

Harman's Latour: An epiphany of the obvious?

An introduction to 'School X', the post-continental/analytic philosophy

In a philosophical world of proliferating neologisms and the increasingly tangled concepts that they append to, there is certainly something to be said for simplicity. Ever since Occam's Razor (the principle that "entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily") was incorporated as a principle of rigorous scientific thought, Western thinkers have refreshingly (albeit somewhat irregularly) attempted the occasional theoretical closet-cleanings designed to simplify both the substance and communicability of their ideas. In the era after the medium and the message have long been co-habitants and more, Graham Harman's recent treatise on the metaphysics of Bruno Latour represents exactly such a closet-cleaning, with a monumental scope and ambition. Harman, as a Heideggerian philosopher, a contemporary intellectual category defined by the man who once famously quipped that "making itself intelligible is suicide for philosophy"ⁱ, must be well-aware of the allure of simplicity for his readership, who maybe simply overtaxed by complex jargon and the billowing frills of superfluous conceptual verbiage. And especially where hard sciences (or 'natural philosophies') are concerned, this allure of simplicity is not without good reason. Early in the twentieth century, the philosopher of science Karl Popper argued that pragmatic and aesthetic concerns aside, Occam's Razor could be justified theoretically by the criteria of falsifiability, arguing that since more simple theories inevitably apply to more cases than complex ones, that they are therefore falsifiable to a greater degree, and therefore capable of greater empirical truth. In other words, to be simpler, for any theory, is to be truer.

However, the contemporary postpostmodern reader, constantly bombarded with blithely false advertising promising a host of quasi-impossible idyllic rewards from an increasingly

omnipresent digital screen, has also learned to beware the sense of convenience that a simple, sellable explanation provides. Simplicity is often true because the claim that it makes is modest, placing in theoretical form something that, after examination, is uncontroversially true because it simply *is the way it is*. Consider the heliocentric theory of planetary rotation, or the mathematical proposition that $2+2=4$. The Earth and the other planets do in fact revolve around the sun, and if you and your brother and your parents go for a picnic, there will be four of you minus the ants. How much more complicated would the observable world that we live in have to be for statements as basic as these *not* to be accurate? However, straying further into the realm of metaphysics is stickier as far as simplicity is concerned, because the claims made are far less modest. After all, what's at stake is the entire structure of reality! And so a reader might have reason to be skeptical when an author posits that their fresh-out-of-the-box (albeit a box that has been there for the opening by anyone who wanted to read Latour firsthand) object-centered philosophy is capable of explaining the reality of just about everything. Harman, with a written voice almost trembling with excitement observes: "Every human and nonhuman object now stands by itself as a force to reckon with. No actor, however trivial, will be dismissed as mere noise in comparison with its essence, its context, its physical body, or its conditions of possibility. Everything will be absolutely concrete; all objects and all modes of dealing with objects will now be on the same footing." ⁱⁱ As a reader, we are easily drawn in to Harman's superbly engrossing tone as he perfectly capitulates the breath-catching philosophical sentiment of standing on the edge of a great abyss, beholding a strange vision that has changed everything we ever once thought was true. But how well does his argument really hold up? When the starry-eyed intoxication of introductory epiphany turns into the more plodding explanatory pace of mid-read, how happy are we to have this text as our traveling companion, through a journey which veritably seeks to re-invent reality?

Embarking on this metaphysical journey with Harman's Preface and first chapter, I found myself half-consciously humming the tune to Fred Astaire's rendition of "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off". Harman returns a number of times to the idea that what makes Latour's metaphysics so compelling is the way in which it seems from either hard-line metaphysical position to be an untenable compromise. His language here is succinct and explanatory enough to worth quoting: "...Latour is attacked simultaneously for opposite reasons. For mainstream defenders of science, he is just another soft French relativist who denies the reality of the external world. But for disciples of Bloor and Bourdieu, his commerce with non-humans makes him a sellout to fossilized classical realism. In Latour's own works, however, this tiresome strife between objective physical matter and subjective social force gives way to a more fascinating theme: *objects...*"ⁱⁱⁱ The persuasive intuition here, which I believe is well-calibrated, is that many readers who would be familiar with the "clash of realities" ("the world doesn't exist and/or is entirely social" on the one hand and "our perception and/or social conventions are wholly irrelevant to how we describe the world) are not particular fond of either hard-line position in their purified extremes, and seeing merits in both, have been searching for their own personal way to negotiate and compromise, creating a comfortable middle ground of reality that is both internal and external, both socially created and materially determined. Voilà Latour à la Harman! His explanation of metaphysics, as mentioned earlier is relatively simple. Everything is an 'actant', which is to say that it should be given merit equal to all other actants, and that every actant has relative power that is not intrinsic to the actant themselves but is accrued through their relationship to other actants in a network. This, according to Harman, holds true across the board. Words in a sentence are possessed of meaning not because they are words but because they are in a sentence. A soldier is empowered more by the existence of the army than by the mechanics of his rifle. No longer does the debate of mind over matter, social actors versus

natural ones even appear a relevant distinction. As Harman eloquently puts it, "a pebble can destroy an empire if the Emperor chokes at dinner."^{iv}

At least for myself, whenever an author offers a stunningly simple departure not only from one particular position but from many at once, a skeptical voice in my ear asks: "Well, if it's so simple, why would so many smart people spend so much time arguing about it? And better yet, why hasn't someone else thought of it before now?" The answer to the first question may simply be that, to reverse the Forrest Gump chorus, smart is as smart does, and that the nature of philosophers these days is to latch onto distinctions and encourage arguments for its own sake ("no question too small!"), a sort of behavior that Freud somewhat ruefully summarized with the as "the narcissism of minor differences"^v, by which one can suggest that the endless parsing of ideas and theories, and the concurrently the identities of those who vehemently subscribe to them, serves to create an illusion of significance and vitality among the parsers, when in fact the reality of what's at stake in these debates is decidedly quite less radical and relevant that the participants wish to believe. However, the answer to the second question (of uniqueness, not of origin) is usually even more definitively, that someone *has* already produced a version of the so-called revelation, a version which may even be simpler and more compelling. The logical candidate for this honor may be the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose radical empiricist 'metaphysics of becoming' starkly departed from his predecessors, who were for the most concerned with theories of society or language as isolated and abstract from say, an empirical consideration of ecosystems, of military technology, or of architecture.

Graham is doubtless well-aware of this, and preempts this intuition even in the introduction, where he carefully distinguishes between Latour, who he allies with Whitehead, and Deleuze (paired with Bergson), the latter for whom 'becoming' as a process transcends objecthood

(an artifice of perception after all), while the former insists on the primacy of objecthood over any change at all, a world in which objects are so well-defined by their properties that they are infinitely vulnerable to any alteration, including the passage of time. As Graham puts it: "For the first group, substance is too determinate to be real; for the second, it is too indeterminate to be real."^{vi} As if to substantiate the real-ness and genuine relevance of Latour's metaphysics, Harman is fond of giving lists of everyday objects with which Latour's theories might regular traffic with, for example (to list a few):

"...apples, vaccines, subway trains, and radio towers..."^{vii}

"...generals, surgeons, nannies, writers, chefs, biologists, aeronautical engineers, and seducers..."^{viii}

"...children, raindrops, bullet trains, politicians, and numerals..."^{ix}

"...windmills, sunflowers, propane tanks, and Thailand..."^x

"...bodies, atoms, cosmic rays, business lunches, rumors, physical force, propaganda, or God..."^{xi}

"...pine trees, dogs, supersonic jets, living and dead kings, strawberries, grandmothers, propositions, and mathematical theorems..."^{xii}

"...our prisons, our gas and water infrastructure, the sale of potato chips, international law, nuclear test bans, and enrollment in universities..."^{xiii}

This list of lists is by no means exhaustive. But what is the point? What is the blindingly simple yet profound truth that will change everything and end the debate about whether or not reality is separated by mind or matter or neither or both? Harman writes: "...*nothing* can be reduced to anything else. Each thing simply is what it is, in utter concreteness."^{xiv} Latour's metaphysics is a philosophy of objects, and in order to be metaphysical, everything, material or immaterial or *whatever*, has been characterized as an object, although of course without being *reduced* to any

preconceived principle of 'object-hood'. Hence the repetitive lists. For this reviewer, the starry-eyed moment of epiphany has been momentarily superseded by another figurative sense-organ; the skeptical nose that just caught a unpleasantly familiar whiff of the meta-meta "everything is the same, but yet different" philosophy of the Age of Aquarius, a philosophy which manages to be at once obvious, contradictory, and useless. Objects, or what Latour calls 'actants' are both differentiated and omnipresent, "Nothing exists but *actants*, and all of them are utterly concrete." ^{xv} But isn't metaphysics about attempting to define or characterize reality in certain terms, whether empirical or no? If everything is an actant, which is to say, that if there's nothing we can point to that we can clearly say 'this is not an actant', then isn't the very concept of an actant more or less *completely undefined*? If parameter-less sets are passing for definitions these days, one might equally ask you to draw a picture of a square without depicting its edge! Because if it does pass as such, then I have an entire ream of rare nature photographs to sell you of noseless polar bears blinking in snowstorms^{xvi}, all mint condition, too! And thus, lacking an outside to allow the definition of reality to actually be defined (even the broken metaphysical circle of Heidegger's-cum-Spanos' emphasized exterior *still had a line with which to demarcate one from the other*) isn't what Latour-cum-Harman up to here not even really technically metaphysics?

There are other problems that if anything, may be even more troubling than the tautological vagueness of the actant-concept, such as the inability to say when an actant starts or stops, or how we might distinguish it from other actants. For example, if my foot is an actant, does it start at the ankle or the heel? This seems like that's a pretty important question, if all objects are "totally concrete". And am I an actant built of other actants? If so, this is starting to sound suspiciously like a Deleuzian 'assemblage' under a different name. Harman suggests that the power of actants is their varying relations through networks (hence the title) related to force, but if everything is an

actant then mustn't the networks themselves be actants? And if networks and actants are the same thing, possessed of the same properties, then the idea that an actant gains relative power only through networking (allying, translating, mediating and so on) with other actants falls apart because the actants that are themselves networks could simply rely on a power that was entirely self-contained, or rather, derived from its actant-parts. These questions raise the troubling possibility of a contradiction between Latour's belief that nothing can be based on first principles, and then asserting what seems like almost nothing but. How do we know what an actant is, what it is capable of, what this concept makes possible or thinkable unless we define it as a first principle? I've certainly never met anything that has introduced itself as "totally concrete", and while the description is interesting and intellectually stimulating, it seems to me that it is *deducted* from Latour's own beautifully elaborated epiphany near a provincial French snowbank in the late '70s, rather than *inducted* say, from having encountered an object's property of concreteness and realizing that this property was definitive of all objects. Therefore objecthood (or actanthood) itself must necessarily be a first principle, unless the answer to all my previously posed rhetorical questions is simply 'everything', in which case the concept of an actant is philosophically meaningless. I might as well say that everything is a Xomphlglott, or that everything is an Oni-995-Plot, and when you ask me what each of those is, I'll tell you: everything!

Despite these theoretical problems with the groundwork of Harman's elaboration, 'The Prince of Networks' does have its moments of refreshing and honestly dismissive critique. If one reads the book more as an attack or better yet, a play on the rigidly conventional metaphysical divide (rather than only as the re-construction and elucidation of Latour's metaphysical system) then the lessons which it offers for the student of reality are truly both incisive and profound. The honest (if perhaps hypocritical) antipathy to first principles, totalizing explanations of reality, and

even to probability becomes a strong critique of conventional concept-oriented (rather than material or object-oriented) metaphysics, a critique that resonates strongly with any reader who is frankly fed up with the argument over whether or not capital or gender more closely resembles that magic principle which structures every aspect of social reality. As Harman eloquently and irreverently puts: "The labour of fitting one concept to another obsesses a Kant or Husserl for decades, and even then the polished final product will be riddled with errors detectible by a novice."^{xvii} While I applaud these sentiments, I cannot help but feel that in Latour's case, as often happens within the context of highly critical or de-structive philosophy, the traps laid by the negation of the status quo are often more powerful than the re-constructive elements of the refurbished system are able to either circumvent or overcome.

Harman is doubtless aware of some of these problems and does an excellent job of preempting the skeptical reader. For example, in the chapter 'Questions' he suggests that there are two kinds of critics: "those who want us to succeed, and those who want us to fail."^{xviii} Critics be warned: the second kind are up to no fun. As I wrote this review I was forced to ask myself, which one am I? Before I answer that question, I think it is important to point out that forcing a reader to examine their critical relation to the text is already a testament to Harman's skills as a writer of philosophy. However, like so many of Harman's questions, I find it both puzzling and thought-provoking because I am not sure what success or failure would mean for Latour's ideas. To be genuinely and seriously considered as a shiny new Black& Decker in the old metaphysical toolbox? To supersede even that category, and begin a process of redefinition for the very meaning and purpose of the tools and the toolbox itself? To achieve acclaim and spark discussion among serious thinkers? If this is how success is defined, then I can whole-heartedly put myself in the former 'succeed' camp. But if success is defined in terms of precision, of consistency, and of

empiricism and relateability (Latour's own criteria for good thought) then my serious misgivings with some of the book's foundational concepts may put me more close, if reluctantly so, to the naysayers and nabobs of negativism. However, while Harman's statement to the critics is certainly thought-provoking, one might suggest that just as there are those in the war on terror who are neither "with us [n]or against us" there may be many critics of this book who neither wish it preeminence nor marginalization.

Despite Latour's object-oriented-ness, much of the book wends its way around and through the greatest hits of metaphysics (Aristotle, Hume, Locke, Leibniz, Husserl, Heidegger, and so on) although it does so in a much more lucid and palpably exemplified way than most such texts of similar formula. The traffic with Hume's questions of causation on 'Local Occasionalism' is a particular gem, and of course, as one would expect, the analysis comparing Latour's 'actants and networks' to Heidegger's 'things and relations' is full-flushed and well-articulated. However, as the book moves from theme to theme, I keep returning to my quandaries, moving through them, I find them centered on my inability to grasp what exactly Latour means by his elusive concept of 'concreteness'. Harman is frequently at his best when his writing becomes more poetic, and I found this particular incarnation of the concept most illuminating: "No one ever really saw 'red'. We saw apple-red, ink-red or blood-red, infused with the style of the objects to which they belong." ^{xix} This is certainly a linguistic commonplace where, through hyphenation, we attribute qualities as being 'of the object', rather than vice-versa. However, I could not help feeling that while this object-associative networked reality was now more easily grasped, a color does not merely exist in a vacuum, and that this vision still raised for me the troubling question of *time*.

This question is related to the question of what an actant is, how it is distinguished from other actants, and how it relates to other actants within a network, or a set of variously defined relations. For Latour, the actant is atemporal; it occurs both in time and in space. Therefore, events, just as anything else, are also actants, and the relation they bear to future and past events, people, and other actants can also be described through Latour's network metaphysics. How would this particular type of actants be distinguished, then? How many event-actants are in a minute, an hour, a day, and how can we answer these questions without being arbitrary? More than that, how do we deal with distinguishing these types of actants from others when they flow so cleanly from one into the other, from the beginning to the end, fragmented and re-ordered in memory? Latour characterizes the interaction between actants, in his most broad-brush, as 'mediation', that actants are always mediating (speaking, resisting, struggling, binding to one another) without ever being merely "intermediary".^{xx} But although the example of time is perhaps the best at contesting this version of reality, the world of objects from physics to geoscience to biology is replete with supporting examples: actants must not merely mediate *towards* one another, they *must somehow become one another*, just as the future becomes the past with the turning of the Earth. This empirically justified intuition makes my ever-complicating questions Latour imbue my thinking with a renewed hunger for simplicity, and in this case for the simplicity of a Deleuzian 'generalized becoming' hinted at in the Preface.

At this point, I feel that I've been hard enough on Harman that I owe the reader a few guilty confessions. I am a pretty unapologetic cheerleader for the radical empiricist becoming-based metaphysics of Gilles Deleuze and when the Preface told me that Deleuze's ideas wouldn't play nice with Latour's ideas, well, I didn't much feel like playing nice either. These inchoate sentiments were exacerbated by the repetitive actant laundry-lists and pointed tautologies and reached a head with this paragraph:

Everything is immanent in the world; nothing transcends actuality. In other words, Latour is proudly guilty of what Roy Bhaskar and Manuel DeLanda both call 'actualism'. For Latour the world is a field of objects or actants locked in trials of strength—some growing stronger through increased associations, others becoming weaker and lonelier as they are cut off from others.^{xxi}

Now Manuel de Landa, a Deleuzian film-maker-coder-historian-architect, might be my personal intellectual saint, and when I heard that Latour might be somehow *proud* to be guilty of being accused of something by the veritable personified avatar of truth and justice, my former feelings of uneasy partial-open-mindedness collapsed to nanometric levels. As a point of departure, Manuel de Landa has recently written a book called "Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy" which seeks to justify Deleuze using some basic higher math concepts and case studies from various hard sciences. I think that if PoN and IS&VP were two people instead of two books, filled with thoughts of their pages and footnotes, that upon meeting for the first time they would capitulate a sort of antagonistic agreement about how wrong and ditheringly pointless conventional metaphysical debates over first principles are, in the same way that personal enemies meeting at the funeral of a mutual friend give one another an awkwardly long nervous hug. Once the scenery changed to re-constructing an empirical metaphysics, the stiff-grin camaraderie would end and an escalating argument would ensue, where many of the arguments would attempt to characterize the other side as insufficiently radical, or somehow still mired within classical distinctions or dead modes of thought. While I've already indicated where my own bets would be placed, I would highly suggest reading the two books side by side, perhaps even chapter by chapter, so see exactly how the argument might play out in your own head, without necessarily resolving them, but to examine the points of intersection, overlap and clash. Harman has done a marvelous job advancing beyond the archaic terms of the current metaphysical debate, breaking new ground in exactly the right ancient burial sites. Agree or disagree with his methods, his capitulation of Latour is definitely

stimulating and provocative, and deserves a fair hearing even by anyone with a mind open enough to be made up all over again.

ⁱEndnotes:

[□] Martin Heidegger *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* [*Beitrage Zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*], notes of 1936 - 1938, as translated by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (1989) accessed via WikiQuotes, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Martin_Heidegger

ⁱⁱ Graham Harman *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* Melbourne, re.press, June 2009 p. 13

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 5

^{iv} Ibid. p. 21

^v Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. and ed., James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), pp. 58-63

^{vi} Harman, p. 6

^{vii} Ibid. p. 5

^{viii} Ibid. p. 13

^{ix} Ibid. p. 14

^x Ibid. p. 14

^{xi} Ibid. p. 16

^{xii} Ibid. p. 16

^{xiii} Ibid. p. 22

^{xiv} Ibid. p. 17

^{xv} Ibid. p. 16

^{xvi} This metaphor was adapted from a *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip, by Bill Watterson.

^{xvii} Ibid. p. 22

^{xviii} Ibid. p. 119

^{xix} Ibid. p. 136

^{xx} Ibid. p. 15

^{xxi} Ibid. p. 16