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Thought, Untethered. A review essay.

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Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*. Washington: Zero Books, 2010.

Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re.press, 2011.

In his little book on "the ontology of film," Stanley Cavell imagines that photography satisfied "the human wish, intensifying in the West since the Reformation, to escape subjectivity and metaphysical isolation—a wish for the power to reach this world, having for so long tried, at last hopelessly, to manifest fidelity to another" (21). Individuality had become isolation, consciousness came unhinged from the world, and philosophy had to renounce a concern with the things. From outside the field of philosophy, photography's pictorial realism embodied a new solution, both aesthetic and technological, to a centuries-old philosophical problem that thought itself was no longer capable of resolving. Now from within the field of philosophy, for the last decade or so, a group of philosophers has been attempting a specifically philosophical solution, *speculative realism*.

Speculative realist philosophers challenge the necessity, even the propriety, of philosophy's renunciation. Citing the rampant decadence of "postmodern skepticism" and the small-mindedness of analytical philosophy's concern with mind, these philosophers amplify, transform, radicalize, and exalt in Husserl's famous slogan, "back to the things themselves!" This movement has gone under a few different names, but has settled on speculative realism after a 2007 conference of that name. It has become institutionalized enough that two new volumes propose to evaluate where it is and how it got there: Graham Harman's collection of essays and lectures, *Towards Speculative Realism* (Zero Books, 2010), and an anthology edited by Levi Bryant and Nick Srnicek along with Harman, *The Speculative Turn* (re.press, 2011).

My agenda in this review essay is twofold: to evaluate the broad contours of speculative realist thought as they are presented in these two volumes, focusing on two exemplary philosophers in particular, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux; and to show that, however far removed from—even antagonistic to—the concerns of aesthetic, political, and cultural criticism speculative realism may be, it has significant if unexpected stakes for contemporary critical theory. Speculative realism explicitly rejects what I want to call the "humanistic" concerns of much of contemporary continental philosophy and its inflection in critical theory of the sort practiced in literature, film, art, and cultural studies departments. But the terms of this rejection, and the problems it entails or discloses, are instructive for those of us whose speculative practices take place within the domains of culture and the arts. In particular, the deep but perhaps obscure affinity between speculation and aesthetics in speculative realism can serve as an opportunity to reopen, and possibly to transform, our ways of understanding our own critical work and the kind of traction it can have on cultural and aesthetic objects.

Graham Harman is easily the most readable of the speculative realists, and *Towards Speculative Realism* is particularly readable. It is a collection of lectures and previously unpublished essays from 1997 through 2009. The great virtue of this book is as an introduction to Harman's thought, and to his object-oriented philosophy as a variant of speculative realism. It presents in redacted and often exploratory form many of the ideas that were the foundations for his monographs, including *Tool-Being*, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, and *Prince of Networks*. In these books, he often presents his case as though he were reporting incontrovertible results—a style of writing and thinking that is likely a virtue in popularizing a philosophical position. However, because of this, his thinking can feel at times a bit like a conceptual machine which, once you turn it over, keeps going by itself until it runs out of gas (or you do). By contrast, because many of the entries in *Towards Speculative Realism* come in the earlier phases of his philosophical process, this volume presents Harman's remarkably creative thinking less conclusively, in the course of its evolution over a decade. Less certain of itself, this work shows Harman asking, rather than answering, questions. While there's evidently nothing new in a retrospective volume like this, both the proximity of different stages of his thinking and the substance of his style present his object-oriented ontology as a series of productive philosophical questions rather than inert

doctrine.

The animating question of Harman's philosophy is: what is the nature of an object? His way of posing this question is grounded in an unorthodox reading of Heidegger, worked out over roughly the first half of *Towards Speculative Realism*, although it is so foundational for Harman that some form of it is present in nearly every essay. While Harman's philosophy passes through other thinkers—Latour, Whitehead, Islamic Occasionalism—his philosophical trajectory can be profitably understood as a progressive, radical rereading of 20th century phenomenological thought. This trajectory begins with a reading of the account of tools in *Being and Time*, laid out particularly clearly in "The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead," and "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit*." As Harman has it, "the scenario of the tool in *Being and Time* has nothing to do with the human use of tools, and everything to do with the tools themselves" (*Towards Speculative Realism* 24, hereafter cited as *TSR*). Or, in a slogan which appears in several essays, "The tool isn't 'used,' it *is*" (*TSR* 7, 25, 46).

For Heidegger (the received Heidegger, anyway), any analysis of the world must take into account readiness-to-hand, presentness-at-hand, as well as their correlation. For Harman, this position is crassly anthropocentric. Readiness-to-hand does not name a special relation humans have to tools, but rather the available or disposable aspect of any object with respect to any other object. In "The Theory of Objects," he develops this analysis with the example of a bridge:

Walking across a bridge, I am adrift in a world of equipment: the girders and pylons that support me, the durable power of concrete beneath my feet, the dense unyielding grain of the topsoil in which the bridge is rooted. What looks at first like the simple and trivial act of walking is actually embedded in the most intricate web of tool-pieces, tiny implanted devices watching over our activity, sustaining or resisting our efforts like transparent ghosts or gels.

(*TSR* 24)

For Harman, the tool—any given object—is enmeshed in a set of total relations (i.e. the world). Meanwhile, each object is visible only very partially from any given perspective. "The bridge has a completely different reality for every entity it encounters: it is utterly distinct for the seagull, the idle walker, and those who may be driving across it toward a game or a funeral" (*TSR* 25). The word *utterly* here is doing a great deal of work: the claim is that the relation between the seagull and the bridge is of a radically different, wholly unrelated, kind than the relation between the idle walker and the bridge.

This allows Harman to claim that "there is an absolute gulf between Heidegger's readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand" (*TSR* 26). No matter how it manifests itself, the bridge (or any other object) itself is always infinitely withdrawn. Any relation a walker, a seagull, or a driver in a car may have to it always radically misses what the bridge *is*, in itself. And *any* relation, in any modality, we may have with a tool, whether it be practical or contemplative, aesthetic or empirical, also always radically misses the object. Harman's object-orientation entails a concern with the "unchecked fury" of the withdrawn essence of objects (*TSR* 26). Doing justice to the object itself means affirming such fury, and also affirming that we never reach any object *as it is in itself*. But crucially, *neither does any other object*: objects are withdrawn from each other as radically as they are from us. The relation (or non-relation) between bolts and pylons is of exactly the same kind as between humans and the bridge: "all relations are on the same footing" (*TSR* 202). What's refreshing about Harman is his insistence that bolts and pylons deserve as much or more attention from philosophers as the typical objects of philosophy: language, knowledge, mind, etc.

The obvious question arises of how objects can interact at all if they're also absolutely withdrawn from each other. The second half of *Towards Speculative Realism* presents Harman's development of this question as well as his solution: *vicarious causation*. As he has it in an essay on Husserl, "Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities," "if hammers, rocks, and flames withdraw from all other entities, then it needs to be explained why anything happens in the world at all" (129); and "since objects cannot touch one another directly they must be able to interact only within some sort of vicarious medium that contains each of them" (*TSR* 131). Harman's very weird but absolutely ingenious and elegant solution to this problem is that this medium is *other objects*. *Relations themselves are objects*. Take again the bridge example: its bolts anchor its pylons into its concrete foundation which is itself dug into the ground. These are all objects in their own right, never encountering one another, always infinitely withdrawn. But taken together, in their relations to one another, the bolts and pylons and foundation and concrete form the bridge itself—which is also wholly withdrawn, even from its constituent parts. It's objects all the way down. Except there is no question of up or down—no level of reality (of scale, complexity, durability, nature, or physical existence) is any more essential or fundamental than any other: "an atom is no more an object than a skyscraper," "an electron is no more an object than a piano," and "mountains are no more objects than hallucinated mountains" (*TSR* 147-48). While the bridge is certainly composed of parts, the bridge *itself* is not any one of these parts, nor merely their sum. The bridge names the way in which its parts are related to one another, but it is not itself reducible to this bundle of relations.

Throughout, Harman's ontology of an utterly pure, totally positive, completely inaccessible object licenses speculation as the only way we may ever reach anything like an encounter with the object itself. Since "there is no way of approaching equipment [objects] directly, not even asymptotically or by degrees" (47), the only way we have of thinking the withdrawn object or vicarious

causation is metaphysics, "speculative theory on the nature of ultimate reality" (TSR 49). Two consequences follow from this. First, since we *always* miss the object, the ground for Harman's theory of objects cannot be the object itself. This is a phenomenology without a practice of description. At no point does Harman ever really address himself to any object in particular, and it is not difficult to see why. At best we see his characteristic stylistic tic of what elsewhere he calls a "poetry of objects" (*Prince* 101-103): "monkeys, tornadoes, diamonds, and oil," "hammers, drills, keys, and windows," "trees, atoms, and songs. . . armies, banks, sports franchises, and fictional characters" (TSR 95, 97, 147). This is a poetry whose only device is parataxis. As poetic device, parataxis levels all differences between its terms—which, I suppose, is precisely the point. No object has any privilege or right of dignity over any other. But as a collection of essays (instead of a book on a single thinker, like *Prince of Networks*), *Towards Speculative Realism* makes particularly clear a resulting difficulty in Harman's thinking. Instead of asking about any objects in particular, the essays all treat different *philosophers* and their *theories* of objects: Heidegger and Husserl, but also Lingis, Whitehead, Latour, and DeLanda. These are uniformly creative, opening these thinkers up in novel ways. Yet even in its object-oriented instance, it seems that the object of philosophy is really only ever other philosophy.

The second, related consequence is that in Harman's case, the revival of metaphysics seems to amount to a revival of what Renaud Barbaras teaches us is the basic metaphysical mistake in "Phenomenological Reduction as Critique of Nothingness": determining in advance that being must be purely positive by opposing it to pure nothingness. To maintain the form of being as pure positivity, Harman's objects *must* be infinitely withdrawn as a matter of formal requirement. His position (and *Towards Speculative Realism*) begins with a formal determination of an object as a purely positive being, and the rest of his philosophy (and the rest of the book) unfolds in a frictionless universe of formal objects without qualities or air resistance, like high-school Newtonian physics. Harman develops his doctrine of vicarious causation because his theory of objects was obviously missing an account of relation or change. As we see in his progressive posing of the question of relation in *Towards Speculative Realism*, vicarious causation addresses a formal problem of a metaphysical system, but it does not seem excessively oriented by the need to explain any particular facts.

The benefit of Harman's position is that it allows philosophy to speak of any and all objects, to become, that is, object-oriented. This does not come without costs. This philosophy can only speak of objects so on the condition that all such objects be any-objects-whatever, all fungibly withdrawn. It thus prevents any access to being itself except by means of the very faculty that determines in advance what will count as being: speculation. Meanwhile, phenomenality, our ongoing encounter with the world, teaches us that the world, and what is in the world, is, *in itself*, indeterminate, porous, incomplete. A more mundane phenomenology, like that of Merleau-Ponty, does not discover the absolute being that such speculation desires or demands. At issue is not realism *per se*, since Harman admits phenomenology is (or can be) realist. The issue is rather what you mean when you say something *exists*. Harman's exuberantly maximalist position, from a certain angle, looks less like a realist return to the things themselves, as they are and as we discover them, and more like an ingenious philosophical revenge on the world for not living up to the disappointed expectation that being be pure and absolute, for its failure to satisfy Cavell's wish. A thought which claims better fidelity to the things themselves ought not to work tirelessly toward a formal philosophical articulation of what an object is, both presuming and concluding that objects are all fundamentally fungible—or, what amounts to the same thing, all radically singular and wholly withdrawn. Rather than freeing us from anthropocentrism, such speculation can feel almost megalomaniacal, recreating the world in its own image.

Much broader in scope than *Towards Speculative Realism*, *The Speculative Turn* is a survey of current positions, trends, and debates in speculative thought. It is a much bigger and more difficult book. It consists of 25 entries over more than 400 pages, from the usual suspects of speculative realism (Harman, Ray Brassier, Levi Bryant, Iain Hamilton Grant), from frequent critics and interlocutors (Steven Shaviro, Alberto Toscano), and from stars of contemporary continental philosophy (Badiou, Žižek, Stengers, Latour). It is an impressive volume in its depth and vibrancy, and the interest of this volume for scholars working in the idioms of critical and cultural theory lies in no small part in the impressive intellectual creativity unleashed by a radical break from familiar styles and objects of thought. Moreover, it does an excellent job of collecting the multiple positions and styles of thinking on offer in speculative realist philosophy. It is less clear, however, what to do with those radically divergent positions and what the goal of such a survey is.

The book has the raw material to serve as an introduction to speculative realist thought (and then some), but its organization will not be useful to readers not already familiar with speculative realism. The editors have divided the book into five sections, which, oddly, are mentioned in the introduction but are not reflected in formal divisions in the table of contents or section breaks. They are "Speculative Realism Revisited," then a folio on Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, followed by sections on Politics, Metaphysics, and Science. These divisions do make some sense, but the ordering of essays is sometimes inscrutable. For example, Meillassoux's contribution, "Potentiality and Virtuality," which redacts and extends positions he presented in *After Finitude*, is placed only after the folio dealing with *After Finitude*. And even within that folio, Peter Hallward's "Anything is Possible" is a clear and critical summary of *After Finitude*, is cited by every entry in the folio, and yet comes only toward the end of the

section, the fourth of five entries.

Readers not already steeped in speculative realist thought would do well read out of order: the introduction to the volume; Hallward's "Anything is Possible" and Nathan Brown's response; Levi Bryant's "The Ontic Principle"; Shaviri's commentary on Harman, "The Actual Volcano," and Harman's response; and Harman's "On the Undermining of Objects," and Grant's response. After that, many of the essays in the volume will be much easier to parse. (And some of them, no matter how brilliant, will be obscure without significant preparation in the history of philosophy.) The difficulty of ordering is perhaps unavoidable in a book like this. As is evident from their introduction, the editors of *The Speculative Turn* aspire to introduce these debates to a broad audience and to demonstrate their importance to the larger field of continental philosophy. The challenge is that the debates between the contributors are live and ongoing, have been for some time, and are still unfolding in these pages, as is evidenced by the number of responses included in the volume. It's hard to stage an introduction in the middle of things.

At the same time, as a marker of its growing institutionalization, *The Speculative Turn* might also signal a moment of increased fragmentation in speculative realist philosophy. Speculative realism offers a great many different options, which share much more in what they reject than in what they affirm. And what they reject is what Quentin Meillassoux has named "correlationism," or Kant's critical legacy. As Ray Brassier has it, correlationism is "the philosopheme according to which the human and the non-human, society and nature, mind and world, can only be understood as reciprocally correlated, mutually interdependent poles of a fundamental relation" (*The Speculative Turn* 53, hereafter cited as *ST*). As the number of anticorrelationist positions grows, it seems that the feeling of being united against the pieties of both continental and analytical philosophy has become less urgent; Harman suggests as much in his entry. Nevertheless, speculative realists' fractiousness has always been a hallmark of the movement, frequently invoked as evidence of its dynamism and importance. Such fractiousness is perhaps befitting a movement which rejects the last two hundred years of thought: these are people very willing and quite able to engage in heroic acts of disagreement. Paradoxically, when anthologized, such disagreement seems increased to the point of dispersal. This is particularly true with some of the entries from the better-known thinkers: the speculative realist core of this volume sits rather uneasily beside Žižek's unsurprisingly full-throated affirmative answer to his titular question, "Is it Still Possible to Be a Hegelian Today?" That said, this feeling of dispersion turns on much more than the mere proximity of these essays, but is also a substantial intellectual matter.

Speculative realism of all flavors proposes to move past the Kantian inheritance of correlationism by insisting that philosophy must return to its pre-critical (pre-Kantian) vocation of speculation about the Absolute. Or the real. Indeed, the two seem to become equivalent. Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek acknowledge in their introduction that "this activity of 'speculation' may be cause for concern amongst some readers, for it might suggest a return to pre-critical philosophy, with its dogmatic belief in the powers of pure reason." Continuing, they claim that speculation "aims at something 'beyond' the critical and linguistic turns. As such, it recuperates the pre-critical sense of 'speculation' as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labour of critique. The works collected here are a speculative wager on the possible returns from a renewed attention to reality itself" (*ST* 3). It seems to me that it is not so much speculation or its promotion that should be a cause for concern, nor attention to reality, but rather the elision of the difference between the real and the absolute.

This elision is evident in the characterization of much contemporary thought as anti-realist. If "the basic claim of realism is that a world exists independent of ourselves" (*ST* 16), it seems a bit extravagant to claim Marxists are anti-realist, or phenomenologists, or analytical philosophers of mind, or even such much-maligned language-oriented philosophers as Derrida or Gadamer or Wittgenstein. And yet, the editors claim that a

general anti-realist trend has manifested itself in continental philosophy in a number of ways, but especially through preoccupation with such issues as death and finitude, an aversion to science, a focus on language, culture, and subjectivity to the detriment of material factors, an anthropocentric stance toward nature, a relinquishing of the search for absolutes, and an acquiescence to the specific conditions of our historical thrownness.

(*ST* 4)

A concern with finitude and death, or an investigation of (but not acquiescence to!) our historical conditions and conditionedness, aren't on their face anti-realist, but are rather ways of reckoning with the real from our situation within it, of acknowledging our failure to know it as it is in itself, of coping with its recalcitrance and indeterminacy and excess.

The speculative realist asks us to leave behind what we think we know or experience of the real, for we cannot *know* this radical exterior, "the great outdoors." Thus it becomes the task of *speculation* to think the real as the absolute. And ontology, understood as resurgent metaphysics, takes priority over epistemology. As with Harman, such a position obliges speculative realism to hold that there are no phenomenological or epistemological criteria by which we might evaluate such accounts of the absolutely real and their competing claims. This is the problem *The Speculative Turn* both presents and embodies. Since knowledge seems to be out of the question (or is just a boring question), the thinking on offer in this volume is by turns ingenious, athletic, and inspiring, or tortured, baroque, and impenetrable—and radically divergent. The disagreement turns mostly on the nature of objects and the

nature of change, or the not-quite-parallel problems of relations vs. objects and process vs. stasis. Which is just to say that they argue a great deal about the nature of the real, as befits realists. It seems less clear what, exactly, their grounds for dispute are.

The folio on Meillassoux helps clarify these problems. It is the most unified portion of the book; all the essays deal with the same texts and problems, and it presents the greatest sustained encounter in the volume between speculative realism and its critics. Yet even here, these two camps seem to be talking past one another. Meillassoux's philosophy itself helps make clear why that should be. Meillassoux, like Harman, holds that the ultimate nature of reality is beyond apprehension by knowledge, science, or the senses, although thought can grasp something of the nature of the things. However, for Meillassoux (in Hallward's words), "the modality of this nature is radically contingent... there is no reason for things or 'laws' to be or remain as they are. Nothing is necessary, apart from the necessity that nothing be necessary. Anything can happen, any place and at any time, without reason or cause" (ST 130). Meillassoux is Hume's wonderfully perverse heir; "Potentiality and Virtuality" is a reconsideration of "Hume's Problem." Hume famously observed that we cannot ever know the cause of an event, we can only induce it. Traditionally, Hume's problem has been cast as a problem of epistemology: if we cannot ever truly *know* a cause from its effect, the question becomes what practices of induction can sufficiently underwrite claims to knowledge, especially scientific knowledge? But Meillassoux poses the problem, radically, as one of ontology, marshaling Hume to the conclusion that there is no necessity, that there is no reason at all, that things do seem to continue mostly as they are. The universe is absolutely contingent.

For Meillassoux, any change at all is always radically possible but never, ever necessary. The problem of how you can get from one state of affairs to its successor is a problem of merely ontic description. Metaphysics has nothing to say on the matter other than whatever rules or laws or conditions govern (or seem to govern) such unfolding are radically contingent. But this notion of radical contingency is so radical that it cannot get, in Hallward's words, any purchase on concrete change: "Once Meillassoux has purged his speculative materialism of any sort of causality he deprives it of any worldly-historical purchase as well. The abstract logical possibility of change. . . has little to do with any concrete process of actual change" (ST 139). Responding to Hallward, Nathan Brown insists that this is no deprivation; rather, the proper domain of Meillassoux's work is "the speculative." Brown's criticisms of Hallward amount (taken together, very approximately) to asserting that whatever flaws Hallward finds in *AfterFinitude*, they all consist in not following Meillassoux in strictly separating the empirical from the speculative, the ontic from the ontological. Which is to say, not following Meillassoux in affirming the absolute exteriority of thought and being. Everything in Meillassoux follows from this affirmation. And indeed, it all does follow. As with Harman, Meillassoux's is a frictionless universe: once you accede to his first principle, his thought is compelling, convincing, and relentlessly consistent as a matter of doctrine.

Whereas Harman holds that we do not see the things themselves, as they are constitutively withdrawn, Meillassoux does Harman one better by claiming that the only way that thought can know ultimate reality is by sundering any correlation or contact between thought and being, only to reunite them in the media of pure speculation and an absolutely contingent contingency. His doctrine consists, in short, in a claim that in order to encounter the real, we must turn our backs on it: facticity distracts us from being. As Hallward contends, this is an "anti-phenomenological return 'to the things themselves'" (ST 135). Retooling my objection to Harman earlier, you could very well suggest that, as Merleau-Ponty has it, the "thing itself" is only ever a postulate of thought (82). Objective thought mistakes being by falsely hypostatizing the object, replacing the messiness and finitude of the world as it is with the ideal purity of the absolute and the in-itself. It might then seem totally apropos to relegate the question of the things themselves to the realm of a pure speculation that has renounced any concern whatsoever with the world as it is. After all, the thing itself as absolute being doesn't belong to the world anyway—it has only ever been an artifact of thought. Turning to absolute speculation on the absolute, such speculation misses the real it so desperately seeks.

I might be overstating the case, but this way of saying it articulates in no uncertain terms two related difficulties of speculative realism. First: What licenses the claim of speculation to articulate ultimate reality, the things in themselves, once it has rejected any form of correlation? What criteria are adequate to adjudicate the merit or correctness of the various speculative realist positions? If not mediated through experience, perception, empirical measurement, or some other contact with the world, what kind of relation can speculation claim to its objects? Not to put too fine a point on it: what are the *grounds* for deciding between the many competing speculative positions in *The Speculative Turn*? Second: What sort of difference does this philosophy seek to make? What is the relation of philosophy—understood not as the activity of pure speculation, but the activity of discoursing about it—to its objects and to the world? Or: what are the *stakes* of deciding between competing speculative positions in *The Speculative Turn*? Now, these sound like crassly correlationist questions, and awfully mundane ones at that. The first is a question of epistemology broadly, the second a question of the articulation of something as deathly boring as disciplinary norms.

These are questions about the nature of *speculation* in its conjugation by speculative realism. Of course, meditation on the nature of speculation cuts against the grain of the aspiration of speculative realism to break out of the correlationist circle and is much attenuated in *The Speculative Turn*. Attenuated, but not ignored. Ray Brassier and Adrian Johnston hit on the problem, and Alberto Toscano's "Against Speculation" poses it most fully in his treatment of the account of speculation Meillassoux gives in chapter 2 of *After Finitude*. In Toscano's words, correlationism "designates those structural invariants or transcendental

parameters that govern a given world or domain of correlation without themselves being open to rational explanation, deduction or derivation. In this respect, facticity is a form of reflexive ignorance" (ST 85). The "strong correlationism" of Heidegger or Wittgenstein, or really, any anti-foundational philosophy that forbids or foregoes speculation on an ultimate reality behind facticity, is thus a "new obscurantism," "a *carte blanche* for any and all superstitions" (ST 85). Strong correlationism is complicit with the rise of religiosity because philosophy has removed any vocabulary or grounds for discussing the absolute and irrational. Meillassoux's brilliance lies precisely in the way his thought moves past dumb wonderment at facticity by ontologizing anti-foundationalism as absolute contingency. Here, realism and speculation license each other, and this is the crux of Toscano's critique of Meillassoux. The absolute autonomy of the real, and its absolute exteriority with respect to thought, frees thought from the necessity of being a correlate of being. Yet once you give up any pretension to correlation between thought and being, how can you claim that absolute speculation will have any purchase whatsoever on the absolute of the real?

The questions of to what, to whom, in what modes, in what registers, and to what degree thought is (and ought to be) bound are questions that neither *The Speculative Turn*, nor speculative realist philosophy more generally, has quite known how to pose—even as it also makes them unavoidable. This inability is not unrelated to the uncertainty *The Speculative Turn* displays in the kind of impact it wants to have. The largely unvoiced question of speculation lies at the heart of what is both flawed and crucial about this volume.

If speculative realist philosophy does not quite have an account of how to answer these questions, it poses them in urgent and novel ways. This is not merely to recruit Harman, Meillassoux, and others to the correlationist concerns of critical, cultural, aesthetic theory (etc.), or of what Adrian Johnston calls "ontic disciplines." But clearly the kind of purchase thought has on the world is of concern not merely to the speculative realists, but to practitioners of any sort of humanistic or critical thinking. You might even say it's of greater importance to those of us who "do theory": from a certain altitude, the "theory" that we "do," wedded as it must be to an object or scene of inquiry, is the real object-oriented philosophy, speculative thinking that does not know how to get on *without* an object. The speculative realist demand to radically rethink this relation (or non-relation), and this dependency, is crucial. Whether or not you agree with Harman or Meillassoux, or any of the others, the charge from speculative realism to disciplines and practices of thought more bound to the things themselves—as we discover them in the world—lies precisely in their challenge to correlationism, that is, to our received ways of conceiving of the relation between thought and its objects.

In his contribution to *The Speculative Turn*, Steven Shaviro outlines the deep similarity between Harman's and Whitehead's ontologies, and then glosses his reason for preferring Whitehead's relational ontology over Harman's object-oriented one:

I would suggest that the contrast between Harman and Whitehead is basically a difference of style, or of aesthetics. This means that my enjoyment of one of these thinkers' approaches over the other is finally a matter of taste, and is not subject to conceptual adjudication. And this is appropriate, given that both thinkers privilege aesthetics over both ethics and epistemology.

(288)

In the absence of positive criteria by which we can evaluate the merit of one position over another, the decision we make between them hinges on something that is not conceptual, or logical, or empirical, or rational. We can give reasons for these decisions which fall under any or all of those categories. But at a certain point, as with aesthetic decisions, rationality, even reasonability, must give way to a resonance that is merely felt, a certain *this* that seems captured by a philosophical claim whose grammatical form ("the world is like x") might mislead us.

Installing aesthetics as the model for the relation between thought and world would seem to obviate the problem of the correlationist circle (or that's what's in the offing), since as Shaviro would have it, the kind of resonance at issue between thought and world on this model would not name a special form of relation between a subject and an object, but all forms of relatedness between entities. Moreover, this model introduces something like a kernel or splinter of the absolute into *every* relation of thought and object (or, for that matter, any object with any other). It stages, in miniature, in every encounter between a thought and an object, the kind of move Meillassoux makes at the level of ontology. No appeal to any aspect of the appearance of an object will ever be able, in the last instance, to found any claim about that object whatsoever, as it is in itself. Yet such a claim is not groundless, or irrational: you can always give *reasons*. (Although eventually, you can only just point or gesture: don't you just see it?) And yet, since there is something fundamentally unaccountable in such a relation, it includes an appeal to something absolute—it is asserted, universally, without being subsumed under a concept.

This very well may look like an attempt to square the correlationist circle even while claiming to be outside it, reprising "postmodern skepticism" by denying that thought ever really grasps its object, staying comfortably within the navel-gazing domain of human culture, all while making rather extravagant appeals to first philosophy and metaphysics. By the same token, speculative realism, from certain angles, takes on an aspect of remarkable hubris, even megalomania, even as it claims to get us beyond self-involved anthropocentrism. Or I may seem to be attempting an accommodationist compromise by articulating a position in critical

and cultural theory that isn't undermined by the critiques of correlationism that found speculative realist philosophy, and from which seemingly antagonistic arguments about first philosophy, ontology, and metaphysics seem not just relevant but urgent. It's possible that I am. In any event, my goal is to articulate a way in which speculative realism can pose a productive challenge to critical and cultural theory. Whatever the solution or resolution, its challenge consists in thinking in new and radical ways the importance, stakes, and force of speculative thinking within critical thought about art, literature, and culture. At a time like this, with the defunding or outright dissolution of institutional spaces dedicated to the practice of speculation, we need more and better ways to say how and why thought matters.

[An open access PDF of *The Speculative Turn*](#) is available for download on the re.press website.

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