

## **A Preponderance of Objects: Critical Theory and the Turn to the Object**

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### **Abstract**

This article critically examines the turn to the object in contemporary philosophy, particularly through an examination of the object-oriented philosophies of Graham Harman and Bruno Latour. I pose the question as to how Adorno's philosophical project can aid a critical examination of contemporary realist ontologies. Using insights gleaned from Adorno's critical philosophy, I claim that any "turn to the object", needs to continue to critically engage with subjectivity and conceptuality. Finally, I consider the question of critique, and outline a project for a critical materialist philosophy that nevertheless emphasises the "preponderance of the object."

### **Keywords**

Objects, ontology, realism, critique, subjectivity

"But it is not the purpose of critical thought to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol. The purpose of critical thought is to abolish the hierarchy".<sup>1</sup>

ONE of the hallmarks of the contemporary theoretical landscape is the turn to the object or to materialism. In the past ten years, there have been numerous philosophical attempts to engage with objects or materialities in novel and interesting ways. <sup>2</sup> This "turn to the object" is constructed as a

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno T.W *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 181.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of this work see Harman G., *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the carpentry of things*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), Latour B.,

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radical break with the recent philosophical past that was overly concerned with language, discourse and meaning as constructed by human subjects and only viewed materiality or objects as projections or screens for the interrogation of human concerns.<sup>3</sup> Despite this construction of a radical break with the past in a new emphasis on materialism, connections are made with various twentieth century philosophical positions to ground such a turn to the object. Graham Harman's philosophical project of object-oriented philosophy is explicitly constructed in a creative tension with the phenomenological tradition, particularly with the work of Heidegger, but also arguing with and against Husserl and Levinas.<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour's different but related philosophy of objects as actants within networks relates itself variously to the process philosophy of Whitehead and the sociology of Gabriel Tarde.<sup>5</sup> Various other 'new materialisms' have prioritised an appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophies of material becoming or Althusser's late philosophy of the materialist encounter.<sup>6</sup> The one philosophical figure rarely discussed or worked through is Theodor Adorno.

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*Reassembling the social. An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Coole D. and Frost S. (eds) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), Bennett J, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of things*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), Bryant L., *The Democracy of Objects*, (Open Humanities Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Bryant L, Srnicek N. and Harman G. (eds) (2011) *The Speculative Turn – Continental materialism and realism*, Melbourne: re:press.

<sup>4</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*.

<sup>5</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Coole D and Frost S (eds), *New Materialisms*.

At one level, this is peculiar as Adorno's consistent philosophical project was concerned with a turn towards the object. His explicit aim was to effect an axial turn towards the object through a critique of the claims of the subject to be able to identify completely and exhaustively the object with concepts. This is what he terms the "preponderance of the object".<sup>7</sup> For Adorno, this is not only a purely philosophical issue, but also an ethical and political demand. The turn to the object is an attempt to undo a history of domination in which human subjectivity is constructed through a disavowal of its dependence and relationship to materialities. One would think that Adorno's work would be a rich resource for thinking through the philosophical precursors of this turn to objects, but there are very few mentions of Adorno's work in many of the key theorists of object-oriented philosophy or a new materialism.<sup>8</sup>

I want to suggest two reasons for this lack of interest in Adorno's work. First, Adorno's work is both a consistent philosophical attack on idealism and a constant critique of fundamental ontology, and it is the latter element that makes Adorno unpalatable to current theorists of the object, realism or materialism. Adorno writes that "fundamental ontology cannot annul epistemology at will".<sup>9</sup> What he means by this is that it is not possible to make positive statements about the

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<sup>7</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 183.

<sup>8</sup> Harman hardly ever discusses Adorno's work, and Latour's references to Adorno are very rare. Levi Bryant has briefly mentioned Adorno's work in his blog, accessed here: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/?s=Adorno>. Bennett's earlier work was more engaged with Adorno and Horkheimer's philosophy, but she has moved further in the direction of process and relational ontologies, see Bennett J (2001) *The Enchantment of Modern Life. Attachments, crossings and ethics*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), for an example of this earlier work.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 86.

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nature of the real, without considering our representations of that reality through conceptuality. This is a fundamentally Kantian thought, but Adorno complicates this thought by articulating conceptual categories as historical products rather than cognitive invariants. Conceptuality is formed by a process of the domination of particular objects and their identification as forms of objectivity that are prepared for human use and exchange in capitalist societies, namely as commodities. The turn to the object is an attempt to loosen the bonds of a rigid conceptuality and to perform an intellectual experience that will allow an opening towards objectivity. However, we cannot leap over the historical epistemological constraints into fundamental ontological statements. Adorno is, therefore, what Padui has termed a materialist rather than a realist.<sup>10</sup> He accepts that there are entities beyond thought and that thought depends on these entities but there is no leap to the possibility of thinking the nature of reality itself. For Adorno, materialism must remain “imageless”.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, for object oriented philosophers Adorno’s work remains essentially caught up within an epistemological framework of subject and object thinking when the purpose of the turn to the object is an ontology of objects *as such*, beyond the subject-object relationship.

The second reason for the lack of interest in Adorno’s work is the question of critique. One of the most interesting but paradoxical elements of the turn towards the object is a move away from a tradition of critique. For Adorno, the turn towards the object is a critical turn; it is through the turn to

the object as non-identical with conceptual identifications that one can try to put a block on human domination, and to release a history of suffering in both subjects and objects and the possibility of emancipation which is configured as a different way of being with objects. The contemporary turn to the object is explicitly configured as a move away from critique and towards concepts of construction, composition and mapping rather than deconstructing the social sphere.<sup>12</sup> For various reasons, the project of critique is to be overcome in the turn to a new ontology of objects that demands a refusal or a suspension of traditional critical questions in favour of the more affirmative notion of constructing or composing assemblies of objects.

### Object-oriented Philosophy

There are many different strands of philosophical realism, materialism or object-oriented thinking in contemporary philosophy. Here, I want to focus on what has been termed object-oriented philosophy, and is represented by two very different ontologies, both of which concern a turn towards the object. First, there is the work developed by Graham Harman that emphasises a philosophy of objects as withdrawn substances and second there is the relational ontology of Bruno Latour that thinks of objects as actants relating within networks to produce assemblages or ‘matters of concern’. Whilst there are key and important differences between a philosophy of objects as relations and a philosophy of objects as substances, there are central similarities within these approaches that differentiate them from philosophies of

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<sup>10</sup> Padui R. ‘Realism, anti-realism and materialism – rereading the critical turn after Meillassoux’, *Angelaki*, 16.2 (2011): 89-101.

<sup>11</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 204.

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<sup>12</sup> Latour B. ‘Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30.2 (2004): 225-248.

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process and becoming that are more dependent on the work of Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>13</sup> Whilst, at times, I will specifically refer to the differences between relational and substance based philosophies of objects, there are many central points of agreement in these approaches that I am subsuming under the title “object-oriented philosophies”. These points of agreement can be listed in the following five themes:

- 1) Ontological statements cannot completely be politicised or reduced to social constructions. There are aspects of the world that can be identified and described as existing separately from human attributions and political evaluations. These aspects of reality are knowable and describable.<sup>14</sup>
- 2) The basic ontological unit of existence is the object. All that there is are various types of objects interacting with other objects. This is what is meant by the ‘flat ontology’ of object oriented philosophy.<sup>15</sup>
- 3) Objects have an agency – they exert effects on other objects. Matter is not dull and inert or passive but active and lively.<sup>16</sup> Agency cannot be viewed in terms of human meaning and intentionality, but as effects of actions between objects. Interactions between nonhuman/nonanimal objects are of just as much significance as interactions involving human/animal objects, and there is no difference in kind between

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<sup>13</sup> DeLanda M. *A new philosophy of society. Assemblage theory and social complexity*, (London and New York: Continuum Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Bryant et al (eds), *The Speculative Turn*, 16. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 246.

<sup>15</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*. Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, (Melbourne: re:press, 2009). Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*.

<sup>16</sup> Barad, K *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007). Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

interactions/relations involving humans and those not involving humans.<sup>17</sup> The agency of objects also means that object-oriented philosophers are explicitly not old-fashioned scientific reductionists, but they are opposed to any reductionism, either to the social or the natural. Indeed the nature/culture divide is completely overcome or dissolved in these approaches.<sup>18</sup> There is then a speculative or metaphysical element to this materialism/realism. This involves a self-conscious metaphysics/poetics of the agency of objects.<sup>19</sup>

- 4) These philosophies are not anti-subject but they are anti-subject as a pole of representation of the world. Implicitly, it is difficult to clearly characterise a concept of subjectivity in these philosophies, although they all acknowledge the existence of something called the subject, they are largely hostile to a notion of a subject ‘representing’ reality. This leads to an absence of discussion of conceptuality in these philosophies. Indeed, just what the difference between a concept and an object is, is hard to clarify.
- 5) These philosophies are self-consciously post or even anti-critical. The turn to the object fundamentally alters the project and process of critique. Therefore, they have an account of what critique is and an account of why critique can no longer be relevant given the turn to the object.

What I want to do in the rest of the article is to explore in some more detail these five themes and to suggest some

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<sup>17</sup> Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 67. See also Shaviri S *The Universe of Things. On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Latour B, *We have never been modern*, translated by Catherine Porter, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Harman G (2012) ‘Aesthetics as first philosophy: Levinas and the Non-Human’, *Naked Punch*, accessed 6.3.13 at: <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/147>. See also, Shaviri, *The Universe of Things*.

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interesting and hopefully fertile cross currents with Adorno's philosophy of the object.

### Fundamental Ontology

The idea of an ontology without politics is an idea of the possibility of making ontological claims about the nature of existence itself that is not dependent upon our access to things as they appear to us historically and cognitively. One of the central divisions between the object oriented philosophies that I am discussing here is between those philosophies that conceive of the object as analogous to a substance and those philosophies that conceive of the object as purely existing in relations.

Harman and Bryant generally share a notion of objects as entities existing independently and with some aspects withdrawn from any relation. An object is an entity that has a discrete, unified existence and specific qualities that even when relating to another object always holds something in reserve. For Harman, an object is at its core:

[...] a unified thing with specific qualities that withdraws from any attempt to grasp it.<sup>20</sup>

What characterises an object is not just its ability to relate but its ability to withdraw from any relation and hold itself in reserve from any aspect of its sensual interaction with any other object, be they human or nonhuman. For Harman, an object cannot be exhaustively mapped or determined by its relations, as there is always an element that withdraws from

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<sup>20</sup> Harman G 'The road to objects', *continent* 1.3 (2011): 171-179, 177.

relationality, and he refers to a notion of substance to ground this idea of the withdrawal of an object. The notion of substance just is this aspect of withdrawal, that there is always something in excess to an object from any of its relations.<sup>21</sup>

By contrast, for Latour, the notion of an object is exhaustively mapped by the patterns of relations and interactions amongst objects. Everything is concrete and exists in a pattern of relations. Objects appear and come to light through assemblages of different objects interacting with each other. Each object/actant deploys its full characteristics within an assemblage of objects interacting with each other. Nothing is hidden or held in reserve. Objects change through interaction with other objects and through the stabilisation of particular 'matters of concern'. Objects become stabilised through the strength of the alliances and assemblages that are formed, rather than through some inner reserve or substance.<sup>22</sup> In his latest work, Latour has discussed more the need for a subsistence of entities that maintains itself through "alteration".<sup>23</sup> However, this concept is still opposed to a notion of substance or anything withdrawing from relations. Rather, Latour writes of "modes of existence" and different "trajectories" for entities.<sup>24</sup>

How is one to decide between these two ontological positions? If we are really pointing out ontological truths

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<sup>21</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 149.

<sup>22</sup> Latour B What is the style of matters of concern ? (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Latour B *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*, translated by Catherine Porter, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.102.

<sup>24</sup> Latour B, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p.85.

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about the world, then we would need to construct an argument that these different positions accurately give an account of the nature of existence. Any such account though, is inevitably going to be an account based on particular values and experiences. To see the world as fundamentally made up of withdrawn objects is an account based on a particular experience of objects or observation of objects interacting with each other. Similarly, to emphasise a relational notion of objects is to emphasise a particular understanding of different processes, practices and experiences. One can try and understand the coherence of such an ontology in terms of its ability to account for processes of identity and stability over time, of localisation, of the ability to explain relation and causation, but there is never a definitive argument that states exactly an ontology completely free of political evaluation. Indeed, one of the means that Harman uses to critique the notion of relational ontologies is the timeliness of a return to substance, which seems a peculiar argument for an ontology withdrawn from any entanglement with history and politics.<sup>25</sup> As Bennett points out there are ethical and political difficulties with both relational and substance based ontologies of the object.<sup>26</sup> This is the difficulty of the claim that a realist ontology involves a step beyond the simple claim that there are entities existing beyond human access, and the move to giving an account of just what those entities are. Any such account can attempt to give a coherent picture of the world but is also inevitably provisional, and based upon particular historical, ethical and political appeals.

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<sup>25</sup> “But the wager of object-oriented philosophy is that this programmatic movement towards holistic interaction is an idea once but no longer liberating . . .”, see Harman, ‘Aesthetics as First Philosophy’, 187.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett J. ‘Systems and Things’, *New Literary History*, 43 (2012): 225-233.

## Flat Ontology

In a way, Latour’s relational ontology has a more ready answer to such a critique. For Latour, the critique that any ontology already presumes an ethical or political stance towards the world, itself is reliant upon a split between nature and culture that is already overcome in a philosophy of relations where everything is an object, and every object is equal in the assemblage within which it is formed. It is not that on one side, there are impenetrable facts about the world and on the other, there are the cultural, social and intellectual attempts to apprehend such facts, but that facts themselves are produced through assemblages of actants. To be more precise, Latour prefers to talk about “matters of concern” or “things” as more or less stable gatherings of different assemblages. There is no privilege to human understanding here, although there is often an implicit human observer gathering things together. All objects are on equal footing, and all act and ‘translate’ each other. Translation here simply means the perturbation of one object mediating an interaction between other objects. Ontology is therefore a construction of events and objects in action, rather than some kind of hidden truth about the world. Karen Barad, who has also offered a relational ontology of objects, prefers to write about “onto-epistemology”, which she defines as the “study of practices of knowing-in-being”.<sup>27</sup> Everything is an object, and everything has an agency, and stabilised “matters of concern” exist only through the force of the assemblages that are built. Latour’s ontology is therefore a combination of constructivism and a

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<sup>27</sup> Barad K. ‘Posthumanist performativity: towards an understanding of how matter comes to matter’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture*, 28.3 (2003): 801-829, 829. See also Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

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positivism of what exists, although it is not a positivism of facts, because it is particularly interested in how facts come to be constructed and how they are contested, fragile and only achieve a relative stability.

The attractiveness of this notion of a flat ontology of objects interacting in a process of mutual investment and attraction is that it pays due heed to the manner in which nonhuman objects have a force of their own that cannot be reduced to human intention. It draws attention in any mapping of a social situation to the plurality of both human and nonhuman actors. As we will see there are problems with Latour's lack of any concept of society, history and his complete reduction of the concept of human agency. However, at this point it is worthwhile just to stick to the notion of a flat ontology and to realise that there is an inadequacy to a philosophical position that names everything equally as an object. At some level, this is true, in terms of everything being an entity in the world ( notwithstanding the problem of imaginary objects), but this does not tell us anything significant about differences between objects, or about types of objects, or about concepts, or larger social units such as economies or classes. Latour has lots to say about objects, but it really amounts to the same thing. The writer Ian Bogost has talked about the "Latour litanies" that list object after object in a kind of mantra, but there is very little attention to kinds of objects and kinds of agency.<sup>28</sup>

The anti-relational branch of object-oriented philosophy also expresses a belief in a flat ontology of objects.

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<sup>28</sup> Bogost I. *Alien Phenomenology or what it's like to be a thing*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

Everything is an object that relates and acts with other objects. As we will see later, this does amount to a very different concept of what agency means that is very similar to Latour's idea of actants. The difference is that these objects hold something in reserve when acting with other objects; they are never fully present, or always in excess of their relations. The claim to a flat ontology is the claim that this is true of relations amongst non-human objects just as it is of relations between humans and humans or humans and nonhuman objects. The further claim is then made that there is no difference in kind between relations involving humans and relations involving nonhuman objects. As Harman states, there is no difference in kind in the relation of humans to pollen from the relations of pollen to oxygen.<sup>29</sup> Even if one accepts this, which when you think about it becomes complicated due to the variety of objects named in these relations, this still does not preclude there being a difference by degree in these different relations. The concept of a flat ontology does accept this grudgingly, but has nothing to say on the matter.

Harman does have something more to say about the object, and it turns out that the object itself is multiple, or to be more precise, quadruple.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on Husserl's phenomenology, Harman draws a division between real and sensual objects. There are real objects that are unified, autonomous things with real qualities that only come into contact with another real object through their appearance to other objects as sensual objects with sensual qualities. Harman gives the example of the sunflower here, which is a real unified

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<sup>29</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Harman G., *The Quadruple Object*, (Hants: Zero Books, 2011), Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 214-219.

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object with real qualities that can only though be experienced as such through its sensual apprehension by another object, both in terms of its sensual appearance and the fact that it is apprehended as a sensual object. From Husserlian phenomenology, Harman takes the idea that in experience an intentional object is given (what he terms a sensual object) although it is only experienced through some of its qualities and moments. When objects relate, they do not encounter each other in their reality, because this reality is always withdrawn from appearance, but encounter each other as sensual qualities and sensual objects. To preserve the notion of flat ontology, Harman claims that this quadruple model works across all object interactions, presumably including inorganic objects, but definitely including insensate objects. It is then difficult to understand the precise notion of sensual qualities and objects at play here. In the relation between oxygen and pollen, one could perhaps reduce the notion of sensation to some kind of organic perturbation, but just what a sensual object would be for oxygen or for pollen is hard to understand. To save the notion of the withdrawal of objects, Harman introduces the concept of sensual experience, but this concept appears to destroy the idea of a flat ontology.

### All Objects Exhibit Agency

The radical step taken with a flat ontology by all object-oriented philosophers is that all objects exhibit agency, and there are no particular agencies that are privileged. This does not mean that there is no hierarchy amongst agents, only that any hierarchy should not be conceived as describable in terms of human intentions and meaning. The notion of agency becomes radically altered to one of exerting an effect on other objects. At one level, this does involve an acknowledgement of

the dependency of any concept of human agency on an interaction with levels of active materiality that cannot be just subsumed under human significations. The possibility of being an agent is a possibility that can only be realised through and against various material effects. Bennett puts this well when she writes that:

Theories of democracy that assume a world of active subjects and passive objects begin to appear as thin descriptions at a time when the interactions between human, viral, animal and technological bodies are becoming more and more intense.<sup>31</sup>

Subjective agency is not the agency of a transcendent subject completely removed from a passive material and thus acting upon the world, but a subject that is itself an object as embodied and also a subject that depends for its agency on an interaction with active materialities. This is a point that Adorno makes clear in his essay "On Subject and Object", when he writes that the radical separation of the subject from the object is a historical process which results in a disavowal and domination of objectivity.<sup>32</sup>

However, the emphasis on the importance of taking into account material agencies as central to any notion of subjective constitution and subjective agency moves beyond this important insight into how objects matter towards a full-blown redescription of the nature of all agency that involves a suspension of the central defining features of subjectivity;

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<sup>31</sup> Bennett, J., *Vibrant Matter*, p.108.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno T.W 'On subject and object', in Adorno T.W, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry W. Pickford, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).



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namely conscious experience, meaning, intentionality and reflection. Latour defines action as anything that "modifies a state of affairs by making a difference".<sup>33</sup> The purpose of his sociology of associations is to trace the various ways that assemblages of objects of all types make a difference within networks or "matters of concern". This is a radical reduction of the concept of agency, rather than just a decentering. As Bryant (2011) writes, Latour's strategy is to move from an understanding of agency as located within humans to a notion of agency located within assemblages of actants including non-humans.<sup>34</sup> At one level, this acknowledges the entanglement and dependence of human agency on a variety of material bodies and forces, but at the other level it radically reduces the number of questions one can ask about an assemblage. It is an important step to take to recognise that action is a property of entanglement in material reality, but it is a step further then to bracket out any discussion of human intentionality or reflection. Bryant gives a radical example of this bracketing out of human subjectivity through an argument that questions the possibility of deliberating prior to actions. He poses the question as to:

How often do people act based on reasons and intentions? Isn't it rather that we fabricate reasons and intentions after we act as grounds of our actions in the vast majority of instances? . . . Isn't this precisely what fMRI scans show, where the decision is made prior to us becoming conscious of the action or reasons for the action? If this is the case, then all things being equal, we should abandon the idea that meaning and intention is the sole domain of humans,

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<sup>33</sup> Latour B., *Reassembling the Social*, p.71.

<sup>34</sup> Bryant L., *The Democracy of Objects*.

as humans never had this capacity to begin with as a given.<sup>35</sup>

Quite apart from the rather peculiar reversion to the supposed authority of fMRI scans, this is an argument that appears to dispense with the whole question of meaning and intentionality. What does it mean for a non-animal object to raise the question of its own actions even retrospectively? There is a parasitism within this philosophical approach that borrows the language of autonomous, full-blown agency and ascribes it plurally to all objects, but then critiques it whenever the concept of the subject raises its head. The concept of an actant reduces agency to the effect of a force coming from other actants. What I become or what becomes of me is an effect of my material entanglements and the effects that I manage to have on other objects in any assemblage within which I happen to be. This enables an enlargement of the domain of what comes to count within any sociological explanation, but at the cost of raising critical questions about the nature of any assemblage as we will see later.

### Anti-representationalism

At the heart of these problems of defining the particularities of human actions within object oriented philosophy is a resistance to thinking through any question of representation in concepts. These philosophies want a return to the object which does not have to negotiate with any question of the conceptual representation of the real, as this conceptual representation immediately lands us back in the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.98.

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problematic philosophy of access, which is the main point of their critique.

Adorno's philosophical project is also concerned with an attempt to make a move against the epistemological division between subject and object, towards the object, but without dispensing with conceptuality altogether. A turn to the object indicates a need for a different kind of conceptual thinking, a different kind of intellectual experience. Adorno describes a historical process in which a certain relation between self and world that is dominated and driven by the separation of a constituting ego and a mechanised nature takes predominance. This is a moment of freedom, in the sense that it is only through the separation from nature that humans become free from being dominated by natural forces. But, in this process of freedom from nature, and in the service of self-preservation, humans become separated from all that is natural within their own bodily relation to the world. Ideas of spontaneity, and a living alongside what is other from the self in a way that does not dominate otherness, becomes lost in the increasing systematisation and mathematisation of the natural world and human responsiveness to that world.<sup>36</sup> However, there is not some originary vital contact with the world that can be recovered or gestured towards. It is not as though there was an original relation to nature that has been lost in the process of capitalist modernisation, but that certain ways of being in the world which privilege a dominating and non-spontaneous relation to the natural world and to the body have become dominant within modernity.

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<sup>36</sup> Adorno T.W. and Horkheimer M, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002) 2–34.

There is a form of objectivity that is given within capitalism that is the commodity form. The commodity is the manner in which objects are made to appear within capitalist society as items for exchange. The commodity is therefore an abstraction from any notion of what materiality could be without the commodity form. Through this abstraction, commodities are not enjoyed as materialities in themselves, but only as instrumental objects for some other end. The commodity is exchangeable and totally fungible and once it acquires its exchangeability it loses its singularity. This is a form of objectivity that relates to a material practice of using objects for exchange that creates a representation of the object as inert, calculable and subject to mathematical measurement. This social practice of commodity exchange does not exist separately from epistemological concepts. Adorno thinks that the notions of subject and object are the reflection of social processes. He writes that:

The separation of subject and object is both real and semblance. True, because in the realm of cognition it lends expression to the real separation, the rivenness of the human condition, the result of a coercive historical process; untrue because the historical separation must not be hypostatized, not magically transformed into an invariant.<sup>37</sup>

There is no leap beyond this model of conceptual thinking, as there is no possibility of a thinking that would magically have access to the real. Any kind of thinking is representational in the sense that it attempts to capture objects under concepts. Adorno wants an orientation within conceptual thinking that will allow an openness to a different

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<sup>37</sup> Adorno, "On Subject and Object", p.246.

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understanding of what it might mean to encounter an object as a subject. Part of this openness is an acceptance of the experiential and bodily nature of such an encounter. There is a "somatic" moment to thinking.<sup>38</sup> However, the encounter between a subject (that is also an object) and nonhuman objects of various types cannot be reduced to either just an expression of some kind of behavioural effect, nor to complete and satisfactory identification, but an attempt to move towards a different relationship to objectivity through a different use of the concept.

Adorno writes that the utopia would be to "unseal the non-conceptual with concepts, without making it their equal".<sup>39</sup> The unsealing of objects would be an opening to an objectivity that is never fully revealed as such, that does remain fundamentally withdrawn. Adorno writes of this as thinking in constellations, through the deployment of a range of concepts that circle around an object without providing any specific identification or definition. This play of concepts indicates both an immersion and responsiveness to the releasing of an object from its historical petrification, and the refusal to completely identify the object. The goal of the constellation of concepts is to produce through the use of conceptuality the possibility of what Adorno terms a "contemplation without violence" that "presupposes that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distanced nearness".<sup>40</sup> Harman has written about an encounter between objects that he terms a kind of 'allure' that moves

beyond the object as it is given towards the possibility of a proximity towards an object that nevertheless withdraws from any full encounter. Using Levinas, he terms this a proximity without touching, but he extends this as a form of communication to communication amongst all objects, whether they be humans or avalanches slamming into abandoned cars.<sup>41</sup> This extends a metaphoric based on conceptual representation to entities without language.

Timothy Morton argues in a similar vein that there is nothing particularly different in degree about human representations when thinking about relations amongst objects. He writes that:

I just look and quack intelligent in relation to some other entity [...] What spoons do when they scoop up soup is not very different from what I do when I talk about spoons. Again not because the spoon is alive or intelligent (panpsychism), but because intelligence and being alive are aesthetic appearances for some other phenomenon.<sup>42</sup>

In a more nuanced manner, Shaviro has recently argued that the need to conceive of a flattened ontology that treats all agency as similar leads object oriented philosophy either towards a version of eliminativism or a version of panpsychism. It is the virtue of object oriented philosophies that they resist reductionist and mechanistic views of agency, but the anthropomorphic enchantment of objects occludes asking central questions about the nature of subjectivity.

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<sup>38</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno T.W, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott, (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p.89.

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<sup>41</sup> Harman, G, "Aesthetics as first philosophy".

<sup>42</sup> Morton T 'An object oriented defense of poetry', *New Literary History*, 43 (2012): 205-224, p.215.

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Shaviro writes of a necessary anthropomorphism which serves as a corrective to anthropocentric thinking, and that we need to think of all entities as having forms of experience.<sup>43</sup> However, there is little attention to the range of different types of experience that different entities have, and scant attention to human experience. Harman writes of this as an aesthetics as first philosophy, but aesthetics and art are types of conceptual representation, and it is only through the practice of a turning of concepts against conceptual identification that a different relation to objectivity can arise.

The refusal to think through any kind of conceptual representation as a fundamental element of human-world interactions leaves object-oriented philosophy in a state of enchantment by objects. This is the numbing effect of the long lists of objects as used within a flat ontology that serve only to blunt any kind of critical response to differentiation amongst the objects as listed or to the possibility of a reflective response to this bombardment of entities. This results in a fundamentally anti-critical philosophy.

### The Turn to the Object as Anti-critique

The refusal to think the problem of representation as a historical constitution of subjectivity against a form of objectivity results in a turn against critique. For Latour, this amounts to a conscious attempt to dislodge any thinking of totalities such as capitalism, let alone society. There is no society that exerts any universal pressures or hold on relations between agents. Latour's sociology of associations is an attempt to dissolve the thinking of the social as he writes:

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<sup>43</sup> Shaviro S., *The Universe of Things*.

the aim of this sociology of associations more precisely; there is no society, no social realm and no social ties, but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations.<sup>44</sup>

This sociology of associations is immensely attractive to inter-disciplinary research endeavours because it simply becomes a cartography of participants in networks that refuses to ask any questions about meaning, power or the social constitution of such networks. All that matters is that an association is formed, is traceable, and becomes stabilised over a period of time. It is true that Latour occasionally raises the question of the 'liveability' of such associations but this vague notion is given no other form than an empty concept of renewal.<sup>45</sup>

In his latest work, Latour returns to the question of values in a thoroughly conservative manner. What is important is to trace the internal conditions of truth within each network or "matter of concern", and then, to nurture or uphold institutions which can allow central values to survive. Latour replaces a notion of critique with a moralising discourse that attempts to trace values within modes of existence and uphold or cherish such values, which appear to be relatively ahistorical. He emphasises a diplomatic approach to an anthropology which is concerned with how to 'speak well' with various interlocutors from various traditions, although this is very much an effort considered with outlining a notion of Western tradition. This turn to values does not really modify

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<sup>44</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p.108.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, pp.260-261.

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his earlier hostility towards critique, indeed it cements a naked reactionary form of cultural critique. Latour writes that:

It is only today, owing to completely different circumstances, that we are obliged to renounce critique and learn to respect institutions again – perhaps even to cherish them.<sup>46</sup>

Latour famously attacked critique for its continual deconstruction of positions in favour of a greater reality. Therefore, the critic approaches his or her object with a well armed theory of explanation that can easily batter down the illusions of the naïve believer.<sup>47</sup> Critics are concerned with the destruction of illusions in favour of some greater explanatory rationale that itself is never subjected to critique. For Latour, what is needed is construction not critique, or what he terms a practice of composition.<sup>48</sup> Composition is about tracing assemblies of equal actants, both human and nonhuman, in order to chart the number of participants in any assemblage and the strategies through which these assemblages become stabilised. Finally, there is a question, which appears to gesture towards a political question as to how these assemblages can have any sense of themselves as a collective.<sup>49</sup>

Latour's tracing of the formation of matters of concern through contested issues provides an interesting analysis of how certain issues achieve stability as facts, but the refusal to ask any critical questions leaves us with a philosophy of the

strongest winning out. Only that which is successful and passes the test deserves the name of an assemblage. Critique is not, contra Latour, necessarily the debunking of illusion in the name of a greater reality, but the question of how particular realities are constructed and the cost in terms of suffering through which something becomes a matter of concern. It is not just a practice of tracing associations, but asking the question of how those associations stabilised, through which mechanisms of force and power and at what cost to both humans and nonhuman objects. Adorno writes in the essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" of the need for critical theory to immerse itself in its objects; however, at the same time to try and think of the relationship of those objects to the social whole, without having a secure path for criticism.<sup>50</sup> Criticism is therefore always a tentative questioning that results from an encounter with its object, but with an orientation towards that which is hidden or unsaid in the constitution of assemblages as stable assemblages. As Judith Butler writes, critique is concerned with the "occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves".<sup>51</sup> The turn to the object in critical theory is a twofold attempt to try and read in objects the sedimentation of suffering as a history of human relations, but also the possibility of releasing the object from that history to different possibilities that were passed over. Thus, a critical theory of assemblages asks the question of what is passed over or what is missed out in any successful stabilisation. As Adorno writes in his essay, "On Tradition," rather than a focus on

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<sup>46</sup> Latour B., *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p.261.

<sup>47</sup> Latour B., "Why has critique run out of steam?", pp.237-238.

<sup>48</sup> Latour B. 'An attempt at a compositionist manifesto', *New Literary History*, 41 (2010): 471-490.

<sup>49</sup> Latour B., *Reassembling the Social*, p.247.

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<sup>50</sup> Adorno T. W. 'Cultural Criticism and Society', in Adorno T. W. *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997).

<sup>51</sup> Butler J. 'What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue', in Ingram D (ed) *The Political. Blackwell readings in continental philosophy*, (Massachusetts, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) pp. 212-229, p.213.

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successful assemblages, the critical gaze focuses on that which is out of date or passed over:

But such idiosyncracies touch upon the true theme of rethinking tradition – that which was left along the way, passed over or overpowered, that is ‘out of date’. What is alive in tradition seeks refuge there and not in the permanence of works that have stood the test of time.<sup>52</sup>

In his latest project, interestingly, Latour does acknowledge this critique that his notion of construction ignores that which is left along the way in constructing networks, but he doesn’t really respond to his own internal critique.<sup>53</sup>

If social and political theory is reduced to a cartography of objects in assemblages, it becomes reduced to a positivism of forces of attraction. Whilst this expands the range and number of forces that are taken into account, it fails to ask any questions about the epistemic and societal totality in which these assemblages are formed, the consequences in terms of human suffering of their formation and stabilisation, and the possibilities of emancipation that may lie occluded within such formations. The ‘turn to the object’ in critical theory is a turn towards the site of both suffering and the promise of

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<sup>52</sup> Adorno T. W ‘On Tradition’, *Telos*, 94 (1992): 75-82, p.80.

<sup>53</sup> In a short passage that is very reminiscent of Adorno’s writings on tradition, Latour writes the following: “If every existent remakes the world in its own way and according to its own viewpoint, its supreme value is of course that of existing on its own, as Whitehead says, but it can in no case shed the anxiety of having left in the shadow, like so many mere means, the multitude of those, the others, that have allowed it to exist and about which it is never very sure that they are not its finality”, see Latour B, *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*, p. 455. However, for Latour, this is just a cost of self-preservation per se, and there are no structural dominating features to the manner in which entities become what they are.

something different, not just towards an account of alliances and forces.

### Conclusion

The recent ‘objective turn’ in philosophical discourse represents a welcome and provocative move towards an understanding of human agency as caught up within a series of other objects that themselves have a force and exert effects on social life. An emphasis on embodied practice, and on the ‘liveliness’ of things is an important correction to the construction of human subjectivity as entirely separate from the natural world and dominating a rationally calculable nature. However, the encounter with Adorno’s philosophical work poses several questions, questions both for object-oriented philosophy and for the tradition of critical theory.

Firstly, we need a more nuanced account of the nature of different kinds of objects as well as human ways-of-being amongst objects (even whilst being objects themselves). Does this mean that we cannot talk about objects as separate from human beings? No, but we do need to acknowledge that such a discussion will take place in critical contact with the disciplines of natural science. One of the key determinants of the “turn to the object” in the humanities has been a partial shift in paradigms in the natural sciences away from mathematical physical models of science towards biological and lively models of emergence, plasticity and contingency. This is only a partial shift in paradigms as reductionist thinking still survives even within this transformation.<sup>54</sup> However, this transformation

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<sup>54</sup> Catherine Malabou’s recent work is an interesting example of this tracing of a “fine line” of being provoked by confluences between concepts developed in the humanities ( the notion of plasticity as she developed it in Hegel’s philosophy)

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has enabled a re-engagement with the project of science on new terms. This is a challenge to critical theory as it partially complicates the picture of science as a rationalisation of calculable, inert matter. The question of "lively matter" and how it comes to matter politically, socially and individually is a key contemporary issue.

However, the importing of a metaphoric of agency into a flat ontology of objects does not seem particularly helpful here. The poetics of objective agency is largely a fetishising of an enchantment by objects that obscures both an engagement with objects on the terms of natural science, and an enquiry into human entanglement with objects. It becomes a way of eliding the question of human consciousness and representation, and the bracketing out of the question of conceptual representation is also a bracketing out of the way in which a historical domination of objectivity becomes instituted within conceptual categories. These conceptual categories cannot be completely disavowed but only worked through.

Secondly, it seems important to state that sentience matters and grades of sentience matter; critically, socially and experientially. This does not immediately decide what or where that sentience is, but names it as an issue worthy of moral and political concern. The concept of suffering, and the suffering of humans and nonhuman nature is a central category for any

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and concepts developed in the neurosciences (namely plasticity in the brain). There is a recognition of the transformation of the scientific paradigm in this work, although not necessarily a critical acknowledgement of the continuation of a reductionist approach. See Malabou C *What should we do with our brain?*, translated by Sebastian Rand, (New York; Fordham University Press, 2008), and Malabou C *The New Wounded. From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, translated by Steven Miller, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

social and political theory. Therefore, although a flat ontology argues that it is not completely without hierarchies, it needs to give an account of those hierarchies that raise central ethical questions. The hierarchy amongst objects cannot just be a matter of force, but should also take into account sentience and the capacity to suffer that enables an enquiry into how particular assemblages may be oppressive and experienced as stifling of potentialities within objects.

Thirdly, the nature of the object as commodity as a central form in which objects are produced and made to circulate needs to be thought through and not just ignored. The manner in which the commodity form determines a particular relationship between humans and objects and a history to that relationship is a central component of any philosophy of objects.<sup>55</sup> Critique survives as a turn to the object as a marker of damage done by the continued form in which objectivity is made to appear in capitalist societies.

Finally, both Harman's substance based ontology and Latour's relational ontology have important insights about how objects are experienced and produced, but the notion of experience and production refers to a concept of historical materialism that cannot be wished away. The idea of the

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<sup>55</sup> For an interesting opening of the discourse around object-oriented philosophy and commodification see the debate between Levi Bryant and Voyou on their respective blogs, *Larval Subjects* and *An und für sich*, where there are interesting debates about the nature of what capitalism does to objects through commodification, which are very Adornian thoughts. For the key blog entries see: <https://itself.wordpress.com/2011/06/07/commodity-fetishism-and-object-liberation/> and: <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2011/06/15/commodities-objects-and-persons/>

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withdrawal of objects from any relation makes sense as a turning against conceptuality within conceptuality to try and enable a different non-identifying way of being with objects. The notions of 'allure' and proximity without touching have interesting and important things to say about the mutual entanglement of subjects and objects that lose their force when extended to relations where no subject appears. Similarly, Latour's notion of the construction of contested "matters of concern" is the construction of these within and for human societies. This does not mean that nonhuman objects don't exert a force or effect in these assemblages, just that the question of what is to count as a "matter of concern" is a question that is constructed within a societal form and on the basis of a concept of what it means to live in a society. A critique of "matters of concern" is not the unmasking of illusions to unveil a greater reality, but the question of whose interests are served, at what cost are these assemblages formed, and what possibilities are there that lie discarded along the way.



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