

Speculation at the crossroads

Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. Mark Allan Ohm and Jon Cogburn, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014. 488 pp., £85.00 hb., £24.99 pb., 978 0 74868 149 5 hb., 978 0 74868 150 1 pb.

In 2011, the publication of *The Speculative Turn* drew together discrepant realist and materialist philosophical projects that had been developing over the prior decade. But it has yet to be seen what this ‘turn’ in twenty-first century philosophy will amount to. While some of its projects are in decline, others are still developing towards mature articulation. Epistemological impasses seem to have driven Graham Harman’s work deeper into recapitulation and commentary than conceptual development, while recent follies of object-oriented ontology like Timothy Morton’s *Realist Magic* suggest that this ‘school’ is caught in a downward spiral of incoherence (see my review in *Parrhesia* 17, 2013). On the other hand, Ray Brassier’s lucid programme piece ‘Concepts and Objects’ outlines a critical realist programme at the intersection of metaphysics and epistemology that still awaits book-length treatment. Similarly, the fascinating work of Gabriel Catren on the ontology of mechanics has yet to result in the systematic treatment it will hopefully receive. Quentin Meillassoux has published a study of Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés*, but his most significant philosophical contribution, *After Finitude*, remains only the fragment of an as-yet-unpublished magnum opus whose notoriety has grown through hearsay, past drafts, sketched outlines and excerpts. Meanwhile, Markus Gabriel’s careful, provocative investigations of German idealism suggest the promise of his forthcoming systematic work, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology*. And Daniel Sacilotto is one among several younger thinkers in the midst of writing what may be a significant first book.

While contemporary speculative philosophy thus lingers in the trough between waves of early conceptual invention and mature systematic development, those committed to the philosophical current beneath the surface of its proper names have a double task. On the one hand, to counter the reduction of genuine speculative thought to the brand name of an academic trend, ‘speculative realism’. On the other hand, against dismissals inevitably encouraged by such opportunism, to take up the consequences of what matters in contemporary speculation through a re-engagement of the tradition in light of its

achievements and an inventive articulation of new conceptual openings.

For better or worse, ‘the speculative turn’ is the context in which Tristan Garcia’s *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things* must inevitably be situated. Indeed, it situates itself in this context in its opening pages, aligning its project with Harman’s ‘object oriented metaphysics’ and Manuel DeLanda’s ‘flat ontology’. Like Harman, Garcia positions his treatise against ‘philosophies of access’, including ‘philosophies of intentionality, consciousness, language, and action’. He claims that such philosophies ‘fail insofar as they begin by establishing a relation aimed at objectivity’, while ‘the goal of objectivity is soon abandoned and never attained’. Garcia points out that ‘by initially thinking about things we are not prevented from conceiving of our thought, language, and knowledge as things equal to things thought, said, and known.’ But speculation, according to him, cannot *begin* with thought, language or knowledge: it has to set out from thought about things, rather than thought about thought about things.

Already, these introductory gestures distinguishing speculative thought from critical philosophy rely upon oppositions unlikely to satisfy perspicuous readers. Garcia wants ‘to first consider that which is “something,” rather than the position, production, or formation of this something’. For him, ‘the question is therefore: is it better to begin by thinking about our access, which will never have access to things, but only to our conditions of access, or to begin by thinking about things, which, if we do not want to cheat, obtains the thinghood in every possible mode of subjectivity?’ According to Garcia, things can thus be considered *prior* to considerations of their position, production or formation, and we can begin by thinking about things *before* thinking about conditions of access to things.

Before proceeding further, let me note that the major text of twentieth-century speculative philosophy, Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, set out precisely by refusing to sanction such oppositions. Garcia sets two methodological beginnings against one another, one speculative and the other critical.

But for Whitehead, speculative philosophy recognizes that neither of these can begin without the other. Displacing both transcendental critique and metaphysical dogmatism, Whitehead recognizes that we can no more begin with something *rather than* its position, production or formation than we can begin with the formation, production or position of something in the absence of the thing itself. Whitehead's theory of prehensions – a non-anthropocentric theory of the determination of entities – is inseparable from the account of actual entities/occasions it accompanies. He cannot 'begin' with one or the other. By imposing a misleading order of reasons (either things first, then conditions of their production; or conditions of production, then things) Garcia loses from the outset the synthetic ground of speculative thought, without which it falls back into forms of dogmatism inviting Kantian critique. This is why Badiou, for example, arduously develops formalist tools through which his speculative claims might find epistemological coherence, and why Brassier rightly insists that 'the question "What is real?" stands at the crossroads of metaphysics and epistemology.' We need not *begin* with epistemology alone nor remain within its province; nor must epistemology claim *transcendental* warrant or anthropocentric restriction. But we cannot do without it. Speculative philosophy sets out from and returns to the crossroads of metaphysics and epistemology; it has to travel both roads at once. That difficulty is what makes real progress on the double path of speculation so rare.

So, *Form and Object* unfortunately sets out from the least tenable premiss of contemporary speculation: it purports to circumvent the problem of conceptual conditions by fiat, resolving to treat objects and things objectively while treating conditions of objectivity as secondary. For many, I fear, this will discourage earnest attention to Garcia's book. But that would be a shame: despite their methodological shortcomings, Garcia's conceptually rich investigations deserve to be grappled with.

Form and Object is organized in two Books, titled 'Formally' and 'Objectively'. The first outlines a formal, universal theory of four interlocking concepts: thing, world, being and comprehending. The ground of this theory is a differential, relational concept of things: a thing is the difference between *what is in it* and *what it is in*, that which it comprehends and that which comprehends it. 'Being comes inside a thing and being goes outside it', Garcia writes; 'a thing is nothing other than the *difference*

between being-inside [*l'être entré*] and being-outside [*l'être sorti*].' A thing is thus 'a relation, inscribed in the world, between the being that enters the world and the being that goes outside it, and that enters into another thing.'

Garcia's system of concepts is already active in these definitions. A thing is the difference between what is in it and what it is in: 'the world'. Since the world is what *every* thing is in, it is not itself something, but rather 'the form of things'. Everything enters into the world, and the world enters into nothing. The world is the 'negative' of things. Considered as in the world, things are solitary (they enter the world, not each other). In so far as they are in one another, things are 'objects'. According to this scheme, 'every thing has two configurations. The first is that a thing is an *object* insofar as it is comprehended in other things. The second is that a thing is a *thing* insofar as it is comprehended in something-other-than-a-thing [the world].' In the world, things are 'equal': they exist one by one, solitary in their formal equivalence. In one another, things are 'unequal': distributed in relational hierarchies ordered by mereological relations moving from 'smallest to greatest, from simple to complex, from minimum to maximum, from parts to whole'. For Garcia, 'being' and 'comprehending' are also relationally determined. There is no being 'in-itself'. *Being* is being *in* this or that, while that in which something is *comprehends* it. The world comprehends things; objects comprehend each other. Being and comprehending are mutually constitutive categories giving sense to the relational structure of things as the difference between what is in something and what something is in. 'Being is not primary', writes Garcia, 'which means both that no being is *in itself* and that no being is *before* things. Being is secondary and the handmaiden of things, which means that being is the sense attributed to one thing in relation to another thing.'

Garcia thus articulates a relational ontology, persistently critical of 'compact' thinking: any concept of things as self-identical, non-relational or in-themselves without exposure to an outside. His differential theory of things and relational theory of objects is particularly welcome in the wake of 'OOO's' incoherent positing of 'vacuum sealed objects' withdrawn from 'any relation at all' yet related through 'vicarious causation'. Moreover, Book I of *Form and Object* is beautifully written and constructed, moving between numbered propositions and theoretical expositions that are sometimes dazzlingly suggestive of novel conceptual horizons.

The primary difficulty of Book I lies, predictably, in accounting for the *determination* of things and of objects. 'When things are together', writes Garcia, 'they are objects', but 'what forms all is not all things together, but each thing separately.' Again, *things* are always alone in the world, which is the form or 'negative' of each thing separately. But how can 'each thing' be considered separately in this sense, when even gender or adolescence is a 'thing' in Garcia's system? We have no account of how the boundaries of such amorphous 'things' are determined in such a way that their distinction could be coherent – and if this is the case then our formal knowledge of the world (again, working with Garcia's terms) will be rendered incoherent by the metaphysical system we hoped would help us grasp it.

Even the case of a tree branch brings this difficulty into relief. 'As an "object", the branch is in the tree', Garcia argues. But 'as a "thing", the branch is in the world – that is, in everything except itself, in everything that surrounds it, in everything that begins infinitely where the branch ends.' The obvious and banal question is: where *does* the branch end? One should not demand the solution to such questions from a metaphysical treatise, but one does want a framework in which they can be coherently addressed. In *Form and Object*, the answer cannot be scientific, it cannot be conventionalist, it cannot be linguistic, it cannot be phenomenological. While reading the book, we are asked to abstain from asking 'Where does an object come from? By whom or how?' because the metaphysics developed 'ought to be retroactively applicable to any subject, consciousness and condition of thinking, provided one has patience to judge it at the end and not the beginning'. Unfortunately, this turns out not to be the case: the book lacks a theory of determination that might enable such retroactive applicability. Whereas Whitehead's theory of prehensions, for example, offers a non-anthropocentric account of determination according to which entities/occasions are relative to relations among which they are constituted, Garcia does not allow for such a flexible model of the contextual determination of something like a 'branch'. Rather, we are asked to accept that a branch enters into 'everything that begins infinitely where the branch ends', without an account of how instances of relational, perceptual, cognitive, conventional, linguistic or scientific determination might distinguish the beginning of the branch from the trunk of the tree. The point of such an objection is not at all to discredit Garcia's whole project by regarding it with self-satisfied Kantian

scorn; it is simply to point out why the book's metaphysics remains dissatisfying.

If Book I of *Form and Object* is conceptually fascinating despite these shortcomings, I find Book II less so. Here, Garcia turns from his formal metaphysics to an encyclopedic application of its scheme, with chapters on The Universe, Time, Living Things, Animals, Humans, Representations, History, Values, Classes, Genders and Ages of Life. These chapters exhibit an impressive breadth of reading and theoretical labour. But this breadth also turns out to be a weakness, since eight pages on Culture or fifteen on History prove predictably inadequate for credible treatments of such topics. Read charitably, these chapters offer preparatory sketches of how diverse regions of thought might be more rigorously addressed from the metaphysical perspective elaborated in Book I. But they also chafe at such generosity by offering highly reductive accounts of complex theoretical problems. Take the chapter on classes, for example, where Garcia claims that 'Marxism as a fundamental theory of classes is caught in a stranglehold: the necessity of reducing class relations to political and historical conflicts (which allow us to make the struggle meaningful and history readable) and the impossibility of doing so.' This is a false stranglehold, since what Marx offers is a *structural* theory of class constitution grounded in the function of the wage relation within the double reproduction of capital and labour power requisite for capitalist accumulation. If, for Marx, class emerges from and results in 'political and historical conflicts' it is not simply 'reducible' to them. Garcia argues that, 'As an individual, I am neither reducible to being the member of a class which comprehends me nor irreducible to all classes, like a free electron without determination. I overlap different classes, reduced or enlarged – classes of inheritance, of ideas, of thought, of belief, and of action.' Rather than expanding or refining Marx's theory of class, this passage crudely conflates it with classification in general, situating us on a plane of reflection so indeterminate that its statements seem at once banally true and irrelevant or technically erroneous.

This is also the case in the chapter on Gender, where Garcia argues that 'gender is neither purely inscribed in the nature of things nor purely projected by the human mind, but exists as a minimal relation between *that which is gender* and *that which comprehends gender*.' The problem with this pat reconciliation of naturalist and nominalist theories exemplifies the problem with Book II: the formal model of Book I functions as a *deus ex machina* purporting to

reconcile opposing approaches to gender, while the term 'gender' itself is deployed in a question-begging fashion which lands us back at square one, either overlooking or reproducing all the difficulties of the term's ambiguous reference, which spur such debates in the first place. Even if we allow for the constraints Garcia is working under, treating so many subjects in so little space, the frustrating experience of Book II is that if one is invested in the details of the debates he addresses, one finds his brief treatments too misleadingly reductive to lend his theoretical interventions real traction. Ultimately, *Form and Object* would be a more persuasive treatise if it included only Book I, reserving the topics in Book II for treatment elsewhere, in greater detail and with greater precision.

More generally, one hopes that Garcia's considerable intellect, erudition and creativity might be channelled into a more disciplined engagement with the philosophical tradition that would flesh out and strengthen the promising aspects of his metaphysical

framework. The originality and energy of *Form and Object*, and the lovely openness of the book's tone, make the differential, relational ontology it elaborates conceptually and affectively enticing. But speculative philosophy cannot draw its interest merely from the novelty of interlocking metaphysical propositions, even if the scheme they articulate approaches coherence. Philosophical systems also require a dimension of *necessity* drawn from a rigorous confrontation with the history of thought they inherit, and from which they cannot escape. Even if we might like to, we cannot go back to being pre-Socratic philosophers. 'Speculation' should not be a slogan announcing the cursory treatment of detailed theoretical questions in pursuit of an ersatz encyclopedism, nor the evasion by fiat of epistemological problems. It should designate a determination to work through those problems towards the articulation of metaphysical systems that are wrested, rather than sheltered, from critique.

Nathan Brown

Natura highs

Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2014. 384 pp. £55.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 978 0 80478 741 3 hb., 978 0 80479 134 2 pb.

In this intervention into postwar French intellectual history, Knox Peden posits an antagonistic relationship between Spinoza and phenomenology that structures the whole of his book. This is the antagonism of a 'rationalism' represented by different French Spinozists pitted against various strains of phenomenology – either of the Hegelian, Husserlian or Heideggerian variants. Here, the battle is waged between the philosophers of the pure concept against philosophers of experience, and a negative dialectic for Peden plays out in these thinkers without resolution between concepts and intuitions, or between speculation and experience. Of course, the poles of this antagonism do blur historically, and we see in Peden's rich narrative many crossovers between rationalism and phenomenology. This is particularly so in the cases of Gilles Deleuze and the less well-known Jean-Toussaint Desanti. But such cases of blurring do not avoid the fundamental antagonism of concepts and experience posited by Peden. Indeed, a presupposed gap between concepts and experience persists throughout the narrative of *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*, and one sees how Peden analyses

these antinomies of French Spinozism within a framework largely established by Kant at the height of the first Pantheism Controversy.

What gives Peden's narrative its strength and potential weakness is the elasticity of certain terms, like 'Spinozism' and 'rationalism', which are used to cover a wide range of intellectual phenomena. Before Peden endeavours to describe the contours of this history, he establishes what he means by 'rationalism' as 'a term of art'. Rationalism is not so much reducible to a dogmatic philosophical programme, but enjoys the status in Peden's narrative of an 'ethos – understood as a commitment to the capacity of reason, however it is conceived, to supervene on the spontaneous insights of lived experience'. It is this fidelity and commitment to reason as opposed to lived experience that set up the main contrast between who counts as a French rationalist as opposed to a French phenomenologist in Peden's book. With the arrival of the so-called three Hs (Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger) into Parisian intellectual life, Peden maps a veritable rationalistic counter-revolution under the explicit or implicit aegis of a French academy