

## PROPOSITIONS, OBJECTS, QUESTIONS

Graham Harman, in conversation with Jon Roffe

*The following is a near-verbatim transcription of a long conversation between Graham Harman and Jon Roffe on 30 November 2014 in Melbourne, Australia. Bryan Cooke, who transcribed this event, and I made only very minor edits in order to clarify the few moments in the recording that were particularly unclear; otherwise, this is a full record of a wide-ranging discussion, including a number of questions from the floor. Parrhesia would like to thank the Cluster for the study of Organisation, Society and Markets, who hosted Graham Harman's visit, and the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy for their support in running the event and publishing this transcript—Jon Roffe*

**Jon Roffe** Well, first of all, thanks for being a part of this.

**Graham Harman** Happy to be here in Australia for the first time. We've had a wonderful visit. We've been in Melbourne for two weeks. We're going to Sydney next; I've heard great things about Sydney too.

**JR** Well these people are from Melbourne so they won't believe anything nice you say about Sydney. [laughter] So, as I've said, we're keen to sort of make this a conversation more than an ... interrogation. If you feel the questions are too hard, you can respond, well, as if you were being interrogated! That's fine as well. So I suppose I'd like, first of all, to just begin with some very preliminary kinds of questions and sort of introduce those people who are here to your thought in a kind of very introductory way that we can delve into as time goes on. [turning to audience] Now if you've seen Graham talk, you know that he uses these little prompt cards with some mysterious messages on them that—in other words, he's able to reconstruct his thought from these little kernels. So I thought I'd take that as a cue and ask you if you could say in *three propositions*, what would be the key elements of your philosophical approach?

**GH** How about four?

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**JR** Four? [laughs] Okay, fine.

### FOUR PROPOSITIONS ON OBJECT-ORIENTED PHILOSOPHY

**GH** Okay, the first one: when we're talking about Object Oriented Philosophy we're trying to follow philosophy's mission of being as broad as possible. So, of course, the natural sciences will deal with a specific kind of object, physical materials usually, ultimate materials; psychology will deal with *mental* entities and so forth. Philosophy has a more general mandate than that. We're trying to make the globe instead of a map. And so you have to be able to account for everything. So in talking about objects, I'm trying to cast as wide a net as possible: just about anything can be considered an object.

Now this itself isn't entirely original. You can find different philosophers from the late 1800s onwards doing this. It started with the Austrian school with Twardowski and Meinong and the young Husserl who were making similar claims—the object is the most general object of philosophy. You've got Bruno Latour, in his early phase, especially *Irreductions*, talking about how we can't decide in advance what's real and not real, [that] we have to simply cast our net as wide as possible and open it up to everything. That's what they call a “flat ontology” these days—I'll say later tonight why I don't think ontology can be *completely* flat, but it's a good starting point. Don't start off by *assuming* that everything's material, or that it must be a perception of the mind... You start off with an agnostic attitude about what's real and what's not. So that's the first point. And, again, a lot of philosophers have done this: that's not entirely original.

The more original turn, I would say, although it comes out of Heidegger, can be linked to Kant most easily perhaps. If you think about Kant, there are probably two basic things going on in Kant. One of them, of course, is that there are things in themselves that can be thought but not known, and so philosophy becomes a meditation on the conditions of human access to the world instead of about the world itself. That's one feature of Kant. The other feature, however, which doesn't get quite as much attention, is the fact that it's always a matter of human and world, which later gets called correlationism by Meillassoux, which means that in Kant's framework you can't talk about the interaction of two inanimate entities. All you can talk about is *how humans come to perceive that collision between two entities in terms of the categories of the Understanding and space and time?* You're never going to talk about the world in itself without humans being there. And so philosophy becomes a kind of epistemology.

Now, since there are two aspects to Kant, two major aspects to Kant, there are two major ways you can reverse him. Now the first way is what the German Idealists do, which is to say Kant was great except that he had this naïve, old-fashioned, dogmatic thing about the things-in-themselves, so we can get rid of that. And they also held that the distinction between thought and reality is actually internal to thought. This gave us German Idealism and now it gives us Žižek and Badiou. And it gives us Meillassoux.

Meillassoux, for example, is often thought of as a sort of naïve realist because he begins his book *After Finitude* with “ancestrality” meaning that we can talk about the Big Bang and supernovae that existed before any human existed and so sometimes it's said that Meillassoux starts from the scientific standpoint against this postmodern viewpoint that we're trapped in language. Actually, you know, Meillassoux is much more of an advocate of that kind of approach. Meillassoux believes in what he calls the “correlationist circle”, which is to say that you cannot think of a thing outside of thought, because you're already thinking about it when you do that and therefore it's already a thought. It's the same basic move as German Idealism. Meillassoux believes very much that that's a powerful argument in a way that I don't. And so he has to create this kind of complicated path out of it, a kind of “inside job” as it were. He's someone who accepts the basic claim of the correlationist circle and wants to escape it. I don't think his solution works.

I would prefer to reverse the other aspect of Kant. I think finitude is a decisive step forward. I don't think we can get out of that, but I think instead of reversing that, we can reverse the human world priority in Kant. So,

in other words, instead of finitude being this tragic human predicament—where poor humans are trapped in our categories and we're trapped in space and time and we can never know the in-itself the way God would—I hold this to be true of all relations whatsoever. Whatever the two terms are, whether there's a human there or not. Any relation involves finitude. Any relation including brute, inanimate causal relation involves a kind of finitude. Things are withdrawing from each other even at the inanimate level.

And so I have this counterfactual speculation about what could have happened in German philosophy: instead of German Idealism, you could have had German Realism! And it's not as unlikely as it sounds. Remember that Germany was awash in Leibniz at that time, philosophically, and for Leibniz there's no special status of the human. There's the special status of monads, but they're not all human. All relations are problematic, all entities are cut off from each other for Leibniz: monads have no windows. And so it could have easily taken this direction in German philosophy: it's not that the problem with Kant is this stupid finitude, it's this stupid insistence on putting humans at the centre! And so Object Oriented Philosophy, as I conceive it, is this attempt to bring German Realism on to the board, two hundred years late. And it could have happened then.

So that's the second point I would say about my work and it entails a sub-point, which is that there's no direct causation possible. Causation becomes a real philosophical problem. Because if entities withdraw from each other—that's Heidegger's term—because things can never touch each other directly, if things can only touch caricatures of each other (caricatures, distortions, transformations, translations of each other) it becomes problematic how things touch.

And this happens to have been raised in the Tradition, in the school that's known as Occasionalism, which is famous to you from French philosophy. Beginning with Descartes actually, even though his students are usually called the first Occasionalists. Descartes has this problem: of how mind and body, which are separate substances, are able to touch. And his answer is they can't, except with God as the mediator. There was no real Body-Body problem for Descartes. It was a Mind-Body problem. The Body-Body problem he's able to skip over by implying, if not always stating, that the whole physical world is one body, so there's not really gaps in that Body. Hence, you don't really need God for science; you can keep religion and science completely apart. God is only needed for my moving my arm and things of that sort.

This actually goes back earlier though. It goes back to Islamic theology which is something I did not realise until I moved to Egypt and started becoming familiar with this so I could teach it to the students in Egypt who wanted to know about this. And this began from a fairly radical, we could call it radically conservative, interpretation of the Qu'ran, and one passage in particular where they're speaking about the Battle of Badr where the Muslims prevailed against long odds. And it says in the Qu'ran that you think you threw the stone, but in fact it was Allah who threw the stone. And one way of interpreting that, the mainstream way is to say it was a miracle: God intervened in that battle and gave the victory to the Muslims—you can read it that way. That's the mainstream way. The other way you can read it, which is the more radical one is you can say that God intervenes in everything: you're not doing anything. You think you're picking something up, God is actually picking it up. Their favourite example in Islamic philosophy: fire burning cotton. It looks like the fire is burning the cotton, but in fact, fire touching cotton is simply an occasion for Allah to intervene.

And in fact in Islamic Occasionalism as they call it (which comes from the Ash'arite school in Southern Iraq, fairly early in the history of Islam) entities can't even endure for more than a second without God recreating them. So this is the other side of Occasionalism: the fact that everything exists for only an instant and that there's a continuous recreation, which we know about from French philosophy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but it's an Islamic idea. I hold that this was actually the most important contribution of Islamic philosophy to European philosophy. I didn't say Western, because Islamic philosophy *is* Western philosophy. It comes from Greek philosophy. It comes from our same monotheistic tradition. So Islamic philosophy is part of Western philosophy in a way that Indian and Chinese philosophy are not.

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Most secular Western people will laugh at this today, you know — isn't this ridiculous to think that God is picking up everything! Not all of my students in Egypt make fun of this. A lot of them believe this literally. But in a way, we believe a different version of this. I hold that Hume and Kant are simply different versions of this. An upside-down version of it. Obviously, after Descartes and Malebranche.

Malebranche restores the Body-Body problem which Descartes left out. Body-Body interaction is a problem, here's an occasionalism there—God is intervening in causation. You can read Spinoza and Leibniz in this way. You can read Berkley in this way. There's a strong, powerful strand running through 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, both the Continental and the Anglo-American traditions—the Rationalist and Empiricist as we usually call it. But so where did this go? We can look at it historically and be amused by it and think it was important for its time, but notice what happens. In a sense, Occasionalism survives, but instead of God being the centre-piece of all causal relations, the human mind became the centre-piece of all causal relations in Hume and Kant who are basically still our contemporaries. Philosophy moves so slowly! You can be a Humean or a Kantian and say so and nobody's going to laugh at you, right? Whereas if you say you're a Leibnizian, literally, and you believe in the best of all possible worlds, people are going to laugh a bit. You can take things from Leibniz, but you can't be a literal Leibnizian. But you can be a literal Humean or a literal Kantian today, which proves that they're still our contemporaries. What did Hume and Kant do the Occasionalist project? They didn't say "God's intervening." They said the human mind is the source of all causation. So it's not God anymore, but there's still a monopoly. There is a single entity at the centre of things making all causal interaction possible. In Hume's case it's habit, or customary conjunction. That's the only causation we can know of. We can't know if there's any other kinds. And in Kant's case, causation is explicitly a category of the Understanding. And we haven't really gotten beyond this. When people want to talk about object-object interactions, they tend to route them through humans. And that's what I'm trying to reverse in my work.

Two appendices to that. One is that Alfred North Whitehead brought back the God version of Occasionalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's not the side of Whitehead that people like. But prehensions are going through God. You're prehending objects, oversimplifying them in terms of the eternal objects which are contained in God. Then Bruno Latour, despite being a more religious person than Whitehead—Bruno Latour's very much a practicing Catholic—does not bring in God as an *ad hoc* solution in his philosophy the way Whitehead tends to do. So Latour secularises it. Latour says that every relation needs a mediator: it needs some third term to make any relation possible.

This has had a lot of use in the social sciences, but it is still problematic. Take an example. Latour's famous one is Joliot, Frédéric Joliot, the French physicist, who's trying to start a French atomic bomb project right on the eve of the Second World War and failed to do this before France was out of the war. And Latour is saying: what was the connection between politics and neutron before that? At least in France, there was none. Neutrons were discovered, I believe in 1929, by Chadwick. No-one ever suspected that there was a political significance to neutrons. It was Joliot who had to convince the French government that politics and neutrons had a lot to do with each other because this might save the war for France if we can build this bomb before Hitler builds it. He failed. The war was over for France and he dropped out of the picture.

Now, what's the problem with this? Latour says that Joliot's always the mediator between the two; Joliot connects politics and neutrons. The paradox of Latour's position is that you don't know what connects Joliot to politics, you don't know what connects Joliot to neutrons! You need another mediator between those two. So Joliot is connected to neutrons because of scientific instruments. How does he connect with scientific instruments? Through his eyes. How does he connect with his eyes? Through his nervous system. See you can keep adding intermediaries *ad infinitum* for Latour. And he says you can just break it off when it gets boring. It's a pragmatic solution. You know, if you want to study the French atomic bomb project, you can ignore his eye and his nervous system, it's irrelevant.

Okay, that's fine pragmatically. But a pragmatic solution is not a metaphysical solution. You may remember Zeno's paradox: how do I leave this room? Because in order to leave this room I have to go half way to the door, but then to get from there to the door, I have to go between half way and the door and then I need to go half way again and half way again and I keep on getting closer and closer and I'll never get out the door. And there's that famous refutation where the guy just got up and walked out of the door. And I believe he was soundly thrashed by his teacher for doing so because it was considered an anti-intellectual solution. So someone could thrash Latour, I guess. I don't wish to do that! You could thrash Latour for the same reason. It's a pragmatic solution: you give up when it gets boring. You need a metaphysical solution.

And I hold that the reason Latour fails is that he has too much of a flat ontology: he treats all actors the same. All actors are on the same footing, so anytime you put two actors together and ask what's the link you get a third actor, but then that actor also has an infinite number of links between it and all the other actors. I hold that the only way you can solve this is by having two different kinds of actors, just like the only way you can touch magnets is to have north and south poles. You can't touch the north poles of a magnet together and make a chain of magnets. They'll keep repelling—so will actors when you try to link them. They will repel. You need north and south, south and north. So I'm going to say that here have to be two kinds and only two kinds of objects.

It's going to lead me to the third point, I believe: that there are two kinds of objects. The first was the one I drew from Heidegger. My career began with trying to push Heidegger as far as I could push him. Heidegger, of course, is seen to be a very complicated figure and he's extremely prolific. I hold that he's extremely simple: he's as simple as any philosopher we've seen since pre-Socratic times! In fact, maybe he's the new Parmenides. Heidegger, his most famous passage is of course the tool analysis in *Being and Time*, which I hold to be the most important thought-experiment in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and I don't think it's been overcome since then. Heidegger, of course, was arguing against phenomenology. How could you characterise Husserl's phenomenology? By saying that you should not invent theories about things that are beyond phenomenal access. You should simply describe in patient detail everything that is present to the mind. So don't invent theories about when the door slams, the air is vibrating in your eardrum and that going up through your nervous system and creating things in your brain ... That's a scientific theory. We have no direct access to that happening. And any scientific theory is grounded in immediate human experience. What's the immediate human experience? It's that we hear the door slam. And there are all these subtleties to hearing the door slam. There are different levels of sound—and it might make me panic a little bit for a second and then I calm down... There are all these things you can describe. Husserl famously had his students describe a mailbox for a semester. There are lots of things you could say about a mailbox. Like: I only see the front-side, but I assume the rest is there. There are lots of things you can do with perception. Merleau-Ponty does it in an even sexier and more literarily satisfying fashion, I think. Merleau-Ponty can find all these different layers in our perceptions.

So, in a sense, Heidegger begins by trying to negate that, saying "this is a model of presence." Things are present to the mind. Heidegger simply observes that this is a pretty rare case: it's pretty rare that things are present to our minds. That usually happens when things malfunction. Most of the time, things are not present to the mind. We're simply relying on them. We're taking them for granted. We're taking for granted the floor in this room, the oxygen in the air; the function of your bodily organs; your command of English grammar so that you can understand me pretty well; the fairly stable political situation of Australia so we don't have to worry about a riot interrupting this lecture—these sorts of things are taken for granted in the background. This, for Heidegger, is the layer of tools; it's a system of equipment.

Now, this tends to be read, especially by analytic philosophers these days—Heidegger's becoming more popular among analytic philosophers—it's read as meaning that *praxis* comes before theory, that prior to theory and perception there's this vast practical underground of things that we rely on and *praxis* comes first and theory comes second. There's a problem with this reading of Heidegger which is that *praxis* distorts the things just as much as theory does. When you use a thing, you don't exhaust the thing anymore than when you stare at the thing, look at it, make theories about it. In both cases you are reducing the thing to a caricature, to a model.

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You don't have direct access to the thing itself. You're conceptualising it in terms of *certain* properties—but you can't grasp all of these. I can sit in the chair and I can look at the chair. In both cases, I'm missing a lot of features of the chair! A dog can smell things in the chair. A mosquito can detect certain vibrations in the chair, probably. Raindrops can probably interact with the chair in ways that I can't imagine.

So, really there's a sense in which things withdraw from all human access whether it's theoretical or practical: that's the first step. The second step, which is the part people think is crazy, is the fact that this happens in *all* relations. This happens in fire-cotton relations and raindrop-wood relations ... In any relation between any two things, there's a distortion, there's a translation going on. And I would agree that human cognition is something very different, very much more interesting probably than inanimate interaction. The question is whether that difference needs to be inscribed into the basis of your ontology. Does the difference between human thoughts and everything else need to be a basic cut in the fabric of the universe?—as Žižek will tell you, as Meillassoux will tell you, as Badiou will tell you. I think “no.” I think it's a difference in degree and they will say you can't just have a difference in degree, it leads to panpsychism. Okay, fine. Fair enough. But they run into the opposite problem which is that you have to have these magical leaps: ontological catastrophes as Žižek calls them, where the subject suddenly emerges from its material basis. Or in Meillassoux's case thought emerges suddenly for no reason at all, just like life emerged for no reason at all and just as the virtual god will emerge in the future for no reason at all. I think this is a much bigger problem than the gradual thesis of the Great Chain of Being which I agree with to some extent.

So that's Heidegger's object. Heidegger's object withdraws from any contact. It can never be grasped either by human cognition or by any causal interaction at all. There's another side of Heidegger I want to get rid of, which is the holism. He has this idea that all tools fit together in a system which is defined, ultimately, by my potentiality for being. So there's no such thing as a hammer really. There's no such thing as walls and a floor—there's only such a thing as a system of equipment and that system of equipment gains its meaning from me. This building has its meaning because I'm *Dasein* and I need to keep dry and I need to hold activities in a building where wind isn't blowing on my papers—all these things give the tool-system its meaning. The problem is, if this were strictly true, tools could never break. If tools are part of a sleek, holistic system where they only can their meaning by the other tools, why would they ever change? If a tool, if an object had no surplus beyond its current relations to other things, it could never surprise us, it could never come out and shatter our current expectations. So these are two things about Heidegger—lessons ... but also signs of caution.

Now, let's go back to Husserl who I dismissed earlier as this naïve idealist who thinks everything's present before the mind. There's another aspect of Husserl that's been missed even by Husserl's defenders, who defended him against Heidegger. There's still plenty of those. And that is that Husserl has objects that are not withdrawn. Husserl is all about intentional objects. Husserl *is* an object-oriented philosopher. Phenomenology is an object-oriented school: one of the greatest in history. What does Husserl tell us? What's the problem that Brentano, Husserl's great teacher, in Husserl's eyes? Well, for Husserl, Brentano is too close to British empiricism. What does British empiricism tell us about objects? It tells us that there are no objects, there are bundles of qualities. There's no apple: there's red, cold, hard, sweet, juicy, spherical and those go together so often that by habit I say, okay, we'll call this an apple for convenience sake, it's actually all these qualities bundled together. There's no real object there, it's just a bunch of qualities appearing together separately; *I* bundle them together myself. Husserl, in a sense, does exactly the opposite. He flips it upside down and he may well be the first philosopher ever to have done that. You can find parts of Kant where he moves in that direction, the transcendental object=x, but Husserl's the one who really does it explicitly. Husserl says: “your friend Hans is coming down the street,”—this is *Logical Investigations*—you don't say to yourself: “this Hans looks pretty similar to the guy I called Hans yesterday, the shirts are different; the moods look a little different, their posture looks a little different, but the bundle of qualities is, you know, 95% similar, so we'll arbitrarily call this Hans.” No, that's not what happens. What happens is you see the same person, you say: “It's Hans again, just like yesterday; he looks sad today, he looked happy yesterday; his shirt is different, but it's still Hans”. The object comes first.

And in fact, what's phenomenology all about? It's about stripping away the accidental features that an object does not need in order to be itself. It's about going in your mind and saying: "okay, what is it that makes Hans *Hans*, what is the essence of Hans?" It's not having a blue shirt, because he doesn't need that. It's not standing like *this*, because he can change that. It's not being happy, because he can change *that*. In a way this is just Aristotle renewed. Because what did Aristotle tell us about substances? He said a substance is that which can have opposite properties at different times. Socrates is happy then he's sad. Happy is always happy, sad is always sad; but Socrates can be happy and then sad: he's indeterminate with respect to qualities. There's some essential ones you have to have. Obviously, if you push it far enough, Hans is no longer Hans: he's dead Hans or, you know, you're wrong and it's not Hans, it's Jörg or, you know, there comes a point when it's no longer the same thing. And Husserl's point with the phenomenological method, with eidetic reduction, is to figure out where that line is that you can't cross and it's no longer the same thing.

So, there's a different kind of object in Husserl. This is not Heidegger's object. This is not withdrawn. There's nothing withdrawn in each of you when I look at you. There is, but that's a different kind of object! When I look at you, I see you. I look right through each of your specific qualities and I ignore your slight changes in posture as you move as I'm talking; I look right through you and I see the same person there. So that's what I call the 'sensual' object. Husserl calls it the intentional object. I stopped calling it that for two reasons. One is that it's a boring term. The other one is that the term has become confused. A lot of analytic philosophers use "intentional object" to mean the object outside the mind that you're pointing at. That's not what Husserl meant. Husserl meant the object in the mind, the object that's directly accessible to you, but covered over in [sic] accidents. So, Heidegger's object is always withdrawn, it's always more than it seems to be. Husserl's object is always *less* than it seems to be because it's always encrusted with all these accidents that are not necessary, that can be taken away. So you get these two kinds of objects. You also have two kinds of qualities, because there are the essential qualities of thing which we can perceive. There are also the real qualities of things. This is the sense of the simple Leibnizian argument which is, if all these monads were the same, if all these hidden real objects were the same --, i.e. they had the same qualities—they'd be the same object. Things need to have different qualities. So there are hidden real qualities: the ones that Husserl was trying to get at, mentally, by analysing the thing and seeing what the essential features are. But there's also the sensual ones: there's the colours and the moods and the postures that I'm seeing in all of you right now —that I'm encountering directly.

And it's not just humans, I argue, who do that. Objects are encountering sensual qualities of each other. Two kinds objects, two kinds of qualities. That leads to four tensions between the objects and the qualities. And, in a sense, the research program of Object-Oriented Philosophy is trying to explore those tensions. One of them leads to the tension that I call "aesthetic" which is the very important one for me— aesthetics is a very important thing in my philosophy—that's the real object in tension with its sensual qualities: the object is absent but the qualities are there. This happens primarily in aesthetic situations, I hold. You've got the relation between the sensual object and the sensual qualities which I call "time"; and the other one, real objects and sensual qualities, I call "space"; and the other two I call "essence" and "eidos". If you want a complete explanation of this, go to my book *The Quadruple Object*: that's a draft of what I'll be doing in my next big, thick book.

Okay, so that's what we're trying to do: explore the tensions between the four kinds of objects against other kinds of philosophies whose methods all boil down to trying to collapse those distinctions. So, idealists try to collapse the distinction between real and phenomenal. They're trying to say "there's nothing behind the phenomenal: to be is to be perceived." There aren't many full-blown idealists. There's Berkley and a handful of others. Usually people realise that it's an extreme position and try to qualify it in some way, but that's what idealists try to do, they try to collapse that distinction between real and phenomenon. What do empiricists do? They try to collapse the distinction between objects and qualities: they say there are no objects, there are just qualities. But against the different ways people try to collapse these distinctions, we're trying to say that you can never collapse them. You should insist on the tension. And there are different ways that these tensions play out and can be examined.

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Okay, that leads to the fourth and final point I was going to make which is that since real objects withdraw from each other, the only option is that sensual objects are the glue between them. Because real and real cannot touch—they withdraw—a sensual object is always the bridge between real and real. And this has the counter-intuitive implication that causal relation is always a matter of the surface. Some contemporary philosophers like to say that the surface is sterile, that everything has to happen in the depths. I would say the opposite. In the depths things cannot make contact. In the depths things just are what they are; they don't change. Any volatility happens on the surface. Two real objects come into relation only through a sensual object which basically means some mind, but it doesn't have to be a human mind. It could be the mind of a raindrop or a rock—though I don't call it a 'mind' in the same sense as human's, but it's some intentional sphere, some sensual sphere where all interactions occur between real objects. So in a sense, causation occurs in minds, not in physical nature, because in physical nature nothing touches. So that's one counter-intuitive implication! Likewise, sensual objects cannot touch because sensual objects don't exist for each other. Sensual objects exist for real objects, namely, me, or some other perceiver. So I've got the caricature of the table and the caricature of the chair, those caricatures have no relation to each other. They have relation only for me, because my experience unifies both of them. So the real is always the bridge for the two sensuels; the sensual is always the bridge for the two reals. And that's what we try to analyse in Object-Oriented Philosophy.

## OBJECTS

**JR** All right. Maybe I should have given you *one* point to summarise! [laughter.] Let's linger for a moment on this name: *Object-Oriented Philosophy*. To continue our discussion, I suppose I'd like to take each of these words and think about each of them individually. You've just given a very clear description of what an object is. My question would be to do with the starting point of your philosophy. You start with objects, but *why* do you start with objects? It would seem almost an act of faith or a decision—an ungrounded decision or a decision unmotivated, let's say, by prior theoretical concerns. If we were going to start with an object, we could also start with things, or relations, or indeed, anything, in the same way, if there is no prior reason for picking the object to start with ...

**GH** Right. I suppose any philosophy probably has some ungrounded first principle and we can try to analyse ourselves, but I suppose I would say this: what motivates me, in starting with objects, is a certain anti-reductionist spirit. Philosophy is, etymologically, the love of wisdom. It's not wisdom, which means we can't start with any given theory of what an object is. So materialists will often start with a theory, the wish or the assumption, that everything has to be made of ultimate physical particles. This is what I call *undermining*. You undermine objects when you say, as the pre-Socratics did, that all these mid-sized objects that we see are not really there, that what's ultimate is the ultimate physical constituents whether it's air, earth, fire and water together; whether it's atoms, whether it's the indeterminate *apeiron*—this kind of blob like entity which everything specific emerges from—these are ways of undermining objects. And a lot of philosophies, particularly those of a traditional materialist stripe, do this. They're trying to say we have to destroy objects to get down to the underpinning because objects are delusional in some way. So it's kind of wisdom. It's a kind of reductionist wisdom that says these objects are naïve and we need to go beneath them. My objection to this is that it can't really explain emergent phenomena. We can easily see, I think, that things do not necessarily change just because their components change in some way. Obviously if they change too much, the thing will collapse. So I wouldn't say the thing is totally divorced from its material underpinnings—at least it doesn't have to be, but if you change a couple of atoms in your shoe, it's not really a different shoe, is it? You could say that it is, but that's a very radical metaphysics of a different kind you're saying only that the particles are different.

Now, the other reductionist direction, which is more common in modern philosophy and post-modernity is just as dangerous. That's what I call *over-mining*, just by analogy with undermining. It's a term I ... the word "overmining" exists in English, but it only means you're exhausting a mine by taking too many minerals out. I use it this way: to mean you're reducing upward. You're saying: "objects aren't too shallow; they're too deep! Why do you need this fiction of real things in themselves outside of the event, or outside of language or outside



of power? Really everything's constructed by society or it's a perception in our mind and it's a naive fantasy to think there needs to be this thing outside. The problem with *this* is I don't see how it can explain change. If a thing is nothing more than its current configuration, whether for perception, or in relation to other things, as for Latour, whether in terms of some instantaneous event; there's no way you can explain the change that occurs. If I have nothing more than my relations to all of you and my relations to those who are thinking me around the world, how will I be a different person an hour from now, a week from now, a month from now? There is some surplus of me that is not currently expressed. There's an unexpressed reality in things and that's...that's what objects are. Objects are an unexpressed surplus. The only way to get out of that is by injecting some kind of supposed becoming or change-power into the relational network which I don't think ever works. Because it's like, you know, in Molière's play where he asks: "How does this sleeping pill put people to sleep?" And they say: "By virtue of a sleeping power." Well, it's like saying: "How do objects change? By virtue of a changing power." There's process in the things or there's *conatus*. You can't do that. That's simply a magical way of injecting something into things that allows you to get out of a problem that's really there. If you have things and they're in a current state, you have to explain how that thing changes. So that's my motivation for starting with objects.

**JR** Okay. So, for you problems arise after the first decision, if you like. That are best encountered by picking the middle path. That would be the idea. Okay. So, there are two kinds of objects. One kind, what you call sensual objects, they're not withdrawn.

**GH** That's right.

**JR** So, in a sense, the problem of change that you identified just before, only pertains to real objects and not sensual ones. Is that right?

**GH** That's correct. Aristotle, already very early on, dealt with this paradox between the sense that, in one sense, reality is a continuum and in another sense, it's punctuated in different pieces. In a way this is the difference between what the *Metaphysics* and the *Physics* is all about. In the *Physics*, of course, he's talking about continuum. Aristotle points out that you can't say exactly how many moments of time are in this event tonight. Is this event split into five parts? Is it splint into twenty? Is it splint into a million? You can potentially divide it up anyway you want. It's arbitrary to some extent. How many numbers are there between one and a hundred? As many as you want? You can go by halves, you can go by quarters. There's potentially an infinite number of numbers between one and a hundred. Or three. You can jump by forties or you know...

**JR** You can do that with Aristotle. But since then, in set theory, that problem's been resolved, right? Because you can say—definitively, if you like—that there's an infinite number; we can rank the sizes of infinite numbers in the continuum, and so on.

**GH** You can, but you still can't ... You still really can't put a number on it. You can just put different numbers on it. You can potentially divide it up with any of those transfinite numbers. Becoming is another 'one' for Aristotle. How many moments of becoming are there in your life? Are there three major stages in your life or fifty? You again can't do that. And space: how many parts of this room are there? Now, some philosophies want to turn everything into continuum and say that somehow individuals are the product of human practical decisions, that the mind is somehow arbitrarily cutting things up into parts. But that's not there in Aristotle. Aristotle has the paradox that the *Metaphysics* is not about a continuum. It's about substances. It's about things that—how many people are there in this room? I can't arbitrarily divide that up. There are a given number of people in this room, which means that you're a different kind of thing than space or number. You could, if you had some radical metaphysics where we're all just some undifferentiated flux of vibrant matter and we're going to cut things arbitrarily into pieces, but this leads to problems, I think.

**JR** Well, you could say that there's a difference between arbitrary and contingent though, right? There could

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be a *real* reason for things being divided up in a certain way that's not arbitrary which nonetheless wouldn't require any essence of the things.

**GH** Okay, but if you're conceding that than you're already saying that how you count is not entirely your decision. There's certain criteria you have to use ...

**JR** Sure.

**GH** ...which means there's something outside of you that guides that decision. And we can be wrong. We can be wrong in our decisions about how to divide up history or how to divide up...the ten greatest philosophers or something ... But there's something outside of us that's guiding that decision.

**JR** Sure. Well, before we go on, I guess I want to ask about the distinction between the two kinds of objects: what do they share *as objects*? What allows us to call both of these things objects *per se*?

**GH** Yes...

**JR** ...Given that the crucial feature of a real object is its withdrawnness and the sensual object doesn't share this, what allows us to say that they're both the same?

**GH** They are both units. And they are both able to bear different qualities...

**JR** Okay.

**GH** ...And that's the main similarity.

**JR** Okay. That they're united. And qualitatively featured in some way or other?

**GH** That's right.

## ORIENTATIONS

**JR** Okay, got it. Let's turn to the second word: oriented, orientation, object-oriented philosophy. Obviously, we've reflected on this a little already in invoking the decision to start with objects. Now, let me quote Kant, who's got an obviously very famous notion of orientation from "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?". Here's what he says: "To orient oneself in thinking in general means, when objective principles of reason are insufficient for holding something true to determine the matter according to a subjective principle."

So, again, this would seem—certainly from the Kantian point of view, which we might have questions with, I suppose—to indicate that there is a question of *grounding* the decision, let me put it that way. In your view, is there a way of grounding these basic moments in philosophy?

**GH** Yes, but I don't think it's an axiomatic one. You see in Meillassoux for example this idea that he can start from a first principle that's absolutely unshakable and then deduce eternal and absolute truths from it. I don't think that's possible; I side with Whitehead on this. Whitehead talks about how deduction is a very subordinate moment of philosophy. He says the method of philosophy is not that of geometry, it's of what he calls 'descriptive generalisation'. And this is why Whitehead says that philosophies are abandoned, they're not refuted. There's always arguments against any philosophy. You give them up, I guess, to some extent for pragmatic reasons when a philosophy becomes sterile, when it turns into a series of robotically repeated formulae by those who practice it, it starts to dry up and it starts to die which happens to any philosophy and which will happen to mine at some point as well—maybe sooner than I hope! We'll see. But I don't think the way to orient oneself

is to proceed axiomatically.

**JR** Sure. Well, I think Kant would agree. You have to start with a subjective moment ...

**GH** ... so I don't disagree with what you just said ...

**JR** Sure.

**GH** ... although 'oriented' is not as technical a term for me as object. I simply borrowed this term from computer science as a joke. I don't know a lot about object-oriented programming. I simply picked it up ... About terminology, I *am* a pragmatist. I happened to use this term in a lecture, back in around 1999. And it caught on. People started using it, so I said, okay, I'm married to it now, I'll stick with this term. And it's served me pretty well.

## PHILOSOPHY

**JR** Sure. I guess this brings us to 'philosophy'. You invoke philosophy as an oblique discourse, if I can put it that way. One that can't proceed axiomatically, and doesn't begin with rational, you know, explicit decisions. Now, there are two questions here. One would be, since the first decision of your philosophy is to side with objects, "to side with things" as Ponge would put it, what does this mean for branches of philosophy other than ontology? You've invoked aesthetics already, but what about things like ethics and politics (which we'll come back to later on), or epistemology? What about these other branches of philosophy? Do they spring from the decision about objects too, or are they ... alongside it?

**GH** I think there are ontologies of different things. And you see this already in the Platonic dialogues. Socrates will ask what is friendship or what is virtue. In a sense, you could say that he is doing an ontology of these things even if that term is an anachronism. You can have a specifically philosophical discourse about anything. If you're trying to specify what is it that makes this kind of object different from the neighbouring kinds ... The reason I define philosophy in this way is I'm trying to stay true to the Socratic version of philosophy. People remember Socrates searching for definitions. What they don't remember is that he never gave any. He destroys every definition that he gets. And that's not just because he's a jerk who's trying to trip people up. It's because you *can't* give any definitions, it seems to me.

**JR** We'll come back to Socrates on this point. The second half of the question on philosophy would be this, I suppose: it does seem like—bringing together the things we've talked about so far—that there is an explicit non-oblique moment in your philosophy. It may not be axiomatic in the straight-forward sense, although it does *seem* axiomatic, and I mean here that the positing of the object is not oblique. It is as direct a proposition as one could hope for as a ground for a philosophy. So it does seem like at least one philosophical claim is non-oblique for you.

**GH** Yeah. One way of approaching this would be to say that it still is oblique because it's still a puzzle to me. I'm discovering new things about that and new implications of it. Another way to look at that is simply that you have to start somewhere. As Heidegger puts it, no-one can jump over their own shadow.

**JR** Sure.

**GH** And it doesn't mean that I think I have absolute and eternal access to the starting point of philosophy—there must be objects! In a sense, we're all rooted in particular philosophical contexts and people are free to dump mine. I don't see that I'm ever going to escape that. It's so clear to me that probably I'm too old to change that. I could, I'm open to it in principle, but...

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**JR** Okay. So I suppose I'd like to ask one more broader question before we pass on to other topics. And it would concern not ontology, not philosophy, but thinking *per se*. What *is* thinking as such?

**GH** For me thinking is about hunting for surprises. It's about conceptual innovation. We think fairly rarely—I think we all realise this. Ninety percent of the time we're simply repeating things that we've heard, that we've been socialised a certain way to say. It's fairly rare that we have thoughts that are our own, that we really treasure because it took some work, it took a special moment of insight to get them. And those are the moments we remain loyal to I think...

**JR** Right.

**GH** ... the moments when we seem to make a breakthrough that wasn't clear to the people around us: Cantor's "I see it, but I don't believe it" with transfinite numbers or any number of other examples from intellectual history.

**JR** Absolutely. I suppose you know that one of my interests in invoking this question has to do with, let's say the reliability of thought figured in Kant as the transcendental illusion, but also we could invoke—the other master figure in this broad tradition would be Freud. So one way to put it would be this: are there any other non-thetic investments in thinking? Are there elements in thought that we're not able to negotiate with at all? Things that characterise or colour thinking in one way or another such that it would tend in one way or another without our ability to rectify it ultimately?

**GH** I suppose there are. I suppose we're all haunted by these. Some of them are historical, some of them are psychoanalytic. But I think it's a recipe for insanity if you try to question all of your givens too much. I mean, you have to do this to a certain point but you can't keep doubling back and looking at yourself in the mirror. You have to go out and grab stuff and ... theorise.

**JR** Sure. So, last question on this point. Do you think that ontology ... do you think that there is any natural ordering of thought? My motivation for asking is something like the idea that politics is the fundamental human act—some people think this. So, political investments/decisions would come first and then metaphysics, epistemology would flow from this in a certain respect.

**GH** Right. Whereas it was theology in an earlier age, and no-one has a high opinion of that anymore. And this is one of my worries is that we all laugh about how philosophy was the handmaid of theology in the Middle Ages, but now we're in a rush to turn philosophy into the handmaid of leftism or the handmaid of neuroscience. People keep—it's almost as if they can't stand the freedom of philosophy—they keep putting it back in the service of something else. And of course you can have commitments. You can be a philosopher and an activist, but I don't think you're a philosopher and an activist in the same stroke, because if you're a philosopher you have to give up the political presuppositions that guide your activism. We're humans too and we confront emergencies, dire situations which we have to deal with and you might be so appalled by something that's happened ... I was so appalled by what was happening in Egypt that I stopped blogging about anything but Egyptian politics for a while. There are moments like that, but I don't think it follows from that that politics is the transcendental condition of access to the rest of reality.

## CAUSALITY

**JR** Okay. Well put. If you'll forgive us, gentle audience, I'd like to delve into a few more technical questions. Obviously, when you begin a philosophical endeavour like yours, you raise, as you've indicated, a series of problems that other ways of doing philosophy don't end up confronting. So, causality—we may as well start there, since this is the big problem, of course. With no direct causality, causality for you is mediation, would that be fair to say?

**GH** Yes.

**JR** ... one object mediates the relationship between two others.

**GH** That's right.

**JR** ... And as you've just said, this is fundamentally an Occasionalist conception of causality. So I guess I have three questions about this. First would be, why ought we call this causality at all?

**GH** Because it involves the transmission of influence from one thing to another.

**JR** Influence?

**GH** And if there were no causality, we'd just simply have a multitude of universes. Each object would be its own universe and I think we can simply dispense with that because experience shows otherwise. You don't have to prove it axiomatically.

**JR** Okay. But it would seem, though, that what you've got is the same situation. In your universe, objects proliferate in nested series, if you like, which is what you would call the network of causal relations, but each one is self-contained. Again, if I could shift the question then, why would we call this "influence"?

**GH** Because one thing can change the state of another thing. Fire can burn cotton. Fire can destroy cotton, but that doesn't mean they can touch directly. And that's the assumption I want to get away from, that all interaction must be direct interaction. Sometimes people object to my position by saying it's obvious that things interact so that I just want to cut things off only to bring them back together. Bruno Latour says this against me for instance. And my answer is that you end up with a very different picture of interaction if you first account for the fact that they're cut off. And if you don't account for the fact that they're cut off, you have a completely relational metaphysics where everything touches everything else and it's not clear why this holism wouldn't degenerate into a monism where everything's just one thing with local vibrations.

**JR** I think that your reference to Aristotle is very appropriate here. There does seem to be something like your view of causality in Aristotle in the sense that we can call it an *ectopic* theory of causality: it's not something that exists in addition to the two things that are interacting, but rather a form that the two objects share, so I definitely think that there's a precedent there. Given this very classical precedent here, it does seem to put you at dramatic odds with the scientific approach to causality which would either go towards a kind of epistemological explanation, I guess you could say, or a blind reference to efficient causality: the billiard ball-style thing. So if I was a scientist, and I swear I'm not [laughter], how would you ... would you try to convince them, first of all, that their view of causality is mistaken?

**GH** I think it's dangerous to directly intervene directly in another field and tell them that they're messed up. Because there are different ways of talking about Nature. One of the problems I think we've had in modern philosophy is that a division of labour has been created taxonomically. So people have said: philosophy doesn't need to talk about the natural world because scientists are already doing that well enough; it's philosophy's job to talk about the human-world interaction. This is what's happened since Kant pretty much. The problem with that is that the sciences aren't even letting us have that any more. They're trying to turn philosophy into neuroscience—you know, someone like Metzinger—and they're saying that ultimately the hard sciences are really going to explain the human-world interaction. And Metzinger says "Don't worry, philosophers, I still have a job for you—you can sit on ethics panels!" That's all he wants us to do. Because there are still these "grave social implications" to all these neuroscientific discoveries. Okay, my response to that is not that philosophy should try to take over the sciences, because we can't—there's too much detail there. But we can resist the taxonomical division of labour. We can resist the idea that philosophers are not allowed to talk about nature because the

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scientists have already exhausted it. We can say philosophy is a different way of dealing with nature.

And, interestingly enough, this is appreciated by at least some scientists now. I can think of two examples. One is Carlo Rovelli, as quoted in *Collapse* a few years ago, who says that it's time for philosophers to stop limping along after the scientists and explaining what they've already done. Instead, leap forward and think of new possibilities! And who knows where physics is going to be in fifty years? How do you know that they're not going to need my theory of causation? Maybe it'll come in handy. Think of what Leibniz did for Einstein much later, or Kant for Mach. So that's one aspect of it. Was there something else you asked about science?

**JR** No, I guess that was it.

**GH** Ah! I was going to give another example, which is that I met Anton Zellinger the quantum theorist from Austria at *Documenta*, the arts festival, last summer. And he told me that his problem in dealing with philosophers these days is they're too timid: they're all afraid to say anything about Nature because he's this world class physicist and they're afraid of making a big mistake in his presence. But he wants us to do this! He wants us to speculate in the way that philosophers used to do. It's really an American phenomenon that physicists became anti-intellectual and just...shut up and calculate, the QED works you don't need to...—the European physicists were never like this.

**JR** We've got that as well ...

**GH** Yeah. It's an Anglo-American, Anglophone thing.

## POWER

**JR** Sure. I guess this is a proximate question here and, again, a relatively technical question. It would involve the notion of power, not political power, but in the sense of capacity. You've invoked the *conatus* already, but I suppose I wonder: is there any meaningful metaphysical weight to the term *power* on your view?

**GH** My position here is a bit different from anyone else's. On the one hand, I agree with Latour that Aristotle's theory of power is a mistake ...

**JR** ... which is in the sense of the *potentia*

**GH** Yes. Now, Aristotle, you remember, the reason that he had to invent this concept of *potentia* is because of the Megarians who were actually serious rivals of his at the time (they're from Megara, near Athens) who said that a house builder is not a house builder unless he's building the house in this moment: if he's asleep or he's not building right now than he's not a house builder. And Aristotle points out that there's an obvious problem with this which is that it puts a sleeping house builder on the same level as a sleeping ignoramus about houses. In fact, a sleeping house builder actually knows less than a fumbling amateur who's actually building a house right now ... So in order to deal with this Aristotle has to say that there are things called potentials: they're here but they're not currently expressed. And of course I agree with that part of it. I agree that a thing is not simply what it is right now. There has to be something in reserve. I simply disagree with calling it potential. And here I agree with Latour. Because Latour accuses the concept of potential of laziness because all you have to do is say: "the oak tree is potentially in the acorn." What does that really give you? You're being lazy. You're not explaining how the acorn actually undergoes a series of transformations into the oak tree. You're magically ... retroactively inscribing the oak tree into this little acorn.

**JR** Well you could though, couldn't you? You could put the potential for the oak tree in the acorn. And do a good job of it ...

**GH** In a sense you could, but potentiality always ends up being *matter* for Aristotle. Matter is very indeterminate. I think you need to have a form there. It always has a specific concrete form. The form of an acorn is different from the form of a sunflower seed. There's a form wrapped up there, it's simply not expressed. So that's why I don't agree with potential. For me everything's actual, but not everything that's actual is relational. That's my way around it.

**JR** So this is the 'something is not expressed' of the object.

**GH** That's right.

**JR** But couldn't we reframe that and simply say that an object has a determinate degree of power to express itself? And that it's never fully exercised? Maybe we could say that, which would allow us to differentiate between objects in terms of the amount of power that an object possesses or can exert?

**GH** You could. But if I understood you correctly, what I don't like about this is that if you call something potential, you are judging it too much in terms of what it might, eventually, do in relational terms. So, if you say that this person is a *potentially* great chess player, you're judging it in terms of this final state where they've won a chess tournament and become a Grand Master, whereas what I would say is that this person *is* a great chess player only they don't know it yet: they haven't gone into training, they're in the wrong circumstances, maybe we'll never know it—I think that's a more accurate way to express it.

**JR** But that would be an epistemological way of putting it, wouldn't it? To say it's about knowledge.

**GH** Invoking potential does this. I think that's why I don't like it.

**JR** You said "they are a great chess player, they just don't know it yet." So, that's to say that it's a question of knowledge, not a question of being.

**GH** Well I'd say that the *being* is that they already are a great chess player. We simply don't know it. So there's an epistemological limitation on the reality that is the great chess player-ness. So, I don't think that you can ever know the real directly—that's the difference between me and Meillassoux for instance—I think that's hopeless. I think that Kant was right about finitude. But you can still talk about reality though.

## DISTINGUISHING OBJECTS

**JR** I suppose that, at this point, I become a bit curious about whether you can distinguish, really distinguish between objects at all, if the withdrawn nature of the object is the signal characteristic, if you like. It's true that objects have different qualities. These qualities change. So it means that, as you said, the thing-itself remains withdrawn or, if you like, cut off from its properties or qualities at a certain level. Doesn't this mean that every object is the same, then, beneath its qualities? If we can know nothing about it other than it withdraws (or can be separated from its qualities in the sensual case), are they not all the same?

**GH** No, because they have different real qualities even though you can't be sure what the real qualities are. And maybe this is a good place to talk about science—I think you were going to ask me about science? Now, one of the objections people make to my position is that they say it doesn't do enough justice to science. I can see why they say this. Because initially I'm trying to stop rampant scientism, which is arising in Continental philosophy for the first time now: that we need to bow down to the natural sciences and follow what they tell us about the world. Ladyman and Ross, who are borrowed by some Continental philosophers, now say that the metaphysics of time should be determined by relativity theory, that the metaphysics of natural kinds should be determined by Darwinist theory. I say no, I think there's room to speculate. And one of the reasons I say this is that the sciences have a different mission. The sciences are trying to gain knowledge. This is what they

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do. If a scientist is not amassing knowledge, they're failing. Whereas philosophy is failing if it's trying to get knowledge. Philosophy's been a kind of counter-knowledge ever since Socrates: it's been trying to undercut knowledge and point at that which cannot be known. Which doesn't mean it's just a negative theology because it's kind of oblique theology—it's *not* a theology, and if it were theology it would be an oblique theology. And we can know a lot of things without having a rationalistic certainty about what we know. So knowledge doesn't disappear. It doesn't turn into poetry just because you don't think we can know for certain what the properties of a rock are.

## LITERATURE

**JR** Speaking of poetry, this is an excellent time to segue into some of your work on literature and the arts. Perhaps we'll start by discussing, briefly, your book on H.P. Lovecraft which is, in a way, a surprising thing for a philosopher to write about. In other words, as you say in your book, there's a great deal of philosophical insight found in Lovecraft. Maybe just summarise for us what your basic claims about Lovecraft's writing are.

**GH** Most people read Lovecraft when they're teenagers, I think. I didn't read him until I was in my late thirties and that was simply the accident of the fact that they put out a volume of Lovecraft in the *Library of America* series, which is where all the classic American authors get put, you know, Melville and Mark Twain. And that made me read him for the simple reason that I'd always simply assumed he was a pulp horror writer and I don't necessarily have enough time to read that stuff. And then I thought: wait a moment, they think he's worthy of this status? Then maybe I should give it a read. And it took me a while. It wasn't the first story. I had to get up to the Cthulhu stories before I started appreciating it, I didn't like the early stuff as much. And I find a lot of people call him a pulp writer and a purple prose writer. I didn't feel that way at all! He reminded me a lot of Poe, not just in his subject matter, but also in his style. There's something that Poe and Lovecraft have in common stylistically which is that they are able to hint at the indescribable without making it just canned, pulp technique where, y'know, "the monster was so scary that I can't even describe it!"—that's a banality, as even Lovecraft says. It's better than that: they sort of describe it! And what I found—and I was worried that he was putting him through a Procrustean bed—is that he has two basic techniques which are the same as my two basic tensions: the one between real qualities and sensual objects and sensual qualities/sensual objects.

So there are two basic descriptions that go on in Lovecraft, two basic features of his prose. One of them is the one that everyone knows about. I had a friend who said: Lovecraft isn't scary, because a dragon with an octopus head isn't scary. Okay. Maybe a dragon with an octopus head isn't scary. This is why the paintings often seem kind of silly. But Lovecraft *doesn't* say that Cthulhu was a dragon with an octopus head. It's a *lot* scarier than that. He says: "perhaps it would not have been amiss, if in my disordered fancy I imagined that it was not unlike something resembling a dragon with a vaguely pulpy tentacled head and a vaguely humanoid outline. And yet there was something more; it was the general outline of the whole that made it most terrifying." So he's adding these object terms. There's something beyond the qualities there which you cannot quite define. And there's another one I love. In the "Dunwich Horror", when Wilbur goes into the library and is killed by the guard dog that tears of his pants and you finally see what a monstrous body he was hiding. And Lovecraft says: "it would be trite and not wholly accurate to say that no human pen could describe it." [laughter]. Right? So, he's taken care of that objection. "Yet it might be said that no-one could properly comprehend it whose conception of the known life forms and geometrical dimensions were too closely tied to those of the planet Earth." So he's sort of—you can't really visualize it, but you're sort of...there's an entry way there. It's kind of an oblique entry way where he's not just telling you "Oh, it's so scary that nothing could describe it", he's also sort of describing it. That's the basic Lovecraftian gesture: that these monsters are so horrific that you can't possibly describe them. So he's undercutting his own language.

Then I noticed that there's a second thing going on. And this is one which I compare almost more to Cubism or Picasso or Husserl, where it's that other axis, where it's a sensual object, because it's *not* withdrawing, it's *not* indescribable. He says, oh, it's no problem to describe this Antarctic city. And he gives these seventeen



completely inconsistent, y'know, features. The city was scary not because no human pen could describe it, but because there were, y'know, beetle like constructions; cuboid, trapezoid like figures, spires in curious clusters of five—there's seventeen of these things! And you can't possibly hold them all together in your mind. So it's as though he's saying: "no problem, I can tell you what all of the features were. So there it is. That's why the city was so scary: because it has all of these features." But then you can't possibly put them altogether. So that's the other kind of object. And in a way I think Lovecraft was a kind of Object-Oriented Philosopher ahead of his time. And it always sound suspicious to make those claims, but it happens again and again in intellectual history: writers get to something instinctively before the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk.

**JR** Right,well said. So Lovecraft in a way is emblematic, he's an emblematic writer. So really the analysis of Lovecraft belongs to him and him alone. But I do wonder. I suppose the engagement with literature in your work moves in two directions as well. The first question I would ask is about the fact that philosophy is written as well. So if we're going to take to treating things at the level of language, you have to understand that philosophy—as Derrida so clearly reminds us—is itself a written object and is engaged with things at the level of language in ways that at least trouble it as a self-contained set of claims about the world. Is philosophy literature?

**GH** I wouldn't go so far as to say it's literature, but there's a literary aspect to it. One of my biggest complaints about analytic philosophy is, I think, there misconception of writing. They seem to think that the only problem with bad writing is that it's not clear enough. So if you string together enough clear propositions and say what you mean, you're a good writer. And so you get people saying that Quine is a good writer. I think Quine is a wretched writer! Jerry Fodor wrote that bizarre piece in the *London Review of Books* some years ago where he said: "I can't understand why people read Kierkegaard and Nietzsche instead of analytic philosophers, because most of us are such better writers." Really? [laughter] Fodor's a better writer than Kierkegaard and Nietzsche who are both Nobel Prize for Literature quality writers if they had lived long enough for it?! No! It's like saying clarity is the only road to good writing. No, there's a certain vividness that you need to be a good writer and I think the vividness partly comes from being unclear when it's appropriate to be unclear. There are times when you hint and there are times when you state clearly. Just like you would never condemn Leonardo for painting with chiaroscuro, right? He uses shadow to good effect and that shadow helps the painting. And it's the same with writing.

So, no, I wouldn't say that philosophy is literature, but I'd say that most great philosophy has the character of great literature. You can think of someone like Hegel as being a difficult writer, but he's a very powerful writer, especially in his use of metaphors. Of course, Kant, in a way, is a very powerful writer: there are very few really *bad* writers among the most important philosophers, and very few merely clear writers among the philosophers.

## RHETORIC

**JR** Yes. You can go further back than the philosophers you're referring to. Because, obviously, the relationship—the ancient quarrel—between philosophy and rhetoric is a very important one. Obviously, in Plato it's a big deal. Where do you situate yourself with respect to this?

**GH** I side more with the rhetoricians than most philosophers do. And as soon as you say that, they say: "Oh, you're a sophist!" Not really though. Aristotle taught his students rhetoric half the day and that's not just because he was trying to protect them from a regrettably corrupt world where they have to be sophists half the time just to win. No, it's because rhetoric is the art of the background. And the background is important in every proposition. A proposition is not simply what's stated on the surface. When Aristotle talks about rhetoric he starts talking about enthymemes. He's talking about things that are present in your statement without being spelled out. And they're more powerful when they're not spelled out. His example is, the Greeks can say: "this man has been crowned three times with laurel." You don't have to say: "and that's because he's won the Olympics three times!" because the Greeks know this. They know what this means. And just think, if you had to explicitly spell out every proposition you ever state --you'd be a bore, first of all—people don't need you to

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spell out everything! Jokes would be ruined—if you explain a joke, it’s ruined; if you explain a magic trick it’s ruined. If you explain love letters, if you spell out everything propositionally in a love letter, you don’t have much of an erotic touch, do you? [laughter]. You lack finesse. And this occurs all throughout communication... I talk about wine criticism a lot. because Daniel Dennett has this reductionist position on wine criticism—I’ll never forget this. He critiques wine critics: a wine critic says “a flamboyant and velvety pinot but lacking in stamina.” Now, granted, this can become really pretentious in the wrong hands. A pretentious wine-taster can, you know, just say all these things, they have no idea what they’re talking about, just like a pretentious art historian or a biographer can do this. And so Dennett says, get rid of, fire all the wine critics, just pour the wine into a machine, analyse its chemical formula—that’s your wine tasting. And my wife can do both of these, ‘cos she’s a food scientist and she does both the chemical analysis and the sensory analysis—so she doesn’t either overmine or undermine, she can do both of these. Dennett only wants to reduce it to a chemical formula. And he’d want to do that also for literary criticism, for any of these other things. I think it’s important to have a kind of criticism that doesn’t do that that there is a rhetorical kind of criticism and, yes, there’s a danger of pretention. And you’re never going to find a pretentious scientist, I don’t think. There are never any pretentious chemists or biologists, that’s not their problem! You can get *boring* ones. Pretention is the vice of the humanities (potentially), it’s a risk we all run. But that’s, I think, a small price to pay. You don’t want to just get rid of the risk of pretention at the price of boiling everything down to some formula of what everything’s made of.

**JR** If we go back before Aristotle, though, to Plato, the problem of rhetoric was not framed in the same way, you know, it doesn’t take the same place in his approach to things. The problem of rhetoric there is that, if I can put it this way, it undermines philosophy itself. It’s a threat, in fact, an internal one, an uncannily present one. All the time. To the extent that it becomes difficult at certain moments to distinguish between the philosopher and the sophist.

**GH** Possibly. But I think it’s just as difficult to distinguish the philosopher from the sophist if the philosopher claims to have knowledge because the sophist ... the very root of the word means someone who claims to have knowledge: it’s a particularly empty kind of knowledge, but it’s still a claim to knowledge that philosophers share. And, of course, it’s been noted by everybody that Plato is one of the master rhetoricians of all time. He’s probably the greatest literary talent in the history of philosophy to this day ... unless Nietzsche’s better. Arguable!

So, the reason I’m drawn to rhetoric ... By the way, when rhetoric comes into philosophy in the postmodern context, it usually means a kind of relativism. When we say: “what is the rhetoric of Tony Blair’s speech?” it means that it was a lot of nonsense; he was just trying to persuade people to go to war in Iraq, that’s not. ... I have a *realist* sense of rhetoric which is that there are things that you have to hint at that cannot be made propositionally clear. The sciences need to avoid rhetoric because the sciences produce knowledge. The arts cannot avoid rhetoric because the arts do not produce knowledge and I think it’s time to emphasize the side of philosophy that does not produce knowledge. This is why I was defending the claims of the arts against the claims of geometry in my essay “The Third Table” because I don’t think philosophy and rationalism was a good mix. And I think we’ve been doing this for four hundred years now, trying to make philosophy more scientific and I don’t think we can do that: we’re not just a science, we’re not just literature. We’re partly a science perhaps—we’re trying to produce knowledge.

I should point something out here, this is really the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy which some people are prematurely declaring to be over: that it was never really a distinction, that it was only a sociological fact about universities. I don’t see it that way. I see the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy as being a truly not-yet bridged gulf. I think you can trace this to Franz Brentano’s 1894 lecture in Vienna. Brentano’s one of the last philosopher’s who’s hard to place on either side—analytic philosophers like him; he’s also the forerunner of phenomenology—he’s one of the hardest ones to put on either side of the split. What he says in his lecture on the four phases of the history of philosophy is that philosophy has this curiously ambiguous character. On the one hand, philosophy’s like science because it’s trying to gain knowledge. Phi-

philosophy should be trying to get better, we should be trying to know more than we did in the philosophy of the past. On the other hand, philosophy's like the fine arts: you can't say the fine arts are getting better over time. You can say there are full periods and decadent periods, that there are great periods in the history of art and less great period in the history of art. We can argue about what these were, but I don't think that anyone would argue that there were certain important periods of art and certain less important periods of art. You can say that in the sciences too, but then you're just talking about revolutionary periods. You'd still say our physics today is better than it was in the twenties, in the revolutionary period, because we know more. I think if we can figure out how to combine those two moments, philosophy as science and philosophy as art, then and only then will we end the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, because we'll have invented a third thing. No-one's done it yet, but I think that's where you have to go and there too you will also bridge the arts/science gap in some sense. Is there a way to account for those two in a third thing that has not yet been figured out?

**JR** Why wouldn't we include politics in this?

**GH** Okay. How does politics line up here? Is politics a knowledge ...? I think it becomes dangerous and close to management then, doesn't it? Who wants to claim that politics is a knowledge? I guess you can claim it's getting better over times in some ways, that there's more universal emancipation ...

**JR** I guess I mean, not in that way, as much as to say, why not add politics to science and art as the components of philosophy?

**GH** It could be, but would you want to call it either a science or an art? Would you want to call politics either a science or an art?

**JR** It could be the third thing. Something that's neither a science nor an art and yet still a component of philosophy.

**GH** Okay, why do you say politics and not ethics? Or why politics and not...

**JR** Well we were just talking about politics, but there are possibly other things that one would like to include on this list.

**GH** You could do it, easily, if you took Latour's standpoint for example, where, in a certain sense, everything is politics because politics only means alliances of actants arranged so that the stronger assembly defeats the weaker assembly—he can incorporate art and science into that, sure. He does. But it loses something, I think ...

**JR** Well that's really just banal, isn't it? To say that that's politics.

**GH** Yeah. That's not politics.

(CONVENOR: 45 minutes to go...)

## ART AND OBJECTS

**JR** Okay, thank you. I've got two lines of questioning and then we'll open it up for questions from the floor. The first one would be: if you think of what's interesting if you think about art, contemporary art, recent history of art and the notion of the object is that there seems to be two tendencies. One is the focus on the object, the object itself becoming more and more prominent. And on the other hand, it tends towards vanishing almost altogether. I mean, Mallarmé would be the obvious example of this, where it seems like the goal of the poetry is to make the object vanish. And we can think of conceptual art more generally. The aim of conceptual art is not

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to produce an object but to produce an artwork which is irreducible to any object, if that makes sense.

**GH** Yes. One problem is that object in the arts has a more specific meaning than it has for me. For me, anything's an object as long as it's unified and as long as it's not reducible to its pieces or its effects. Whereas "object" in the arts and in some other field has a very specific meaning, so this can sound very reactionary. Like, if you talk to an archaeologist, they say: "what's the big deal with objects? We've been doing objects all along!" The really cutting edge thing in archaeology now is to go to the cultural side. In the arts, sometimes people assume this is a pre-1960s move, where I'm going back to paintings and sculptures *against* performances—no! Because a performance can still be an object. For me an object simply means that which withdraws behind any of its possible manifestations and a performance can do that as easily as a piece of marble. An object doesn't have to be durable for me either: it can last an instant or centuries.

Architecture is another field where people have been picking up on object-oriented philosophy. I'm still new to the field, but it seems one of the things that's going on is, at least among some of the younger architects, there's a resistance to the dominance of a Deleuzian discourse where everything's flows and continuous gradients and there's no specific place where the apertures occur—these kinds of techniques. And now a question is: what would an object-oriented architecture look like? And, actually, I'm co-curating a show next Fall on that and I'm relying on architects for that 'cos I don't, y'know, I'm so new to the field. There seem to be several possible elements. One is that people are taking that in a neo-Minimalist direction which I maybe kind of want to resist: the idea that objects means unadorned cubes and things of this sort. That's one way of doing it. Another way of doing it is simply have a more allusive discourse, one that has more discontinuity in the things that are being made out of these continuous gradients that you see in Parametricism today, such as Patrik Schumacher's defining it. So, these could be taken a number of different ways in any field and I can't be there to try to supervise it because each field has its given problems at any moment ...

Now, I do think though that there might be some genres that are more amenable to object-oriented thought than others. Let me take the difference between films and video games for instance. My friend Ian Bogost, who's a video games scholar some of you may know, has made this claim that video games will be for the 21<sup>st</sup> century what film was to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the great popular artform that rises to become a classic artform. Whether or not that happens ... I've heard people complain that there's still no classic video games, even though there were classic films already by this stage in its history and maybe that's because the audience is demanding Shoot 'Em Ups ... But there is something inherently object-oriented about video games in a way that's not true of film.

Film is not giving you objects divorced from relation. They're giving you objects configured in specific relations. Who was it who was saying—was it someone here? No, it was Markus Gabriel in Bonn, a few weeks ago, who was saying we don't need artificial intelligence because we have film: film is producing subjectivity and this is what he's going to argue in his new project. But you're not really getting objects so much. You're getting objects configured in a specific way and you can't go in and move things around and see objects from different angles, although ironically porn is making that advance. Porn is shooting scenes from eight to ten different angles and you get to choose which angle it's from and I've heard it claimed that porn often is at the forefront of media advances. Ian Bogost swears that hasn't happened with video games! But apparently there's this history: that video stores came in in that context and then they became more mainstream and family-oriented.

Now, in what sense are video games object-oriented? It's just in the sense that there are these personae released into this video game universe and you can do different things with them. You can explore an object in a way that you can't in a film because you have to have some power to move around and...I don't really play video games, but I've watched a lot of clips of Grand Theft Auto V on YouTube, just because they're so fascinating. To see things you do ... It's fairly banal, because most people just choose to go around Los Angeles and gun people in the head—not very interesting! My brother had an interesting experience, a fifteen second game of Grand Theft Auto. He pulled up a driveway and accidentally hit a moped driver and a vigilante got out of the car and killed him. But these games go on for a while, you can explore the objects, you can explore Los

Angeles' landscape. These kinds of simulations are object-oriented. So if and when video games ever became a classic artform ... If there were ever a Leonardo of the video game, there would be something inherently object-oriented about that I think.

**JR** Sure. Well, I guess we'd have to have the distinction between saying "a video game is an object", "a film is an object" and then, say, whether it reflects on the status of the object. Because clearly films *are* objects are in your sense.

**GH** Right. That's right.

## PHILOSOPHY, COMMUNICATION, DEMOCRACY

**JR** ... It brings up an interesting question about the relationship between object and image, but maybe we'll leave that to the side. So that other people can get in some questions, let me just move to the last bracket of things I'd like to ask you about. Of course, you're well known for being a philosopher who blogs, who writes on the internet, in fact one who develops your work, let's say in dialogue with other thinkers, in part on-line and so on. Now this has been, as is well known, criticized from a variety of corners, if you like. I supposed I'd just like to ask you two lines of questioning about what we could call this means of transmission: philosophy and means of transmission. Now, obviously, this is connected to the question of rhetoric. It's also connected to philosophy's great enemy: *doxa*, opinion.

So the first thing to say would be this: that the blogging format does seem to be given over to *discussion* in a way that, let's say, is perhaps hostile to the mission of philosophy. One could say this. I could recall famous lines in Deleuze, I'm sure you know these ones: "Philosophy has a horror of discussions. It always has something else to do. Debate is unbearable to it, but not because it is too sure of itself. On the contrary, it is its uncertainties that take it down other, more solitary paths."—I think you would agree with that. Here's another passage: "But in Socrates was philosophy not a free discussion among friends? Is it not, as the conversation of free men, the summit of Greek sociability? In fact, Socrates constantly made all discussion impossible." Now, it does seem that *this* idea of philosophy and the idea of philosophy as being online discussion are hostile to one another. Do you agree with Deleuze?

**GH** I'll start with the Deleuze part and then answer the more general point. Harold Bloom, who's a literary critic I don't always agree with, made this interesting statement that Emerson is to America what Goethe is to Germany, Montaigne is to France and Dr. Johnson is to England. He's the national sage—I like that line. And you notice with these authors when you're in a given national context, if you're in America, you can quote Emerson, that's a knockdown punch! Emerson, he's the embodiment of wisdom. What's happened with Deleuze is he's become the national sage of philosophers. Now this was really improbable! I started graduate school in 1990 and Deleuze's status was so different then. I took a class with Alphonso Lingis which was on a number of authors, but it was basically on Baudrillard and Deleuze. And, at the time, that seemed like the appropriate pairing, because here's a couple of irreverent French guys who make crazy irreverent statements and the academics don't take them that seriously, but they're fun and they shock you in various ways. Deleuze was not considered a serious philosopher at that time except by a handful of outsiders: Massumi and Dan Smith probably. It was true: you had to be working on Derrida or Foucault if you were a serious philosopher at that point. Then it started changing. I noticed around 1994, I was at a Deleuze conference and there was a panel by two fairly not-well known younger academics and two hundred people showed up. So I knew something was going on, that Deleuze was on the crest of the wave.

So it's hard to disagree with Deleuze's bits of wisdom like this. I used to really admire that statement. I'm not so sure I do anymore because I've changed my conception of what a debate ought to do. I agree that Socrates obviously does not conduct real debates. Socrates is totally the troll in each of those conversations making everyone look like an idiot, except in the Parmenides when he's nineteen years old and maybe in the *Gorgias*

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where Callicles puts up a pretty good fight.

So, no, I would not share that sentiment against all debate. I think we tend to do our best work alone, and you should do it in kind of silent isolation and work out it and *then* come into the sphere of debate. But debate can be an interesting stimulus or irritant. You don't want to just do it yourself and never face objections. You need the objections. Now, as for the blogosphere, I don't understand all the criticisms that are made of it. You've got Brassier, for example, saying that the blogosphere is the locus of all stupidity or something like this. Not really. I would agree that most people cannot do their best work on the blog format. The blog format is better for hit-and-run attacks and disseminating information: this person's giving a lecture here; this article's really stupid; look at this link. The comment threads get pretty nasty, but the Wild West was pretty nasty too: it was a new medium during the Gold Rush. The blogosphere will settle down as well. And Levi Bryant is the great counter-example because I think Levi is somebody who, I think, does do a lot of his best work in the blogosphere. He has the patience to sit there and write, you know, these twenty thousand word posts. I can't imagine spending that amount of time on a blog post! And then he engages with all comers in the comment threads, sometimes they get into fights and puts energy into this.

I've started viewing my blog as a snackbar, where I'm not serving my good meals there, but I'm saying: here's what I'm working on now, here's my thought about this news story because I don't have the energy to write my stuff and do it there, but I don't see that it's a problem. The other thing is that it's had a democratizing effect and that has its good and its bad aspects. One of them is that any graduate student in sight can insult you, but that's a democratizing thing. It's not always pleasant—but what was philosophy-like institutionally when I started graduate school in 1990? It was extremely hierarchical, even the Continental world which was not supposed to be. For anything to gain any recognition it had to go through the established hierarchies which means it went through your professor, it went through the big conferences like SPEP or SEP in Europe and something was automatically marginal if it didn't go through those chains of command. And it was very hard to get things published because there were only a few major university presses, they were never going to look at your manuscript unless you were already a professor, they'd reject if they saw you were a graduate student. The journals were the same way and you had to have access to the journals, the university had to have access to the journals. Look at how things have changed today. You've got major, potentially major schools of philosophy arising from graduate students, junior faculty, you've got accelerationism which is being done by Nick Srnicek who's still a PhD candidate and I think Alex Williams is still a PhD candidate, they're commanding international conferences on this. You've got all of these indie publishers, like re.press here in Melbourne, and you've got Punctum in Brooklyn, which make their stuff open access so you don't have to be able to afford it. This has helped with so many new ideas. You've got these para-academic forums like *Collapse* that are very generous in your ability to pirate them and re-print them. What's happened is, in a sense, the established generation of professors has lost control over what's happening. I think that's why so many of them reacted so negatively to speculative realism and other currents like this. Because they're not in the driver's seat now. Things are being led by people between 24 and 45 now and that's a new situation. And the new technologies make it possible. And to pull out of the blogosphere which, believe me, I've considered doing a few times, just because it's become so unpleasant and you ... one can oneself be drawn into the unpleasantness against your better judgment. At times you think: this is not worth the trouble, it's too stressful; it makes you angry for hours, but what would you lose? You'd end up having to go back in there anyway because this is going to be around. We're not going to go back to the traditional media, we're not going to go back to pen and paper journals and brick and mortar book stores and university presses being where everything is happening. So you're going to have this more freewheeling landscape for a while where all these things are going on and I think that blogs have played a positive role in that. I think they've done more good than harm on the whole.

**JR** One last comment. Obviously, philosophy and democracy haven't always been best of friends. But I suppose one way of framing a more general problem with the blogosphere as a place for philosophy is that it seems to treat *discussion* as fundamental, rather than, let's say, an attentiveness to the development of the concept. A certain idea of democracy is put into play first—and philosophy somehow arises out of it, rather than it being

the other way round. So the problem would not be the medium *per se*, but the way in which the medium and certain forms of discourse have maybe parasitised on the capacity for philosophy.

**GH** I think one can do both. I don't think it's hard to run a blog and write philosophy books. And the two media serve different purposes. I would agree that discussion is democratic, but thinking, at least in the humanities, isn't really democratic. You do it by yourself and you're going to stand or fall based on your own efforts most of the time. That's not always true in the social sciences where you see fruitful collaboration and of course in the natural sciences it's all about collaboration usually. You have seventeen authors on a paper, you have to do it that way! In philosophy there aren't too many successful cases: Deleuze and Guattari is a rare exception. There might be a few others, but you don't usually see people's best philosophical ideas when they're collaborating on something because you have to compromise—it's still a mystery to me why that worked so well with those two.

**JR** Me too, me too. Well perhaps, speaking of collaboration, now would be a good time to open the floor up and take some questions. We've got a little bit of time before we get kicked out of here ...

## QUESTIONS

**Audience member 1** I was just curious, when you were talking about film (and I'm new to this so I hope it makes sense), the way that you can't go in and interact with the object—where it is just a single object and there's nothing really to go in and interact with—I was wondering whether you feel the same way about something like music? I'm sure a film student would argue differently, but I feel that music is different in that way because when I listen to pieces of music, depending on what I focus on ... It's not as if I'm actually changing the piece of music, but because there are different aspects I can focus on, they *appear* different on different listening: I can go in each time and find something and because it becomes the object of focus it almost eclipses some of the other parts of the music and I am able, in a way, to change what I'm listening to. Sometimes it might not be wholly conscious, but do you see that that's different in the same way or I am not just getting at, like...

**GH** No, no, you make good points. You're speaking here as a listener of music rather than as a performer because, of course, as a performer you can do what you want with a cover of a piece. I often go back to Marshall McLuhan, to his distinction between hot and cold media which is not popular for some reason. A hot medium for McLuhan is one that is high definition of information so it's all being fired at you and you can't do much with it, whereas with a cold medium, you have to provide a lot of the information yourself. What's characteristic of the former media is they tend to be incendiary, they tend to arouse passions and the latter one's tend to be hypnotic. So McLuhan tends to think that radio is a hot medium—because the words are being fired at you, that's all there is and you can't really change them—whereas with television, everything's so sort of vague that he thinks there's some room for your mind to provide the missing detail. He draws interesting consequences from this. He says, pleasantly, that Hitler could never have arisen during the television age. He would have come across so poorly on television! I think I can imagine that. Another great example, of course, is the famous Kennedy-Nixon debates which, you know, Kennedy was widely perceived as the winner, but only on television. People who listened on the radio voted Nixon because his arguments were somehow more cogent, but he looked horrible and he was kind of mumbling and nervous. Kennedy was the cooler personality ...

Could you see film then as a hot medium and see video as a cool medium because video tends to be much more vague in the story it's telling? There's often just some repeated scenario over and over again that doesn't really anything to narrative structure. So, could you maybe then re-conceptualise film as a cold medium simply because you're able to re-view it in different ways? All I would say is that I often like film, but I never find it hypnotic in the same way that I ... I mean, you can get addicted to video games and play them for *hours* at a time even if it's something as simple as *Candy Crush Saga*. You can play that them for twelve hours! You can play poker for twelve hours at a time. There aren't many things you can do for twelve hours at a time without getting bored! It's these kind of minimal definition but high involvement games (or other experiences) where

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you can do that, whereas I'm not so sure that's true of most films. I can think of one exception which is Christian Marclay's *Clock*, where I think I *could* watch that for the whole twenty-four hours if it were available to me. I was on a tight schedule and I think I saw forty-five minutes of it at the Venice Biennale. But that's probably because the narrative is so vague, you see these disconnected clips of things unified by the clock. That's why I think *that's* a cold medium. So maybe there are certain cinematic techniques which can turn the film medium into a cold medium.

There's also this paradox in McLuhan. On the one hand, he calls certain media inherently cold or hot; on the other hand, media can cool down or heat up. He never really resolves that problem. So it may be possible, but it's not film *per se*, only certain kinds of film production or viewing techniques that make that true, so I'd be willing to qualify what I said based on...

**Audience member 1** My interest was really in music, like, y'know maybe you could say for that as well that, like, there are techniques where you could play with both hot and cold reactions.

**GH** Yes. I tend to find techno hypnotic and hip-hop in a way that I don't find classical music hypnotic. Classical music, of course, is great, but, again, it's high definition: the melody is there, again, there's a different interpretation by each orchestra. When it's techno, for example, or Minimalism (Phillip Glass), the amount of information is so ... sparse that you do have to become engaged with it. Ironically, the ultimate cold medium is fire even though fire is hot in temperature. I remember my six-month old nephew staring at a fire for three hours! [laughter] Not even blinking I don't think. My brother said he sang: "How may I serve thee, Master?" [laughter]. That's what it looked like! Just gazing. Why is that? He couldn't watch a cartoon for three hours! It has to be a fire: something not there and that] you have to produce.

**Audience Member 2** I was interested in the separating of the object-oriented from philosophy in some way. It seems almost as if objects, if you take them as not as, again, knowledge, but rather as an anti-knowledge, it's almost as if you're saying that they're a question rather than an answer? It reminds me of the *Parmenides*, which you mentioned (I think it's the *Parmenides*) where it's sort of suggested that Forms are actually false, but are necessary for the opening up of discovery, of philosophy. I mean, in a sense it seems ... What I'm trying to say is you seem to make the "object-oriented" *subject* to philosophy rather than the other way 'round which seems to be, let's say, not what a more scientific philosopher would do where philosophy would be more subservient to the ... do you see what I mean?

**GH** I think so. You can stop me if I'm not getting it. I think an object is only an object if it's not reduced in either of the two directions. And so you need... Personally I'm not sure you can have object-oriented philosophy without resisting objects' reduction in either direction. You'd have language-oriented philosophy or you'd have philosophy of scientific elements. And so to have an object-oriented philosophy, you have to have object of every different scale and they all have to be somehow inaccessible. Which doesn't mean it's just a negative because along with Socrates and *philosophia* (love of wisdom) where you're getting, hopefully, closer to the thing, you've got Nicholas Cusanus's "learned ignorance" where not all ignorance is equal, some ignorance is learned. Even in Aristotle, who's considered to be this very rationalistic, sort of pro-science, "First Great Scientist of the West," Aristotle makes a statement often neglected which is this: "you can't ever really define an object, because objects are concrete and definitions use universals." So you can describe a thing as green and as heavy, but none of those things are what a thing is: those are universals which apply to many different things. So to really get at the thing, he ends up privileging poetic language, ironically, which people don't acknowledge. Derrida certainly doesn't acknowledge this. Derrida thinks that Aristotle was this cop and who thinks there's this literal meaning of terms and he's enforcing that you have to use the literal meaning and he's punishing metaphorical use, which isn't true at all. Poetic language is the highest, it's the greatest gift, Aristotle calls it. It's genius—it cannot be taught.



Now, I also want to say something about contemporary science which is that, on the one hand, I'm trying to protect philosophy from growing scientism and so, for strategic reasons, I tend to talk up the arts: that we should appreciate the cognitive value of the arts and not give everything to science. But there's a sense in which science is also object-oriented at points. I can think of a few examples of this. One of them, I'd never thought of it this way, but when I saw Anton Zeilinger again, this great quantum theorist from Vienna in Kassel at the *Documenta* festival, he said ... usually quantum theory is seen as a support for idealism in philosophy, you know, there is no reality until the mind produces it. Even Žižek will sometimes pick that up and use it as though that were gospel. Karen Barad does this to some extent and even Niels Bohr talks that way. But Zeilinger made the point that, in a sense, you put an object in a quantum state by subtracting it from its relations, which of course is music to my ears! And there's even a clip on YouTube where you can see a guy put some particle in a quantum state and you'll see it vibrating 'cos it's neither in this relation nor in that. And so, in a sense, it's not an issue of, y'know, the mind collapses the wave function and creates the reality when it observes it, it's more that the reality is there before the collapse of the wave function. Reality is weird reality there, before it takes on some banal determinate form by passing through one slit or another and so maybe quantum theory could be given an object-oriented spin.

Also, note, black holes are my favourite example. People say, oh, you're just doing negative theology 'cos you can't say anything about the object. But you can't really say anything directly about black holes either, right? Which are one of the most alluring phenomena of contemporary science. You don't really know what's in there. You can deduce it from the indirect effects and there's all kinds of speculation about what's inside a black hole: some say it's only two-dimensional, some say other universes are sprouting inside each black hole. And the effect it has when people hear about black holes is almost an aesthetic effect: it's fascinating! No-one knows what's there, it's devouring all this stuff. I've agreed, in principle, to write something on black holes: a short book if the publisher accepts the editor's idea. Because I want to explore what the relation is there. But I would also admit that my philosophy of science, is in a sense, still too Heideggerian because it still too much privileges the indeterminacy of the thing and ... Heidegger says that 'science does not think' which I don't want to say. Of course science thinks! Some of my great intellectual heroes are scientists. So we need to find a way to account for knowledge. I don't think I can do that in my philosophy, I admit. I just don't think philosophy is knowledge, but I think you have to account for knowledge which I freely admit I have not done very well. But dark matter and dark energy are also there. What's the big crisis now in physics? It's that no-one has any idea what to do with dark matter and dark energy. There's not much you can say about them yet. There may never be anything you can say about them directly, as with black holes. So, in a sense, science is going in the same direction on some fronts.

**Audience member 3** I've got a simple question embedded in a complex one. I remember one of the first things I ever remember you saying, it was one of the first times I'd ever heard your name, it was attached to this quote in which you'd said that you thought that the symbol of philosophy should no longer be the Owl of Minerva, but should be H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu. At the time, I was really struck by this—I was reading, because of Jon, the third volume of *Collapse*, the proceedings of the conference on Speculative Realism and was very excited by all of this, but this leads me to a question I have about undermining and overmining. So, when I read the quote about Cthulhu replacing the Owl of Minerva, I thought: one of the things that seems to me so exciting about Speculative Realism is when it says that, if we follow the natural sciences, actually the world is *insane*. We shouldn't be metaphysically *modest* in the face of the sciences, we should rise to sort of ... great metaphysical heights of speculation—this is what was so exciting about the original project of Speculative Realism. But then I wonder how you justify the prohibition against undermining and overmining in this context, because, my sense is that maybe some of the other Speculative Realists think that some of that Cthulhu-like madness of the Real *comes* from the ability for objects to be both undermined and overmined, I just ...

**GH** Exactly. Speculative Realism, of course, is two different things. It's a description, but it's also a rigid designator. The term is pointing to four people who happened to get to get together. All that we had in common is that we were against correlationism: we were against the idea that you could get away from realism by saying

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that the human-world correlate was primary. The four philosophies are all very different beyond that point: Meillassoux's privileging mathematics, Brassier's privileging the natural sciences; Grant and I are not really doing either of those. And the interesting thing is that we realised, fairly early that none of us had any shared intellectual heroes in philosophy. We don't all like Heidegger, we don't all like Badiou, we don't all like Deleuze, we don't all like Leibniz ... The only shared intellectual for all of us was H.P. Lovecraft. [laughter]. And here we all are, in our late thirties at the time, early forties in some cases and we had somehow all come to H.P. Lovecraft independently. How did such a weird thing happen? That that's in the air? We all come to Lovecraft along our own paths. Obviously, we're all finding a different value in Lovecraft and I think what you just said is what Brassier would say in praise of Lovecraft, basically that Lovecraft was teaching us that human beings are pathetic bit players and we don't matter because these giant funguses are coming from Pluto to suck our blood out [laughter] and that's all we're worth, so humanism is useless and ... I don't know what Meillassoux would say about it. Meillassoux likes to mathematise literature. He likes to say that Mallarmé can be reduced to the secret code 707. How would he mathematise Lovecraft? I don't know. I'd like to see how he does that. Grant probably does it in a Nick Land way, this kind of psychedelic way, whereas for me it's a matter of this inaccessibility of the Real that Lovecraft talks about including to scientific discourse.

Why do I not choose the scientific path of appropriating Lovecraft? Probably because ... It was Brassier actually, who told me that Cthulhu isn't scary because a dragon with an octopus head is not scary! And I think that shows Brassier's scientific bias, which is, y'know, big deal, you reduce this monster to a dragon with octopus tentacles. Now, I think all of us would be terrified if we actually saw this thing, but I think it would be less terrifying in the flesh than it is literarily where you can't even describe it—Lovecraft can't even describe it, you know: "it's not quite inaccurate to say it might be something like an outline of..." That's scarier to me, literarily, than it would be to say: "it's a dragon with an octopus head."

You also sometimes hear people from this wing, I've heard Brassier and also Alberto Toscano say that scientific discourse is more interesting or weirder than this kind of armchair metaphysical depictions. Yes and no. I think philosophers need to stay abreast of what's going on in the sciences because we *do* get some really weird stuff from the sciences. But I don't think it's true that *a priori* metaphysical discourse has become so completely powerless to challenge our imagination that ... I think we need that too and that's the side I favour. I worry about the undermining tendencies of a scientific explanation of Lovecraft's monsters and this is the only thing I hesitate about Houellebecq's reading as well. Houellebecq says that what's interesting about Lovecraft's monsters—and this is true—is that they're not supernatural, unlike Stephen King's, they're just made of electrons, although in one case they're electrons with a wholly different vibration range from those of our own planet ... whatever that means! [laughter]. And that's why they don't show up on film. The fungi of Yoggoth do not show up on film because the electrons vibrate differently. Scientifically, that's probably nonsense, but it's interesting to read. And scary to read. So, anyway what is interesting about the speculative realist appropriation of Lovecraft is, as you say, that there are different ways to appropriate Lovecraft and I'm the only one who happens to have written a book about him so far. I would *love* to see Meillassoux, Brassier and Grant each write books on Lovecraft. Or Tristan Garcia for that matter. If you don't know who Tristan Garcia is yet, you'll know him in a few months when his big book comes out in English, *Form and Object*. He's possibly the next important French philosopher. And he's very young. He wrote this gargantuan, 500 page system of everything: it's like Hegel's *Phenomenology* almost. So do read that book when it comes out in January or February from Edinburgh University Press. He's Lovecraftian as well! Next generation.

**Audience member 4** My question is about the specific justification for abandoning the infinite, which is something which you take from Kant and, specifically, what kind of infinite here are you denying, in the sense that, if the object withdraws, how would we ever know that something of the object doesn't live on, for example? Or if the objects can't touch each other, surely that negation could, in a sense, turn into a kind of like an infinite relation, if you like, or an infinite non-relation. So, I'm just wondering, why accept the finite? And if so, what kind of infinite are you denying?

**GH** Well, I'm denying the infinite of knowledge. Denying the idea that you can overcome finitude by reaching some sort of direct access to the thing which requires that the phenomena-noumena distinction—which most people think is disastrous and I don't—is somehow *internal* to the phenomena and that therefore it's not this insuperable gulf—you can gain access to it. I deny this because I think there's a very simple problem, it's a classical realist objection to all forms of Absolute Knowledge. I know many realists do believe in Absolute Knowledge, but it's a classical objection to many claims to Absolute Knowledge which is that knowledge of a flame does not burn anything. Right? There's a difference between knowledge of a flame and a flame or knowledge of a tree and a tree. Now some people say that's a trivial point—Meillassoux says for example, I'm not a Pythagorean because I don't think my knowledge of a planet is actually the same as a planet, of course not, the knowledge is simply pointing at the planet. Okay, but you still have to account for the difference between the knowledge of the planet and the planet itself. And the way Meillassoux does that is, I think, one of the weakest aspects of his otherwise brilliant philosophy which is he says that there's a mathematised form of the tree that inheres in dead matter and that's the only difference. And this is St. Thomas Aquinas! That formed matter is what an individual thing is. Whereas I like Suarez's option better where each form is different, actually the *form* of the thought of a flame is different from the form of the flame itself, so it's a translation.

Even in classical philosophy there was this debate, whereas Meillassoux seems to think you just stamp the form in the matter and that's the sense in which he's a materialist. I think that's too traditional a metaphysics. First of all, how does this form inhere in the matter? Is it the same dead matter for each form? How does the dead matter take on different forms at different times? All of these lead to very traditionalistic dead ends, I think. So I want to avoid that kind of infinity. A thing is never going to be completely replaceable by the model of a thing. That for me is why you cannot have an infinite relation to the thing. Infinite non-relation is, in a sense, what you do have with the thing, except there's this mediated relation, so in that sense you have relation.

So I agree that there's a problem to solve in knowing how we can gain knowledge of the thing if it's indirect, but there's a problem with every philosophy. Tell me one philosophy that doesn't have a problem. It's a matter of choosing which problem you're willing to endure and work on. Meillassoux has this problem of how the universe can appear stable despite absolute contingency. That's a non-problem for me. I don't care because, for me, there's no absolute contingency. He's chosen to embrace that problem and make it his life's work and he spends probably thousands of hours trying to solve this problem. And any philosophy does that. He probably thinks I'm wasting my time trying to figure out vicarious causation, because it's not a problem. In a way, you can define each philosophy by what it's willing to waste a lot of time on that's not a problem for anybody else.

**Audience member 4** And that would be infinite non-relation?

**GH** For me at base, yeah. That's what I'm willing to sacrifice all of my leisure time to. For other people it's different things: *a priori* synthetic judgments for Kant. I don't really care about that; Kant does.

**Audience member 5** I'm just interested to ask: quite a number of your examples are fire and quanta, fungus and Pluto. Do you draw a distinction between that and man-made objects, human beings obsession with making tools and buildings and things of that kind?

**GH** My biggest departure from classical realism, I think—by that I mean Aristotle and the Scholastics and Leibniz—is that they're not very good at handling artificial things. There's a tendency to identify what's real with what's natural, so they're better at dealing with flowers and people and animals. And Leibniz even mocks artificial stuff: he calls it 'mere aggregates' and, y'know, a pair of diamonds glued together is not real, but a diamond is ... Which is funny because it takes a lot of work to make one diamond, right? It's very artificial, you're polishing and cutting and so on. A circle of men holding hands, Leibniz mocks that as an example of a thing—he says that's just an aggregate of many different people holding hands. Or the Dutch East India Company—he says: that's not a real thing. Isn't I, though? I mean, the Dutch East India Company lasted a lot longer than any of its members. It had larger global effects than any of its individual members. It certainly promoted

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and ruined more lives than various members depending on how you look at it. It, y'know, extended Dutch influence around the world and so spread the Dutch language to different places. It's *very* real, I think at least in terms of its effects. That's not even my criterion, but why wouldn't the Dutch East India Company, a Texaco, or Pizza Hut be real objects just as much as I am? Because for me the criterion of an object is not physical unity, it's not durability, it's simply something that is not reducible to its pieces or to its effects. And sometimes I get criticised from the left for saying this for reasons I don't understand. They'll say that I'm a capitalist because I say that Pizza Hut's an object. I'd say the opposite: how can you critique capitalism unless you acknowledge that Pizza Hut is an object or McDonald's is an object that's depredating rain forests. You don't make political progress by denying that bad things exist, right? You have to agree that they're entities and then you can in some other way. That critique keeps resurfacing and it keeps puzzling me.

But, yeah, I think artificial entities are extremely important to discuss. And if I didn't use enough examples of artificial things, that was purely an oversight tonight on my part because I'm perfectly happy to call just about anything an object. The one restriction I would add is that I'm not willing to call something an object just because somebody calls it an object. So if you draw up a list of random entities, that doesn't mean it's an object. It doesn't have a unity except insofar as...it could be a sensual object. The set of all people named Jon, an extensive set of all people named Jon. That's not really a unity outside of set theory. It's something that I am stipulating: in order for it to be a real object it has to have a unity that's independent of any perception of it. And which one's a real object and which one isn't? We're always making mistakes about this and we're always debating about this in history and even in politics. Was there such a thing as the soccer mom in the American electorate who was supposedly swinging these elections in the 1990s? Or was that a figment of the pollsters' imagination? I don't know. But they certainly thought it was real and they acted as though the soccer mom had to be catered to in the policy positions of the two parties in the US. But I'm perfectly willing to consider "aggregates"—in Leibniz's term—an object.

Now Whitehead and Latour can do this a lot better. Whitehead and Latour can deal with far flung, crazy systems of things as objects. Latour wrote a whole book about Aramis, the never-born Paris mass-transit system. My problem with that approach is that they're relationising the object, so that the object is nothing more than its effects. And I want to have a reality of the object that is capable of certain effects but isn't reducible to any of them individually or in total.

**Audience member 6** I just wanted to...Jon half-asked you and I just wondered whether you could say a bit more about what Jon didn't ask you about the relationship (or whatever) between objects and images?

**GH** Right. The sensual objects and the image can be viewed as synonyms. A sensual object is an image. The only difference is that it's a very specific theory of the image because you could have an empiricist theory of the image where it's all the data. Even Brentano still has this theory, that everything that's in the intentional object is in the intentional object and has an equal status. Whereas for Husserl, what's interesting is, you know, this distinction between substance and accidents—which is characteristic of classical realism from Aristotle onward—Husserl has that without being a realist. Husserl has that within the realm of perception, the substance accident distinction and that is a breakthrough, I think. The empiricists didn't distinguish between the important and unimportant aspects of an image. They'd say: it's all a bundle, it's all there. And Brentano also. Husserl's the one who says "no, some of that stuff's eidetic," some of that's essential and you can get rid of the rest of it through phenomenological analysis. You need to figure out what that mailbox doesn't need, what you can get rid of and still have it be the same mailbox. So it's a kind of *idealist* substance-accident distinction: it's really weird. A really weird distinction. So, if you take Husserl's sense of the image, I'm willing to call that the sensual object, but not the image insofar as the image is seen from a very specific viewpoint.

**Audience Member 7** Well I've actually got two concerns. The first concern I have is you don't seem to have any kind of reflexive theory about your own discursive representation. You know, like, you're using language, which is a modeling system, but you talk about these various other things which mediates them, but I don't

think it mediates them in quite the same sense as the distinction between a real object and a sensual object as you outlined in the book. And given your interest in literature and the elusiveness of language and the kind of lively examples you use—you know, very metaphorical things—it sort of seems interesting to me that there is not a strong emphasis placed on your kind of discursive manipulation there? That's probably too big to address, so I'll go to my more specific concern which is this. I understand the general outline of the theory, which is, you know, your criticisms of undermining and overmining and how you've got these two kinds of objects: real objects that are withdrawn from experience, sensual objects which only exist within experience and then each mediates the entities at the other level, sensual objects mediate real objects et cetera. But what I can't see in there is how individuation works. You know, without resorting to that traditional vocabulary of specific unity and numerical unity and formal distinction and so on, how does the object get quiddity or haecceity? How is the object *this* object, you know? That's clear to me in terms of a sensual object, but how does that apply to real objects? What's the individuation there? What makes this object *this* object?

**GH** What makes it *this* object is its real qualities and my worry about many questions about individuation—I don't know where you're coming from—but a lot of times when people stress individuation as opposed to fully formed individuals they're trying to bring us back to a pre-individual realm, they're trying to say that objects are derivative somehow of some more primordial individuation process. And I don't want to make that move. I think you can tell a story about any real object and tell how it was made, but that would be an historical story. You don't have to say that individuation itself had to occur at some more primary level. So for me it's not a problem to say: here's this chair, what are the real qualities of it; we'll never know for sure but we can obliquely hint at them. I don't think individual objects *as such* need to be explained as to how they were individuated, in general, from some pre-individual realm. So this is the critique I often get from people. And that's not a problem for me. For me, there is nothing but objects. So whether or not you choose to stop to tell the individuation story of any individual object is a question of how far you want to go with any given real object. But it's the real qualities that individuate them. They all have different real qualities.

As far as the first point question goes, I also tend to oppose reflexive demands, because what usually happens when people do that—I get this a lot from Brassier's circle for example where people are very influenced by McDowell and Brandom and Sellars. They want to start with normativity, y'know, if you're going to make any claim, for example about the difference between real and sensual that's already a normative claim and so therefore you need to first reflect on the human conditions of access that allow us to make that very distinction. I don't think so because I think normativity also involves the extra-human domain. It's not just that I normatively determine that I'm going to distinguish between real objects that withdraw and sensual ones that don't. It's that something in the world itself is requiring me to do that. And so I think that's just an attempt to give philosophy back to epistemology. And so I generally reject reflexive moves for that reason and so I'm deliberately not reflexive in the book.

As for the question of language, I think I do reflect on it. I just don't want that to be the starting point. I don't want to say: "this entire book relies on a specifically vivid use of language and so therefore we're going to begin with a methodological reflection on language" because for me it works the other way. For me, language is understood by understanding that gap between an object and its qualities, that you're trying to point at the thing, it's somehow not reducible to a list of qualities. In a sense that's Heidegger, but in a sense it's also Saul Kripke, one of my favourite analytic philosophers. Because what does Kripke tell us against other analytic philosophers? That a name is not an abbreviation, not an empiricist abbreviation of all the qualities that you know about a thing. A name is a rigid designator. It's pointing at the thing *beyond* any of its given qualities. He makes the extra disappointing move of saying the essence of gold is its number of protons, so it turns out to be scientism anyway. Your essence is the fact that you had two specific parents which is genetically false, right? Could you have the same DNA from two different parents? It's very unlikely that you could. It's a similar move in Kripke and Heidegger. You're simply pointing at the gap between the object and its qualities. And so, for me, that comes first. And why do I go with that, Jon, you asked this question early on, why do I make the decision to start there? It's because I don't think you can have a philosophy that goes anywhere if you reduce the object

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in either direction: if you reduce an object to its givenness, to its specific qualities and relations, you're never going to explain the surplus in the things which allows those situations to occur.

And, also, the other point is that's simply a very compact account of my philosophy. As I explain in the preface, I wrote *The Quadruple Object* under very special conditions which is that it had to be of very short length to be able to pay the translator and we retroactively deduced that by how big a grant I could get from my university, which at the time was \$5,000. And *Presses Universitaires de France* requires you to pay the translator a certain amount per word and so we worked backwards and said: \$5,000 how many words can I write? And you've got to consider that a French translation is 10% longer than the original English, [laughter] which I didn't realise. French uses more words to say the same thing. You'd think the opposite, right? You'd think that French is a very elegant ... but it uses more words. Maybe they're shorter words, but it uses more words. And so then I had to say, okay, I'm arbitrarily going to choose ten chapters, 'cos that seems like a good bite-sized number of chapters and so each chapter will now be this many words. And so, how much can I fit into that length of a book? And that's why it's the length that it is. There's going to be a longer version of it—it's a model. Like all models it will be replaced and made more complex: there's not a whole philosophy there, just a skeletal outline of a there. And you're not going to find anything changed, but you're going to find a much more complex set of diagrams and ideas in the book whose contract I'm about to sign in the next two weeks. So, you should see it in a couple of years.

**JR** While I've been sitting here, I've just been trying to think of an Emerson quote to finish with. [laughter]. Well, I'll try this one on you: he says "*every word was once an animal.*" And what we've done is corralled them in, and now we're going to let them go back out again. Words go back into their animal state. So, join me in thanking Graham. [applause]

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