mentioned, Whitehead can only be counted as an analytic philosopher if we dwell on his mathematical work with Bertrand Russell, and can only be classified as continental if we overemphasize those aspects of his thought that are beloved by Deleuzeans.⁷ For the fact is that Whitehead really does not fit into either group, and hence the ongoing effort to "bridge the analytic-continental divide" (a project in which Bensusan himself is significantly invested) will do nothing to help our collective assimilation of Whitehead. I will claim that this is an even bigger problem with the bridge-the-divide movement than the fact that it spends a disproportionate amount of energy listening to Robert Brandom's and John McDowell's Hegel and –even more so– Hubert Dreyfus' Heidegger and its excessive investment in the red herring called "coping."⁸

An important question for us is this: what do the analytic and continental traditions in philosophy have in common that prevents both from fully embracing Whitehead as a major philosopher? My answer is that both traditions share a deep commitment to *onto-taxonomy*, meaning the often tacit assumption that reality consists of two and only two basic zones: (1) human thought, and (2) everything else.⁹ Here and there one can find extreme forms of social

⁷ For some otherwise powerful interpretations of Whitehead that strike me as veering too closely toward Deleuzian concerns, see Didier Debaise, *Speculative Empiricism: Revisiting Whitehead*, trans. T. Weber, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017; Steven Shavero, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2009; Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. M. Chase, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2014.

⁸ See Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 2019; John McDowell, *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2013; Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Division 1, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1990.

⁹ As concerns onto-taxonomy the three main discussions are in Graham Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer: The Ethics, Aesthetics, and Metaphysics of Love*, 237, London, Repeater, 2016; Graham Harman, "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy," *Open Philosophy* 3:1 (2020), 132-146; Niki Young, "Only Two Peas in a Pod: On the Overcoming of Ontological Taxonomies," *Symposia Melitensia*, vol. 17 (2021), 27-36.

constructionism that reduce everything to a product of human thought, or extreme versions of scientism that treat physics as the only discipline worth a hearing. But the existence of these one-sided fanaticisms simply emphasize the point that thought and world (the latter taken in the narrow sense of ultimate physical material) are widely regarded as the only two options on the table.

This complaint about onto-taxonomy is not quite the same thing as the familiar Speculative Realist charge against “correlationism,” which I also support.¹⁰ When Quentin Meillassoux wages war on correlationism, two aspects of this campaign are frequently overlooked. The first is that Meillassoux *accepts* the correlate of thought and world as an insurmountable starting point for rigorous philosophy, as when he praises

the exceptional *strength* of this argumentation, apparently and desperately implacable. Correlationism rests on an argument as simple as it is powerful, and which can be formulated in the following way: No X without givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X. If you speak about something, you speak about something that is given to you, and posited by you. Consequently, the sentence “X is” means: “X is the correlate of thinking” in a Cartesian sense.¹¹

Meillassoux never abandons his enthusiasm for this correlationist starting point, and regrets only its result. This is the second oft-overlooked point about Meillassoux: when he complains about correlationism, all he is really complaining about is human finitude. That is to say, he is interested above all in trying to demonstrate that the primary qualities of things are mathematically accessible, not in posing the broader question of why all relations in the cosmos must be considered in terms of their appearance inside the thought-world relation.¹² To summarize, whatever Meillassoux’s partial challenge to correlationism, he remains deeply committed to onto-taxonomy.

But our real concern is with Whitehead, who serves as one of the pillars of

¹⁰ The term “correlationism” was introduced in Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier, London, Continuum, 2008.

¹¹ Quentin Meillassoux, 409, in Ray Brassier et al., “Speculative Realism,” *Collapse III* (2007), 306-449.

¹² See Niki Young, “On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access: Meillassoux and Harman,” *Open Philosophy* 3 (1), 42-52.

Bensusan's *Indexicalism*. Whitehead certainly does not agree that the argument for starting with what is given to thought is "exceptionally [strong, or]... apparently and desperately implacable." Instead, he proceeds as if the thought-world relation were obviously just one case among many of a relation between any two entities. Bensusan follows suit, showing no interest in what Jon Cogburn (following Graham Priest) calls the "enclosure paradox," so central to most modern philosophy: how do we speak of that which lies outside thought without turning it into a thought?¹³ Whitehead's singular power as a thinker is due in large part to the way he simply ignores the Kant-flavored inclosure problem, as does—to a large extent—his later admirer Bruno Latour.¹⁴ Yet I also believe that is the source of Whitehead's enduring and tragic isolation as a major thinker: both the analytic and continental traditions are sufficiently spellbound by the inclosure schema that Whitehead, by ignoring it, is widely assumed to have flouted the basic conditions of philosophical rigor. As we have seen, Bensusan does much the same as Whitehead by extending the Levinasian problem of otherness from human interaction to the cosmos as a whole. In Bensusan's words: "Levinas is a central figure in this book, as he provides the basis of the argument for the priority of the Great Outdoors... Levinas, however, concentrates much of his attention on the human Other... To expand his account of exteriority to the Great Outdoors more generally is a central task of this book."¹⁵

Bensusan's admiration for Levinas—one that I fully share—is clear throughout the book. Yet there are certain paradoxical elements in his interpretation of the celebrated French-Lithuanian thinker. As mentioned earlier, for anyone linking Levinas with Whitehead as Bensusan does, the most obvious benefit that results is the ability to counter Whitehead's ultra-relational metaphysics of prehensions with the Levinasian virtue of always remaining open to the other, the face, the future that lies permanently beyond all of one's current relations. Even Saul Kripke's theory of names, which Bensusan cites with evident approval, is strongest when it reminds us that names point *beyond* the given attributes of a thing (and

¹³ Jon Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations: The Dialectics of Persistence in Form and Object*, 61 ff, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2017; Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Second Edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003.

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993.

¹⁵ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 5-6.

weakest when it tries to pin down the beyond by saying such things as “the essence of gold is to have 79 protons”).¹⁶ Nonetheless, when reading *Indexicalism* it often feels as if Bensusan wants to treat indexicals strictly as relationals, rather than as pointing to what cannot be brought into any relation.

Also somewhat surprising is that Bensusan simply seems to accept Levinas’ ability to point to an exterior without answering the looming inclosure-based challenge: if we point to the Other, does it not then cease to be Other? Or rather, this challenge is not so much “possible” as *actual*, given that this is the entire thrust of Jacques Derrida’s famous argument in “Violence and Metaphysics.”¹⁷ Given Bensusan’s own interest in Derrida, and the fact –as he tells us– that he directed a doctoral thesis by Gabriela Lafetá on the Derrida-Levinas relation, I felt somewhat disappointed that “Violence and Metaphysics” is not dealt with at length in *Indexicalism*.¹⁸ It seems to me that such an engagement would have greatly strengthened the book.

Another complaint I would register about Bensusan’s Levinas is that his interpretation follows too closely the usual vision of Levinas as an ethical thinker of alterity. While this is certainly a major aspect of his philosophical work, what I miss in Bensusan is any clear sense of the Levinas who is also fascinated by the hither side of Being: the surface realm of *jouissance*, where Heidegger’s teleological account of the tool-system is replaced by discussion of the human enjoyment of fine cars and cigarette lighters as ends in themselves.¹⁹ While admittedly not as close to Bensusan’s philosophical enterprise as the ethical Levinas, the latter’s sensual focus on enjoyment is a distinctive contribution to philosophy, one that combats the relational holism of Heidegger’s hammer with a sense of non-relational privacy. For this reason, I believe that it ought to be included in any well-rounded picture of Levinas’ intellectual career.

As a final objection, it also seems at times that Bensusan is too accepting of

¹⁶ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 1981.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, 79-158, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978. For further discussion see Graham Harman, *Skirmishes: With Friends, Enemies, and Neutrals*, 141-166, Brooklyn, NY, punctum, 2020.

¹⁸ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, xiii.

¹⁹ See Graham Harman, “Levinas and the Triple Critique of Heidegger,” *Philosophy Today*, Winter 2009, 407-413.

the Levinasian characterization of the Other as an “infinity.”²⁰ One possible consequence of this assumption is a weakening of our ability to treat each instance of the Other as unique and limited. The Other is sometimes much weaker than I am, but can manifest varying degrees of vulnerability, and at other times is much stronger than I am. The Other can be of the same or different gender from me, as Levinas himself recognizes in his (often controversial) passages on femininity.²¹ Certain ethical demands emanating from the Other do seem “infinitely” compelling, such as the imperative to provide food to a starving child on the street; by contrast, it is more than questionable whether I must give the other a chance to speak in my presence if he has previously made threats or sent hate mail in my direction. When the Levinas scholar Simon Critchley advises making infinite demands on power, Slavoj Žižek notes a defect in this advice: “The thing to do is, on the contrary, to bombard those in power with strategically well-selected, precise, finite demands, which can’t be met with the same excuse [that we do not live in a perfect world and therefore cannot have everything we want.]”²² With the recent importation of Cantorian transfinite mathematics into continental philosophy – as in Meillassoux and before him in Alain Badiou – we have already become familiar with one critique of infinity: there is no totality that contains all possible infinities, and therefore no whole can even be said to exist.²³ But in some ways I am more interested in Timothy Morton’s critique of infinity from the opposite direction: replacing infinity not with an unlimited roster of transfinite numbers, but with very large finitudes instead.²⁴ Words such as “infinity” and “extinction” flatter us with our ability even to utter them. Hence it is far more threatening to speak of climate damage as lasting centuries and more, rather than “forever”; climate nihilists like to speak of “human extinction,” when the far greater threat is the death of six or seven billion of us. Something similar might be said of the excessive focus, in discussions of Kant’s aesthetics, on his

²⁰ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, xiii, 28, 50-52.

²¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 154-156.

²² Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, London, Verso, 2013;

Slavoj Žižek, “Resistance is Surrender,” *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29, No. 22, November 15, 2007.

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v29/n22/slavoj-zizek/resistance-is-surrender>

²³ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham, London, Continuum, 2005.

²⁴ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

notion of the sublime and its invocation of what is *absolutely* large or powerful.²⁵ One of the things that makes his discussion of beauty of even greater interest is that while beauty for Kant resists prose paraphrase as much as does the sublime, it is easier to treat different beauties differently given that beauty is always of a finite character. By agreeing too quickly with Levinas that the Other is infinite, I worry that Bensusan loses the ability to give us any ordinal account of which alterities are most ethically and politically pressing.

2. BENSUSAN AND OOO

Let's turn now to Bensusan's critique of object-oriented ontology (OOO), which contains two separate elements.²⁶ In some respects Bensusan is surprisingly close to OOO. For instance: "I take perception to be ubiquitous, and in doing so I take my position to be in line with Harman's object-oriented ontology."²⁷ In the sentence that follows, Bensusan again touches base with Whitehead, that most anti-onto-taxonomical of thinkers. And unlike Whitehead, Bensusan goes so far as to express support for the withdrawn character of the real object in OOO: "the rejection of the bifurcation between human and non-human realities... [the incorporation of] the idea that reality is intrinsically tied to exteriority: the real object is the Other to perception."²⁸ So far, so good. Bensusan even appears to endorse OOO's fourfold: with its real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities.²⁹ But after defining the OOO real object as a kind of Levinasian "proximity" even in its withdrawal, Bensusan laments that "by understanding proximity independently of any deixis, Harman positions the real object independently of its situation; it is an inaccessible feature viewed from nowhere."³⁰ The complaint seems to be that OOO's fourfold is expressed as a neutral theoretical standpoint rather than from a specific stance in the cosmos by a being surrounded by Others. Such a complaint resonates fully with one of the key phrases in Bensusan's book: "The Metaphysics of the Others," which in fact is the

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Pluhar, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1987.

²⁶ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 59-70

²⁷ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 5.

²⁸ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 60.

²⁹ See Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, Winchester, UK, Zero Books, 2011; Graham Harman, "Dwelling with the Fourfold," *Space and Culture*, 12.3 (2009), 292-302.

³⁰ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, p. 61.

title of his second chapter.³¹

Here we reach the threshold of Bensusan's first critique of OOO. As mentioned, Bensusan is more sympathetic than most critics to the inaccessibly external character of the "real" in OOO, which will always be different from any version of it that is ever made present. As he puts it: "There are elements of externality to the very (quadruple) structure of any object. Any object is in-itself to any other— this otherness is precisely the in-itself that escapes the access of anything else."³² Even so, he immediately adds the following reservation:

The Other has a mapped place in [Harman's] quadruple structure of any object. However, by giving it that place, Harman turns the Other into a substantive; it is as if there were a position in the cartography where otherness lies, a position that can be described, albeit not accessed, through a substantive description independent of any deixis... [B]y understanding proximity independently of any deixis, Harman positions the real object independently of its situation; it is an inaccessible feature viewed from nowhere.³³

There actually seem to be two different points mixed together in this first critique: one aimed at "substantives," and the other at the purported "view from nowhere" adopted by OOO. As for the point about substantivity, it is worth noting that among recent philosophers in the continental tradition, Levinas is among those most favorable toward the notion of substance; Alphonso Lingis has explored this topic in an unjustly neglected article.³⁴ But the usual critiques of substance in contemporary philosophy come from the "everything is in flux" standpoint found most often among Deleuzeans, especially New Materialists. And while Bensusan seems somewhat sympathetic to a "process" orientation, this does not seem to be his major objection to what he considers the substantivism of *The Quadruple Object*. His worry seems to be that when OOO pins down the real at one or two points in a diagram, it has thereby *ipso facto* lost the very otherness of the other, and turned it into an "alter ego" that is merely a residue

³¹ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 78-133.

³² Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 61.

³³ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 61.

³⁴ Alphonso Lingis, "A Phenomenology of Substances," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 71:4, Autumn 1997, 505-522.

parasitical on what is already present. Yet it is hard to see why such a calamity would result from merely diagramming the relation between exterior and interior. OOO does split the real into real objects, just as it splits the sensual into these two same poles, but this is the result of a deduction rather than a naïve presupposition that the real must mirror the sensual: namely, the deduction that there would be no way to move from a monolithic lump of reality to the variegated parade of entities and qualities that we encounter in the sensual realm, so that therefore the real must be fractured into discrete components prior to any perception of it. Here it is worth noting that Bensusan's expressed preference for Tristan Garcia's philosophy over mine results from the fact that Garcia "proposes an object-oriented philosophy that postulates no real object," appealing instead to a differential character at the root of things.³⁵

But what Bensusan really seems to be driving at with his "view from nowhere" critique seems to be something else: "Often the very idea of reality [in Harman] appears as [a] hypostasis of the deictic exteriority; it is no more than a tamed surrogate of otherness." Bensusan correctly distinguishes Latour's action-oriented approach to social entities with my own object-oriented strategy in *Immaterialism*, finding fault with that book for positing the Dutch East India Company as a thing-in-itself underlying its public activities.³⁶ Against such an in-itself, Bensusan again recommends Garcia's approach, with its focus on "the vectors of being coming from elsewhere."³⁷ As Bensusan concludes: "Garcia's object-oriented philosophy, and its notion of de-determination, are closer to indexicalism than Harman's. In particular, [in Garcia] it is through other objects that things become what they are; there is nothing substantial underlying them."³⁸

It seems to me that Bensusan is suggesting that OOO makes an unjust transgression of the inclosure paradox with which all rigorous philosophy must begin. This is rather ironic, given that –as we have seen– Bensusan strongly resembles Whitehead in not taking the usual Kantian thought-world starting point all that seriously. Nevertheless, Bensusan's point against OOO seems to be

³⁵ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, p. 62. See Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. M.A. Ohm & J. Cogburn, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

³⁶ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, p. 63. See Graham Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2016.

³⁷ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, p. 62.

³⁸ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, p. 65.

that after claiming an absolute otherness for the real, it goes on to make unjustified postulations as to the character of that real, while Garcia more sagely limits himself to the barrier between ourselves and the other without making impossible positive claims about the other side of the wall. While this is already somewhat debatable as a reading of Garcia, it is far more questionable as concerns OOO, which eliminates all possibility of a “totalizing” discourse from the moment it treats the real as a surplus beyond all relation. If one criticizes this claim –in the manner of Graham Priest– as a self-defeating attempt to speak the unspeakable, then I am not sure how Bensusan’s own philosophy escapes the same charge. Is his theory of indexicalism not also a neutral “view from nowhere” that proclaims the truth of indexicalism in decidedly non-indexical fashion?

But in fact I hold that neither OOO, nor Bensusan’s position, nor any other philosophy is necessarily vulnerable to the inclosure paradox. “To think the in-itself is to turn it into a thought, so that it is therefore not really an in-itself.” It is seldom noted that this familiar objection amounts to the same basic argument as Meno’s Paradox, that old Sophist’s trick derided by Socrates in Plato’s *Meno*.³⁹ According to this paradox, we cannot look for something if we already have it, and cannot look for it if we do not have it, since in the latter case there is no way we will be able to recognize it when we find it. Socrates counters with his notion of *philosophia*, which entails that we can in fact have something without fully having it: in the case of the *Meno*, we have some sense of what virtue is without being able to define it explicitly in adequate prose terminology. For OOO purposes one can point to the real, and even deduce a certain number of its features, without being able to express the real adequately in literal terms. The paradox only works if one accepts an all-or-nothing model of cognitive access, as if the very sort of pointing-at-the-Other that Bensusan champions were to be immediately converted into a version of the same, or as if Kripke’s “rigid designator” were already a definite description simply because it fixes our attention on one specific referent instead of another. If Bensusan wants to treat OOO’s rough indication of the real as a reduction of the Other to the same, this critique will boomerang and strike his indexicalism as well. After all, he is trying

³⁹ Plato, *Meno and Other Dialogues: Charmides, Laches, Lysis, Meno*, trans. R. Waterfield, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

to make the same point here as OOO itself: one can be aware of the existence of something Other without reducing that Other to our awareness of it. In fact, OOO and indexicalism have a similar status in the sense that neither claims to be a permanently accurate statement of truth about the way the world is. Both are too historically self-aware for that. A better model for describing both would be that of the “research program” as formulated by Imre Lakatos. A research program is a generally fruitful way of looking at the world that can be modified by new discoveries, and which can sometimes endure despite apparent falsifications or counter-examples, at least until a new and better theory appears.⁴⁰ In any case, there is nothing more obviously totalizing or absolutist in the OOO outlook than in that of indexicalism, or of any other philosophical position for that matter.

Bensusan’s second critique of OOO comes a bit later in the book, and receives less development than the first. In his own words: “Harman’s object-oriented ontology... emphasizes that concealment is not something our [human] correlation promotes, but rather a general feature of every relation between any two objects.” This much is true. But there is something wrong with Bensusan’s evaluation of the point: “[Harman’s] position also resembles the metaphysics of subjectivity because it makes a feature of correlation –occultation– the basis for a speculative jump towards a general account of objects that makes room for hidden real objects.”⁴¹ In short, the objection is that OOO wrongly projects a specifically human predicament (the fact that reality withdraws from our direct access) onto entities as a whole. While a number of critics have expressed this view, there is little doubt that Bensusan draws it from Meillassoux’s so-called “Berlin Lecture” of 2012, which for various reasons I regard as the least satisfactory publication to date from that otherwise meticulous French thinker.⁴²

⁴⁰ Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programs: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1978. For a supportive critique see Graham Harman, “On Progressive and Degenerating Research Programs with Respect to Philosophy,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 75:4 (2019), 2067-2102.

⁴¹ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 96-97.

⁴² Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning,” trans. R. Mackay & M. Gansen, in *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity Since Structuralism*, ed. A. Avanesian & S. Malik, pp. 117-197, London, Bloomsbury, 2016. For a critique of the Berlin lecture see Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 97-111, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

The notion that occultation or finitude is something that exclusively concerns human thought is one of the innermost pillars in the temple of onto-taxonomy. Once the duality of thought and world is given, we follow Kant's observation that all human experience occurs according to the pure intuitions of space and time and the twelve categories of human understanding, and then we have finitude as a uniquely human burden: the cross our species must bear. From there, it is easy for Meillassoux to paint both me and Iain Hamilton Grant as "subjectalists" who illicitly inject thought into everything in the universe. Let's forget for the moment that Meillassoux does not believe in finitude anyway and return our attention to Bensusan, who does. The problem with his claim is that even if we agree that the thought-world dyad is all that is initially given to us, finitude certainly is not given. To convince any experiencing human that their experience is finite in Kant's or any other sense requires a degree of sophisticated philosophical argumentation. Yet that very argumentation, by the same stroke, can be used to argue for the finitude of any relation at all, including inanimate causal relations. Stated differently, it is not through the fact of having human experience that we know the finitude of this experience, and hence it is not necessary to be a flame to deduce that the relation between a flame and a cotton ball must also be finite in its own way. Far from "projecting human thought onto everything else," OOO's concern is to consider what happens at a level far more primitive than human thought: the level of relationality in general, which OOO argues must involve translation rather than direct access between any two terms in any relation.

3. BENSUSAN AND MULTINATURALISM

Lastly, we ought to discuss Bensusan's interest in "multinaturalism" and the consequences that flow from this interest. Readers of Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature* will recall his lament that the idea of "multiculturalism" always goes hand-in-hand with a "mononaturalism," as if there were a neutral world-in-itself out there that were merely colored by countless subjective perspectives on the single reality.⁴³ This complaint about mononaturalism actually entails the rather bold view that different spectators inhabit altogether different realities. And since it

⁴³ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004.

would not be very parsimonious to insist that these countless realities pre-exist the birth of those who will one day live in them, the usual understanding of “multinaturalism” is that it retroactively projects or posits the realities of those who exist inside it. So it is, for instance, that Latour argues that the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II could not possibly have died of tuberculosis (as a team of French scientists proclaimed after looking at x-rays). For while tuberculosis belongs to our nature today, it was not a recognized part of the nature of Ancient Egypt.⁴⁴ Although Latour tries his hardest to make this sound like a moderate and commonsensical position, it strikes many observers –understandably enough– as an extreme form of idealism. Even Slavoj Žižek, who is otherwise deeply committed to the real as something retroactively posited by the subject, stops short of claiming that nature itself changed between the time of Newton and the era of Einstein.⁴⁵

Needless to say, Latour has always worked very closely with the discipline of anthropology, and he has his fair share of anthropological allies, with Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro prominent among his fellow theorists of multinaturalism. Bensusan is fully on board with this trend, which casts many so-called “primitive tribes” in a positive light by showing their superior skills in establishing larger collectives not limited to human elements. In this respect, Amerindian cultures are flat ontologists and actor-network theorists *avant la lettre*, and deserve our admiration for it. In Bensusan’s own words of praise: “animist groups, which are spread throughout the Americas but also found in north-eastern Asia and some Pacific Islands, form social ties that are clearly and explicitly not limited to humans.”⁴⁶ Here it is worth mentioning the work of Descola, who in some ways is less of a relativist than a structuralist. After all, he thinks that the possible natures of multinaturalism are not infinite in number, but boil down to exactly four types: naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism.⁴⁷ By determining how any given culture answers two fundamental questions –do humans and animals have the same kinds of minds, or different ones? do humans and animals have the same kinds of bodies, or different ones?– we can place it

⁴⁴ Bruno Latour. “On the Partial Existence of Existing and Non-Existing Objects,” in ed. L. Daston, *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, 247-269, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 907, London, Verso, 2012.

⁴⁶ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 85.

⁴⁷ Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. J. Lloyd, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014.

under one of the aforementioned four possible headings. As Bensusan approvingly notes: “The core of multiculturalism is that there is an ontological totality beyond any subject’s grasp, something alien to any interiority and accessible only from the point of view of nowhere. Multinaturalism, [by] contrast, posits a commonality in the indexical structure.”⁴⁸

While there are a number of anti-relativist philosophers who are rather blunt in arguing for the superiority of Western knowledge over that of Amerindian tribes –Paul Boghossian comes to mind– I am happy to join Descola and Bensusan in taking the views of animists, totemists, and analogists seriously.⁴⁹ This should not cause us to overlook that a heavy philosophical price is paid in exchange for sustaining the multinaturalist argument. It leads, for instance, to one of the most fateful problems in Latour’s intellectual career. In his masterpiece *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour demonstrates serious problems with the modern bifurcation of reality into subjects and objects, cultures and natures, and similar pairings.⁵⁰ Latour replaces this division with a generalized flat ontology in which all things are counted as “actors” as long as they have an effect on something else. Yet Latour quietly superadds a second distinction to this one, in which he identifies the object-pole with things existing in their own right and the subject-pole with things considered relationally. The former is then dismissed as nonsensical, leaving us with a world in which everything exists only insofar as it relates to other things. Stated differently, the symmetry of cultures and natures (which Latour had pressed hard against the subject-centered position of Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer) vanishes, and in Latour’s work culture retains the upper hand against nature.⁵¹ Microbes do not pre-exist Pasteur; to diagnose Ramses II as having died from tuberculosis is treated as an anachronism. Nothing is permitted to exist prior to registering social effects, or even prior to having been *recognized* as doing so: it is not enough to prove that ancient Egyptians died after exposure to *mycobacterium tuberculosis*, or to demonstrate that HIV already ravaged

⁴⁸ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 87.

⁴⁹ Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁵⁰ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993.

⁵¹ Steven Shapin & Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1985.

North Africa a century ago, since these facts had not yet been established at the time.

Note that there is no *necessary* link between Bensusan's indexicalist position and his further embrace of the multinaturalist argument. He might well have insisted on the ontological centrality of pointing toward an exterior while not denying the independent existence of that exterior; this would have kept him relatively close to OOO. Instead, he chooses to follow the path as Viveiros de Castro, who tells us that "body and soul, just like nature and culture, do not correspond to substantives, self-subsistent entities or ontological provinces, but rather to pronouns or phenomenological perspectives."⁵² In accordance with the principles of multinaturalism, these pronouns and perspectives do not exist against the backdrop of a single exterior world that is more or less approximated in the world of perspectives; rather, the perspectives must come first, and only then can they retroactively posit their own exterior. Thus we see that Bensusan's position is not so much a deixis that points to something Other, but one that *generates* its own Other. Or at least that is what follows as soon as he enlists in the multinaturalist cause.

This leads to the final cause for alarm that I felt when reading *Indexicalism*, which has to do with some of the political conclusions near the end of the book. Bensusan's multinaturalist indexicalism leads to a model in which politics should consist in an infinite conversation between different and equally valid viewpoints. But this clearly runs the risk of a "beautiful soul" position in which the indexicalist adopts a political "view from nowhere" that stands above all conflict and all participation in conflict. No allowance is made for the brute fact that sometimes the Other is not a potential dialogue partner, but someone who must be killed, or at least held severely in check. Certain disagreements have *bona fide* life-and-death stakes. An infinite conversation between those alarmed by climate change and those who deny it, or those who do and do not believe in the perilous threat of COVID, would only benefit one side of these two disputes (the wrong side, in my view). Even the multinaturalist Latour builds his philosophy of climate change around the need for Schmittian combat against climate change skeptics, not

⁵² Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 481 in "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4.3 (1998), 469-488.

ongoing dialogue with them.⁵³ Yet Bensusan seems to defend the view that peace will come only from denying the very existence of a reality outside our pointing at it: as if perspectives were somehow more negotiable if detached from anything else. To my mind this continues a worrisome trend in continental philosophy toward unmooring human political thought from any real conditions, as I recently argued in the case of Catherine Malabou, who shows that the same is true of Louis Althusser and Jacques Rancière.⁵⁴

There is a further tendency in Bensusan's book, which I find regrettable, to link perspectivism with welcoming diversity and substantivism with oppressive patriarchy. This emerges late in the book when Bensusan describes the political work of María Galindo of the *Mujeres Creando* collective, whose aims seem worthy enough. But the implicit ontology described by Galindo carries its own significant risks. As Bensusan summarizes her views: "Galindo contrasts the scripted patriarchal global identities that make women what they are supposed to be with the creativity of each unexpected situated alliance between concrete women."⁵⁵ Likening this attitude to a process of decolonialization, Bensusan returns a few pages later to Viveiros de Castro and what he calls "the new mission of anthropology: the permanent decolonization of thought."⁵⁶ My objection is certainly not to decolonialization, but to the trace of moral blackmail that links that admirable political goal with a specific and highly debatable ontology: that of contingency, non-identity, motion, anti-essentialism, practices, diffraction, and materialism. The notion that substantivism in ontology feeds directly into colonialism and patriarchy is an idea that is certainly in the air in our times, yet it fails to correspond to what we know about the rather loose link between particular ontologies and specific political programs. As a rule, the most important philosophers have discovered ideas that are useful to just about any

⁵³ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climactic Regime*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge, UK, Polity, 2017. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*, trans. G. Schwab, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

⁵⁴ Catherine Malabou, "Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain," in *L'écho du réel*, ed. C. Crignon, W. Laforge, & P. Nadrigny, Sesto San Giovanni, Italy: Mimesis Edizione, 2021. For a critical assessment see Graham Harman, "Malabou's Political Critique of Speculative Realism," *Open Philosophy*, vol. 4, Issue 1 (2021), pp. 94-105.

⁵⁵ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 190.

⁵⁶ Bensusan, *Indexicalism*, 192. The reference is to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. P. Skafish, 40, Minneapolis, Univocal, 2017.

portion of the political spectrum: we are familiar with the existence of both Left and Right Kantians, Hegelians, Nietzscheans, even Heideggerians. The notion that departure from realism equates with increasing political liberation is perhaps the one idea in *Indexicalism* that I find somewhat dangerous. Thus I will close with words to the contrary from Chantal Mouffe, from a 2011 interview: “My agonistic model can be used by many different political camps, including the [R]ight. Ideas on how politics works are not tied to a particular political ideology. The [R]ight understands this much better than the [L]eft, I think. For example, the [R]ight has also picked up [Antonio] Gramsci.”⁵⁷ If the Right can pick up Gramsci, then it can also pick up indexicalism, just as easily as the Left might pick up a philosophy of substance.

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⁵⁷ Thomas Decreus, Matthias Lievens, & Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony and the Radicalisation of Democracy: An Interview with Chantal Mouffe,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 73:4 (2011), 677-699. The passage cited is from pp. 687-688.

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