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## **Book Review:**

### **Prince of Networks:**

### **Bruno Latour and Metaphysics**

*By Graham Harman*

Melbourne, re.press, 2009; 258 Pages  
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That the thought of Bruno Latour remains more-or-less unknown to most philosophers is surely one the profession's minor scandals. Latour is, of course, not wholly ignored by the philosophical community. Those of us who dabble in STS or philosophy of technology have known of his import for some time, and a number of Latourian texts are foundational in these fields. For the majority, however, Latour remains best known as one of the many attacked with such vigor and lack of skill by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont.<sup>1</sup>

It is in this context that Graham Harman's *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* must be read. Here, for the first time, we are offered a clear and compelling argument for the broader philosophical implications of Latour's work. More specifically, Latour's 'flat ontology' of actors in perpetual translation and mutual articulation is shown to result in a coherent metaphysics and, intriguingly, the first local or "secular" occasionalism (112) in philosophic history.

*Prince of Networks* should be read as two projects in one book. In Part I, "The Metaphysics of Latour," Harman offers a well-considered overview of the Latourian corpus. The focus of this part of the book is more exegetical than critical, and its virtues are many. The realism implicit in Latour's empirical studies is brought into stark focus. The opacity of some of Latour's signature ideas, including black boxes and quasi-objects, is neatly clarified. And, in what is surely one of the more delightful passages in recent

philosophical writing, we are treated to an extended example of the Latourian dissenter through the imagined smearing of Kant by one Karl Rove. (51f)

As a summary and synthetic reading of Latour's published corpus, this part of *Prince of Networks* succeeds entirely. Indeed, if the book were to end with the final pages of Part I, it would still represent a valuable contribution to scholarship, especially given the paucity of specifically philosophical readings of Latour.<sup>2</sup> But Harman is after larger quarry. With Part II of *Prince of Networks*, entitled "Objects and Relations," he critically analyzes Latour's metaphysics against the backdrop of his own "object-oriented philosophy."

What does Harman mean by an object-oriented philosophy? Perhaps the simplest way to understand the nature of the object-oriented approach is to contrast it with two other realist approaches to objects, as Harman has done in a recent lecture.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, some realists tend to reject the reality of objects in favor of the deeper-lying dynamics or systems from which these objects emerge. On the other hand, some dismiss objects as being fictional constructs of the mind, far less real than the qualities or effects from which these fictions are constructed. These two approaches—the undermining and overmining of objects, respectively—are united in their refusal of objects having any reality in themselves, such that what is real is either 'above' or 'below' the object itself.

Consider Michael Pollan's recent discussion of nutritionalism, where "the widely shared but unexamined assumption is that the key to understanding food is indeed the nutrient."<sup>4</sup> You may have thought you were eating a tomato, but really you were ingesting various complexes of micronutrients. Food science, on Harman's account, undermines food objects. (An overmining approach, by contrast, would see a doughnut as David Hume might – as a bundle of sensations and nothing more.)

But tomatoes and doughnuts are not merely the sum of their nutritive parts. Food objects have emergent properties above and beyond their micronutritive components. One cannot simply whip up a tomato by refashioning tomato paste and discarded stems. Nor can the beneficial effects of eating tomatoes be reproduced by ingesting large quantities of lycopene. Put simply, the tomato

is a reality unto itself, with its gustatory and possible comedic possibilities irreducible to either nutrients or elementary particles.

An object-oriented philosophy, then, is one that takes objects seriously, insisting upon their integral reality above and apart from human access or interest. It is easy to see how Latour's actor-network might fulfill the requirements of an object-oriented philosophy. Actors are fully concrete. (102f) They collaborate and compete with one another to create more complex objects and situations, without losing their own emergent qualities. What makes an actor real is not its materiality, or its being accessible for a knowing subject. The reality of an actor is measured by its associations and trials of strength. (111-12) For Harman this is evidence of a thoroughgoing relationism, or "the view that a thing is defined solely by its effects and alliances rather than by a lonely inner kernel of essence." (75) And it is on this basis that Harman describes Latour's local occasionalism as his "single greatest breakthrough in metaphysics." (82)

Occasionalism, broadly speaking, is the belief that the efficient causes of events can only be attributed to God. With its roots in Islamic philosophy, occasionalism was a dominant theme in 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Harman (controversially) describes Hume and Kant as variants on the occasional theme—relations are real insofar as habit or the categories of the understanding legitimate them. (82) For Latour, the translation and mutual articulation of actors in relation only occurs through the work of a mediator, of someone or something who bridges the relational gap. Such acts of mediation or occasions "allow the entities to modify their definitions over the course of an event."<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, as Harman points out, Latour's local occasionalism results in an infinite regress of actors. (106)

Here we encounter one of the key differences between Latour's theory of actors and Harman's object-oriented philosophy. For Harman, Latour's radical relationism denies actors any non-relational reality, and it also makes any coherent account of change difficult. (129f) This leads Harman to contrast Latour's position with his own, where "relations do not exhaust the things that relate, and hence nothing can be defined as a sum total of alliances, or even of possible alliances." (134) Harman's objects escape the

“whirlpool of relations” (156) by being fourfold, irreducible either to what they modify or their own internal pieces or qualities. (187-8) Such a model of the object is, as Harman memorably describes it, ‘weird.’ (85, 132, 188) The final chapter of the book is devoted to a preliminary sketch of this weird realism and all that it entails.

As mentioned above, *Prince of Networks* should be read as two works in one: as a friendly reading of Latour’s philosophical system, and as a critical engagement with that system from the viewpoint of Harman’s own object-oriented philosophy. We must assess the book from this perspective. How does it stand as a reading of Latour’s corpus? Further, does Harman’s object-oriented philosophy improve upon the putative flaws of Latour’s thought?

In a public response to an early version of *Prince of Networks*, Latour himself raised two points of concerns with Harman’s rendering of his position.<sup>6</sup> First, Latour asks whether it is legitimate to extrapolate a metaphysics from a set of empirical investigations. Because Latour ‘followed his prey’ where it lead him, the deduction of a coherent metaphysics from varied case studies may be impossible. Second, Latour argues that attributing a truly radical relationism to him is unfair. Does translation, and all of the work involved in acts of translation, not presuppose an ‘irreducible singularity’ of every object precisely as that which is to be translated? On the whole, both of these concerns are minor and can be debated without dismissing the overarching validity of Harman’s fine exegesis.<sup>7</sup>

More complicated is the assessment of Harman’s own position, especially given that it is still evolving in print and on his blog. Nonetheless, we might make two remarks. First, Harman goes to great lengths in *Prince of Networks* (163ff) to argue that both he and Latour escape the hegemony of correlationism, or as Quentin Meillassoux puts it, “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”<sup>8</sup> Harman’s earlier work on Heidegger and his tool-analysis<sup>9</sup> opens a way out of correlationism, but here the discussion of rhetoric and the ‘rich elsewhere’ seems diversionary. To his credit, Harman does (177-185) offer a sketch of his Heideggerian antidote, and he does have a book on Meillassoux forthcoming. Still, a more focused approach

to the problem of correlation would have been welcomed.

There is also the issue of pragmatism in *Prince of Networks*, and its relation to Harman's object-oriented philosophy. Harman understands Latour to be a kind of pragmatist in his definition of actors precisely as their effects. (95) For reasons discussed above, such pragmatism is untenable for Harman: “An object might be measured or registered by its relations, but can never be fully defined by them. Pragmatism has value as a method, but fails as a metaphysical doctrine.” (143)

It is hard to know precisely which pragmatisms or pragmatists Harman has in mind here. Latour cites James and Dewey in various places, and one can easily imagine Rorty in Harman's realist crosshairs. Notably absent, however, from both Latour and Harman's corpus is any discussion of Charles Sanders Peirce. This omission is doubly curious given the apparent homogeneity between Harman's criticism of Latourian pragmatism and Peirce's own self-criticism of his early articulation of the ‘pragmatic maxim’—at issue in both cases is the question of a purported nominalism against scholastic realism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, given Peirce's general anti-Kantianism, his “evolutionary realism,”<sup>11</sup> and what might charitably be called an ‘object oriented semiotic,’ one wonders if pragmaticism might succeed where pragmatism fails as an object-oriented philosophy.

## John Hartmann

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*

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- 1 See Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998).
- 2 Among the very few sustained encounters with Latour's work is Peter-Paul Verbeek's. See Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency and Design*, trans. Robert Crease (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005). Don Ihde has also treated aspects of Latour's thought in various works.
- 3 This lecture, from April 2009 at the University of the West of England, is forthcoming. See Graham Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy,” in *The Speculative*

- Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2010).
- 4 Pollan, “Unhappy Meals,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 28, 2007, sec. 6:1
  - 5 Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 141.
  - 6 A lightly edited transcript of this encounter is forthcoming. See “Latour, Harman, and Erdélyi,” *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (Winchester, UK: Zer0 Books, 2010).
  - 7 Latour’s second point is particularly problematic, especially given some of his more radical statements. When he says [see “On the Partial Existence of Existing and Nonexisting Objects,” in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 247-269] that Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis because tuberculosis had not yet been discovered, it is hard to see how he could maintain the existence of some kernel of non-relational reality over and against the process of articulation.
  - 8 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), 5.
  - 9 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).
  - 10 See Charles S. Peirce’s 1905 “What Pragmatism Is” for this attempt at self-criticism (CP 6:411-437).
  - 11 cf, Carl Hausman, *Charles S. Peirce’s Evolutionary Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).