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TURNING TO SPECULATION?

Review of: Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (2011) *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re.press, 430 p.

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These are exciting times in our field. [...] it seems clear enough that something important is happening. In our profession, there has never been a better time to be young.

– Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, *Towards a Speculative Philosophy* (2011)

On April 27th 2007, Ray Brassier, Ian Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux, hosted by Alberto Toscano, met at Goldsmiths for a one day workshop titled ‘Speculative Realism’. The aim was to bring together a diverse range of works that ‘questions some of the basic tenets of a “continental” orthodoxy while eschewing the reactionary prejudices of common-sense’. According to them, ‘Speculative realism is not a doctrine but the umbrella term for a variety of research programmes committed to upholding the autonomy of reality, whether in the name of transcendental physicalism, object-oriented philosophy, or abstract materialism, against the depredations of anthropocentrism’ (Mackay 2007). A

few years later, the breadth of the Speculative Realism movement, as it began to be called, had increased exponentially, also thanks to the extensive use its followers made of blogs and underground publishers. With the intention of assembling and charting speculative thinkers ‘who will be at the centre of debate in continental philosophy for decades to come’ (back cover), Bryant, Srnicek and, later, Harman, decided to publish this collection, whose online publication had already created a buzz¹ on the blogosphere.

In their introduction, the editors of *The Speculative Turn* adhere to this narrative of the new movement and conjure up a sense of a turning point, a radical change. Bryant, Srnicek and Harman are not alone in evoking this feeling of change. In fact, the idea that we are experiencing profound transformations is characteristic of contemporary thought, especially since 9/11.² The editors make their plan explicit: they want to signal a turning away from the kind of anti-realism that Meillassoux dubbed ‘correlationism’, ‘according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other’ (Meillassoux 2008: 3). To counter this position and its focus on text, discourse, and – ultimately – human access to reality, the editors consider objects and ontologies.

Obviously, the framing of this turn in such terms places the founding fathers of speculative thought in a central position in the collection. As they state, the Speculative Realism movement is not a well defined and homogeneous group of thinkers. Rather, heated debates are a characteristic feature of speculative realist philosophies.³ This internal diversity notwithstanding, Graham Harman’s position is one of the most paradigmatic and vocal, and is useful in making some characteristics of speculative thought evident. His philosophy pivots on objects. Starting from the Heideggerian intuition of the tool-being, Harman considers objects to be withdrawn ‘into depths inaccessible to all access’ (8) and to only exist *in-themselves*. In his essay, he criticizes anti-realists and realists alike for not accounting for objects as Aristotelian, withdrawn substances. Both positions, he argues, either ‘undermine’ objects, which means reduces them to a deeper material reality, or ‘overmine’ them, by ‘letting them exist only in their appearances, relations, qualities, or effects’ (9). To counter these moves

and speaking ‘on behalf of objects’ (36), Harman proposes a ‘realism without materialism’ which alone can account for objects in-themselves.

Some of the criticisms this position receives in this volume help highlight some broader limits of a speculative frame. For example, contrasting Harman with Whitehead, Steven Shaviro shows how a more relational approach can better account for an ‘actual volcano’ – *i.e.* one that is open to change – than a world in which objects are withdrawn in-themselves. As he notes, ‘Relations are too various, and come in too many “different degrees of intimacy”, to be reducible to Harman’s caricature of them as reductive, external determinations’ (287).⁴ Shaviro is not the only critical voice speaking against this speculative aversion for relational thinking. Beginning from a realist reading of Deleuze’s notions of virtual and actual, DeLanda indirectly erodes the essentialism of Harman’s objects. In his essay, he considers emergence as the product of nonlinear interactions between complex systems. Ontologies are thus not the substances of objects in-themselves, but the multifarious aspects of an ‘active matter [...] animated from within by immanent patterns of being and becoming’, ‘an immanent real virtuality that changes and grows as new tendencies and capacities arise’ (392).⁵ Moreover, in a large section of the book dedicated to comments on Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (2008), some more doubts on the direction speculative thought might take are made explicit. In his critique of correlationism, Quentin Meillassoux argues against Kant’s Principle of Correlation and suggests a return to Hume’s take on the contingency of causality. In doing so, he posits ‘a mathematical absolute capable of making sense of scientific claims to have knowledge of a time prior to humanity’ (8). Against this, Toscano’s comparison of *After Finitude* with the work of the Italian Hegelian Marxist Colletti argues that Meillassoux’s speculation fails in being materialist since it founders in the idealism of mathematical logics. Even Toscano, one of the original members of the Goldsmiths conference that gave birth to Speculative Realism, here takes a skeptical, if not critical, stance against speculation. The speculative umbrella, under which the collection was framed, already seems to shatter, reorienting the turn suggested by the editors.

Despite being open to such critical standpoints, the collection is generally characterized by a strong sense of antagonism. Indeed, the turn-of-

century feeling evoked by the editors is often linked to a much anticipated ‘renewal’ of philosophical scholarship, hostile to traditional, anti-realist, post-Kantian thinkers. This new philosophy, the introduction suggests, will be one able to provide more space to originality and ‘democracy’, as the innovative publications Speculative Realism relies upon (on paper and, especially, online) should prove. Even if very seductive,⁶ this idea is far from the truth. Like Italian ‘futurists’ or British ‘angry young men’, many of these philosophers are characterized by a radical closure, a ruthless opposition towards everything that does not accept their premises, which is made evident in a prose that is direct, often to the point of arrogance. Ross Wolfe made this clear in his (otherwise similarly exaggerated) parody manifesto: ‘What few people seem to understand about the politics of blogosophy is that it’s secretly a war’ (Wolfe 2011). Out of this ‘war’, stubborn, individualized and atomized trajectories emerge. In reading some of these, Latour’s remark on Souriau’s ‘philosophical politeness’ is clearly relevant: ‘It seems that thinkers never have the necessary politeness for a true multirealism’ (330). This, unfortunately, applies also to *The Speculative Turn*, at least as far as the philosophical positions of some of the contributors are concerned.⁷

Besides the unpleasant and unnecessary character of these disputes, the problem, I argue, is not exclusively a problem of style or ‘politeness’. Rather, what we see is the effect of a holism deeply ingrained in the speculative project. This systematic attempt toward holistic descriptions also seems to affect Bruno Latour. In his lengthy contribution, he analyzes the work of Etienne Souriau, a French philosopher who – in the middle of World War II – elaborated a metaphysics to explore the plurality of the modes of existence of reality. A prelude to his forthcoming work, this essay offers an inspiring and creative list of possible ontologies, but simultaneously risks being taken in by the same holism that pervades much of the volume and, more dangerously, it often swaps empiricism for an idealized and abstract materialism that permeates the entire collection. Indeed, in stark contrast with what they characterize as a deconstructionist and Deleuzian period, many of these thinkers (and here, I think, is where the editorial project is most evident and less fair to many of the contributors of the volume) are concerned with the philosophical category of the Absolute. As Bryant, Srnicek and Harman claim in the intro-

duction, ‘By contrast with the repetitive continental focus on texts, discourse, social practices, and human finitude, the new breed of thinker is turning once more toward reality itself’ (3). This sci-fi sounding ‘new breed of thinker’ begins to assume almost dystopian tones as it showcases its systematism: ‘Genuine attempts at full-blown systematic thought are no longer rare in our circles; increasingly, they are even expected’ (1). The attempt to *define* what is real by starting from speculation, and to do so systematically, is concerning not only for what it does to self-reflexivity and critical thought, but especially for its dispensing with empiricism, its similarities with dogmatism and its wild generalization of (Euro-American) categories to the role of absolutes.

Fortunately, criticisms and remedies of this extreme position are already present in *The Speculative Turn*. In his contribution, Adrian Johnston notices the risk that leading this turn in the direction of speculation entails: ‘There is a big difference between arguing for materialism/realism versus actually pursuing the positive construction of materialist/realist projects dirtying their hands with real empirical data’ (112). To avoid the paradox of materialisms and realisms based on idealist speculation, he suggests, ‘Alert, sober vigilance is called for against the danger of dozing off into a speculative, but no less dogmatic, slumber’ (113). Such ‘sober vigilance’ can be found, for example, in the extremely creative interaction between philosophy and science represented in the collection. Indeed, some of the thinkers in this volume, often coming from outside the very fabric of speculative realism, attempt to take materialism seriously by looking at science.⁸ Paradigmatic of this trend is Stengers’ contribution, which stresses, by means of a commentary on the famous *Conversation* between Diderot and D’Alembert, the importance of wondering involved in understanding materialism as embedded in practices and, thus, being involved in a constant (political) struggle. In doing so, she not only outlines a healthy and empirical philosophy of practices, but she also raises some concerns about how to do ‘good science’.

It is clear that *The Speculative Turn* fails to map a speculative turning point in philosophy. In fact, speculation emerges more as a polemical agenda of some of the contributors. Nevertheless, the collection does raise a number of excellent and urgent questions for contemporary thinkers.

The starting point of the collection, the opposition with what Meillassoux called ‘correlationism’, signals an uneasiness towards the extremes of deconstructionism and those philosophies that completely dissolved reality within a problem of epistemology, dubbed ‘philosophies of access’ by Lee Braver (2007). Clearly related to an increasing interest in materialism that philosophical and social thought are witnessing, this question suggests a growing concern with a more realist and concrete philosophy. The questions of ontology that the collection raises originated from critiques of the primacy granted to the human subject. What the pieces in this collection share is this critique of the post-Kantian human knower and of his privileges. Rather than a speculative turn, this book offers an insight into some of the ways in which contemporary thinkers have been trying to move beyond the humanist core of phenomenology, and signals a strong desire to move away from human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism.⁹

But is Speculative Realism really moving beyond this by means of such wild systematizations? Can the proposal to avoid idealism and return to materialism through metaphysical speculation bring us any further? The answer that Bryant, Srnicek and Harman offer ignores the contributions of empirical disciplines and falls short of realism and materialism. To the extent that it is possible to synthesize a book review in an image, *The Speculative Turn* is well represented by the cover painting of a pair of gardening tools against a black background. These are exactly the kind of ‘objects’ that most of the collection deals with: ideal objects ‘artificially’ isolated in-themselves. By ignoring the importance of the empirical and its situatedness, this proposal fails to grasp the complexity of material and real objects and falls for an idealistic speculation. Moving beyond anthropocentrism requires us, first of all, to acknowledge its importance and its multiplicity, to move beyond systematic categories to more nuanced and situated understandings of reality. This means learning from empirical philosophy, material semiotics, science and technology studies, and anthropology, that epistemologies are also critical to ontologies. Knowledge, perception, imagination, being and becoming are not linear and neatly demarcated processes, they are messy, and delimiting them requires us to be able to constantly adjust our definitions and situate ourselves accordingly. To do so, we need to attend to the empirical in all its relational entanglements. We should counter anthropocentrism with a careful cri-

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tique, a constant reflexivity, an attention to multiplicity and practices, tinkering with and adjusting to alternatives. Deluding ourselves by pretending that anthropocentrism can disappear by just bringing quixotic 'objects *in-themselves*' into our analysis is neither a realist nor a materialist solution. Instead of turning to speculation, to universalist systems, we need to engage and mess with more situated and material semiotic realities.

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¹ Cf. <http://multitude.tv/content/view/472/60/> accessed on 20-11-2011.

² From Žižek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) and Zournazi's *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (2003), to Lovelock's *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006) and Diamond's *Collapse* (2005), to Wu Ming's *New Italian Epic: Literatures, oblique gazes, returns to the future* (2009), from the voices of those taking part in the 'Arab Spring', to those of the Occupy movement's protesters, a need for change, an attempt to find a way out of the Fukuyamean 'end of history' is seen more and more in the 'Zeitgeist' of our times.

³ A case in point is the angry schism between Ray Brassier and the rest of the speculative realism original group. In a recent interview for the Polish philosophy journal *Kronos*, Brassier disregarded the movement as 'an online orgy of stupidity' (Brassier 2011).

⁴ As this quotation makes clear, one way in which relationality is criticized by speculative realists such as Harman is often by relying on a misreading of its proponents. They suggest that relational thinkers believe in a world in which the object is 'nothing more than its effects on other things' (23), but this understanding of relationality appears as a straw-man. This becomes clearer in Harman's reading of Latour as a philosopher *sensu stricto* (2009), which indulges him with his more daring (and yet inspiring) generalizations, often eschewing his crucial empirical material.

⁵ Although inspiring, this position risks crystallizing in a formalized mathematico-computational logic which favors 'long-term historical structures over events' (from <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/manuel-de-landa/biography/> accessed on 20-11-2011).

⁶ This vision appeals especially to younger audiences. More than telling us about the branding strategies of the authors of this volume (as many shallow criticisms argue), this shows how philosophy students are looking for alternatives to traditional philosophy.

⁷ For ideas about a philosophy more passionate than aggressive, the use of the notion of *agape* made by Boltanski (1990) is interesting.

⁸ Also from the field of politics, following Žižek's illuminating footsteps, comes a corrective to such dogmatic holism: Srnicek, the youngest of all contributors, employs Laruellian non-philosophy to try to push the subject of Negri's and Hardt's *multitude*

beyond the limits of capitalism into a seemingly new and open space. Negarestani, instead, mobilizes Freud's death drive to sketch what he calls 'necrocracy', which is 'the organism's affordable economy of dissipation' (192), and employs this in his understanding of capitalism. Unfortunately, while a closer analysis of these articles is beyond the scope of this review, I am curious to see how these ideas will inform speculative thought.

⁹ A desire made evident also by the increasing interest in nonhumans, be they objects or other living critters; cf. Whatmore 2002, Hinchliffe 2007, Haraway 2008, Kirksey & Helmreich 2010.