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# The Normative Architecture of Reality: Towards an Object-Oriented Ethics

Justin L. Harmon
*University of Kentucky*, justin.harmon@uky.edu
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THE NORMATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF REALITY:
TOWARDS AN OBJECT-ORIENTED ETHICS

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DISSERTATION
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
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at the University of Kentucky

By
Justin L. Harmon

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Theodore Schatzki, Professor of Philosophy

Lexington, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

THE NORMATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF REALITY:
TOWARDS AN OBJECT-ORIENTED ETHICS

The fact-value distinction has structured and still structures ongoing debates in metaethics, and all of the major positions in the field (expressivism, cognitivist realism, and moral error theory) subscribe to it. In contrast, I claim that the fact-value distinction is a contingent product of our intellectual history and a prime object for questioning. The most forceful reason for rejecting the distinction is that it presupposes a problematic understanding of the subject-object divide whereby one tends to view humans as the sole source of normativity in the world. My dissertation aims to disclose the background against which human ethical praxis is widely seen as a unique and special phenomenon among other phenomena.

I show that ethical norms, as delimited by utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, etc., derive from an originary proto-ethical normativity at the heart of the real itself. Every object, human and nonhuman, presents itself as a bottomless series of cues or conditions of appropriateness that determine adequate and inadequate ways of relating to it. That is, objects demand something from other objects if they are to be related to; they condition other objects by soliciting a change in disposition, perception, or sense, and for this reason are sources of normativity in and unto themselves. Ethical norms, or values, are the human expression of the adequacy conditions with which all objects show themselves.

In the post-Kantian landscape it is widely thought that human finitude constitutes the origin of ethical norms. Consequently, the world is divided up into morally relevant agents (humans) on one side, and everything else on the other. Adopting a deflationary view of agency, I argue that human-human and human-world relations differ from other relations in degree rather than kind. Thus, instead of a fact-value distinction, value is inextricably bound up with the factual itself. The critical upshot of my project is that traditional subject-oriented ethical theories have served to conceal the real demands of non-human objects (such as animals, plants, microorganisms, and artificially intelligent machines) in favor of specifically human interests. Such theories have also been leveraged frequently in exclusionary practices with respect to different groups within the human community (e.g. women and those of non-European descent) based on arbitrary criteria or principles.

  Justin L. Harmon

  March 7, 2016
Date

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By

Justin L. Harmon


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Theodore Schatzki
Director of Dissertation

David Bradshaw
Director of Graduate Studies

March 7, 2016

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# 1   CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION:  WHAT IS LIVING AND WHAT IS DEAD IN SPECULATIVE REALISM

This dissertation is a work in posthumanist (proto)ethics.  However, like the case of postmodernism with respect to the modern, the posthuman has not simply left the human behind.  Rather, the "post" signifies the late modern human condition of coming to grapple in a serious way with the metaphysical and historico-cultural assumptions in which our identities as "modern humans" are entangled.    Given that it is only out of this obscure constellation of assumptions and the sedimented history of thought that we can even begin to grapple with ourselves, the project has a certain paradoxical character similar to that presented in Kierkegaard's description of the Knight of Faith's ability to "fall down in such a way that at the same time it looks as though one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian…"[1]

The "closure of myth" with which the posthumanist project is engaged—in particular, the myths that circumscribe what it means to be "human" over and against everything else—is, paradoxically, the *opening up of myth,* the exposure of myth *qua* myth, an exposure in which, *a fortiori*, the mythicality of the reductive *de-mythologizing* enterprise of modern techno-science is itself illuminated.  This dissertation is in part an effort to articulate the interface of myth and philosophy, where *myth* indicates the self-concealing background from and against which every explicit self-presentation, practical or theoretical, is deployed, and where *philosophy* points to one singular opening of, or space of access to, *truth*.  If, however, the unity of *philosophy* is always preserved in the multiplicity of *philosophies*, then philosophy is not identical to *truth* (not

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[1] Kierkegaard (2006): 34.

even the "truest" philosophy), but is only ever one contingent and historical expression and rigorization of the true. It follows from this that truth is and can be revealed non-linguistically and, furthermore, by non-human actants. But, for we humans engaged in the posthumanist project, as described above, the philosophical unweaving of our most deeply entrenched myths about human uniqueness and privilege serves to open up a space for questioning in which objects are freed to present themselves at once *imperatively* and *questioningly*, that is, where our demands are met with countless others.

At the most abstract level, the question *I* am asking is what Korsgaard calls "the normative question," i.e., most basically, "whence norms?" From where does the "ought" issue, and why ought we recognize it? It is, in other words, *the* metaethical question *as such*. My attempt to respond to this question can be understood as a more rigorous, nuanced, and far-reaching formulation of an answer that I have found to be more or less intuitive among secular non-philosophers for whom cultural relativism is unpalatable. Why is it wrong to swindle Mrs. Swanson out of her social security check? Because she is the sort of being that demands not to be swindled. Why is it wrong to kick the stray mutt in the alley? Because it is the sort of being that demands not to be kicked. Why is it wrong to effectively poison a community's water supply in order to save roughly $100 a year? Because a human community is the sort of being that demands not to be poisoned. Hence, even in the absence of some distinct, ontotheologically prioritized being (e.g., God, the transcendental subject, etc.) that grounds the ethical relation in a justificatory metaphysics of morals, the *normative* still exercises itself. Where? In the Being, the self-presentation, of this or that concrete and singular being.

My realist view contrasts starkly with that of theological absolutism, perhaps best encapsulated in Dostoevsky's famous line from *The Brothers Karamazov*, "if there is no God, then everything is permitted." The absence of a transcendental, universal measure does not

entail the absence of measure. While the *dispersal* of measure across the inter-object sphere—that in which we and every other object is caught up, from marine bivalve mollusks to protean configurations of cosmic dust—undercuts the possibility of any *vertical, unilateral* or even *bilateral* normativity, it highlights the normative as precisely *horizontal* and *multilateral*. We can perhaps modify Mitya's phrase from Dostoevsky's novel to read instead: "If there is no God, then *nothing* is [simply] permitted."

My metaethical account is situated between the dogmatic extremes of objective absolutism on the one side, and subjective relativism on the other. Both extremes share a common anthropocentric source, and both, perhaps especially the latter, serve to close the space of questioning. Anyone who has taught introductory ethics knows the bitter struggle involved in keeping this space open. Some students take certain moral "truths" for granted, and others tend to balk unreflectively at the very notion of "moral truth." Both tendencies, to invoke a Heideggerian distinction, result from privileging beings over Being, which is just another way of expressing the oblivion of the imperative mode—the very mode in which objects present themselves as what they *are*. As I write in section 2.4 of Chapter Two: "If we do not call into question the 'spoken falsehoods' of our cultural heritage by, for example, thinking and talking about the nature of justice, we are likely to be inclined to think of the latter as being nothing more that the observance of certain rules. If we reduce justice entirely to the production and observance of contingent *nomoi*, 'we may, in turn, be tempted to agree with Thrasymachus' view that these rules are so many devices for securing the interests of others against our interests.' As a result, ethics becomes a purely instrumental *techne* or technology; below it is but a gnawing abyss."

Ethical systems that function as determinate rule providers, such as Kantianism or, in certain versions less rigidly, utilitarianism, effectively *technologize* the ethical as well, purporting

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to hand down unilateral direction and guidance from pure rationality, or from the native hedonism of human nature itself, a fixed and knowable entity. The growth of "axiology" or "value theory" in the twentieth century already performatively and implicitly answered the "normative question," severing it theoretically from the categories in which we have historically endeavored to investigate the real. As I show in Chapter Two, this was a more or less inevitable corollary of the *arche* from which modern science got underway in the seventeenth century. Sartrean existentialism reduces the *existential* problem, namely, the problem of how to *live* as an *existing individual*, to a decisive conflict between subjectivism and objectivism, failing to see, however, that the birth of the metaphysical *object* was at the same time the birth of the metaphysical *subject*. To think a being as "mere object" in this context is to "subjectivize" it, to posit it as *being for* as subject. Hence, both terms imply a necessary relation, but one that is dictated unilaterally on the side of subjectivity, the ground for all *knowing* and—since the epistemological turn—for all *being* as well. Thus, "subjectivisms" and "objectivisms" alike belong to the selfsame, biunivocal source of Cartesian ontology where the *two* of the dualism gives way to a furtive quasi-monism, where knowledge of objects is ultimately knowledge of oneself—not as a Socratic opening of finite questioning, but as the most securely knowable thing of all. We can see in light of this claim why Ayn Rand's perverse so-called "objectivism," for example, seems much more like the most aggressive apotheosis of subjectivist politics than its name suggests.

Object-oriented ethics is for these reasons not an "objectivist" ethics. It is, rather, a strategy to recover the *sense* of the ethical prior to its ossification in the ideal domain of values, housed in one or another structure of privileged subjectivity. But, crucially, it is also an acknowledgement that we cannot and ought not, even if we could, reverse the decisive blow that critical philosophy has dealt to all dogmatic realisms; we can't return to some bucolic state

of being perfectly at home among objects in the world. Instead, we must come to terms with the profoundly messy (but not, properly speaking, chaotic), multilateral state of our world as one in which, at the most basic level of reality, every entity takes its measure from the "outside," so to speak, from the imperatival self-presentation of finite contiguous beings. Yet, every finite being, insofar as it is an exposure of truth, houses an infinity of self-presentations, none of which can be reduced or eliminated, either in the *downward* direction towards some inscrutable atomic building blocks, or in the *upward* direction towards some privileged *ur-relation*, whether articulated as *cognition*, *consciousness*, *power*, *praxis*, *language*, etc.

The alternative to these methods (what Graham Harman calls "undermining" and "overmining," respectively) is to develop alternative methods, not through top-down conceptualizations or reconceptualizations, but from the ground up, amidst our ineluctable entanglement with things, *with* which we not only manage to satisfy our ends and desires, but also to learn what those ends and desires are in the first place. In short, we must strive to keep in view the ongoing proto-ethical source of our technological ethical systems, i.e. the systems that answer to our longing for a "preemptory directive and for rules that say how man…ought to live in a fitting manner." The proto-ethical issues from the singular existence of every being in its peculiar style of being; this "style" exercises itself, this Being "speaks," as call, imperative, lateral (and never unilateral) appropriation, demand. My project is not to reduce human beings, purportedly the only moral agents in the cosmos, to the level of "mere" things. Rather, it is to elevate the plurality of supposedly "mere" things to a level of dignity and considerability heretofore reserved for only Gods and humans. OOE is a strategy for thinking an ethics that is reducible to neither subjective values, nor to objective principles.

In April 2007, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant spoke at Goldsmith's College in London at what would later be dubbed the first

Speculative Realism event.  Brassier organized the meeting—and purportedly coined the term "speculative realism"—in the wake of the 2006 publication of Meillassoux's *After Finitude*. While the four original members of this nascent movement differ so widely on a number of substantive points that subsuming them under the same theoretical umbrella seems a stretch[2], they are nevertheless unified in the face of a common antagonist, first identified by Meillassoux: "correlationism."

In the words of Meillassoux, "correlationism" is "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."[3]  Stating the same idea differently, Harman describes correlationism as a "philosophy of access," which "assumes that the human-world gap is the privileged site of all rigorous philosophy."[4]  Understood in these terms, at the heart of correlationism lies the Kantian view that human finitude constitutes both the intelligibility of the world and the insuperable limit to any transcendence of this intelligibility.  Since the advent of Kant's "Copernican turn" in philosophy, it has been regarded as impossible to engage with the sundry entities of this world, from flagellate protozoa to the Virgo Cluster, *as themselves*, that is, beyond the narrow dictates of specifically human interest and reason.  Phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, etc., as anti-realist positions in contemporary philosophy, all subscribe in some way to the correlationist edict, even if they vary with respect to the specific nature of the correlation to be privileged.  Although many of these trends go some way toward dismantling the abstract Cartesian subject, in an important

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[2] Meillassoux, like his mentor, Badiou, advocates the positing of a mathematical absolute.  Harman as we will see, calls for an anti-reductionist (mathematical or otherwise) object-oriented metaphysics. Brassier is an avowed reductionistic nihilist.  Finally, Grant pursues a brand of materialism in the tradition of Whitehead and Deleuze.

[3] Meillassoux (2006): 5.

[4] Harman (2011a): 136.

sense they also remain captive to the modern project of subjectivism by treating the subject as something of a diaphanous lens—whether as *consciousness*, *discourse*, *power*, etc.—through whose aperture alone the world and its furniture can be seen.  As Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman write in their introductory essay to the edited volume *The Speculative Turn*, "in the face of looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world (including our own bodies), it is not clear that the anti-realist position is equipped to face up to these developments."[5]

In the minds of these thinkers, post-Kantian philosophy has been a "transparent cage" beyond whose walls

> …contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers:  that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere.[6]

It is for this reason that these new realists enjoin us recover the long beleaguered *speculative* vocation of philosophy, where "speculation…aims at something 'beyond' the critical and linguistic turns…as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labor of critique."[7]  Of course, the progress achieved through the labor of critique can be explained as the overcoming of dogmatism, whether rationalist or empiricist in character.  Thus, what is needed "in the face of looming ecological catastrophe" is the recuperation of a *non-dogmatic* (and non-idealist) *conception of the absolute*.  What could this mean?  Meillassoux writes:

> Against dogmatism, it is important that we uphold the refusal of every metaphysical absolute [i.e. every ontotheological absolute], but against the reasoned violence of various fanaticisms, it is important that we re-discover in

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[5] Bryant, *et al* (2011): 3.
[6] Meillassoux (2006): 7.
[7] Bryant, *et al* (2013): 3.

thought a modicum of absoluteness—enough of it, in any case, to counter the pretensions of those who would present themselves as its privileged trustees, solely by virtue of some revelation.[8]

Meillassoux understands, rightly, I think—as did Kierkegaard, arguably[9]—that a total abjuration of the absolute, in other words, relativism, opens the door to perhaps the most ferocious and implacable forms of fanaticism. Against this consequence, Meillassoux claims, "…it is possible to envisage an *absolutizing* thought that would not be absolutist."[10] The task he lays before us here is to "grasp how thought is able to access an absolute, i.e., a being whose *severance*…and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relation to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not."[11] In an important sense, this dissertation is an attempt to take up this task and to follow it through along a more or less clear trajectory.

As it turns out, Meillassoux's own effort to delineate such a *non-absolutist absolute* lands him in a regrettably naïve mathematization of the real, wherein the principle of non-contradiction alone can be affirmed with any degree of certainty. What sets Meillassoux apart from the other speculative realists is his insistence that correlationism cannot be overcome, but must be radicalized—mathematically—from within. While I resist this conclusion, Meillassoux's reasoning here is quite powerful: We can know, at least, that no contradictory entity is possible, because it "would be tantamount to a 'black hole of differences,' into which all alterity would be irremediably swallowed up, since the being-other of this entity would be obliged, simply by virtue of being other than it, *not* to be other than it."[12] What appeals to me

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[8] Meillassoux (2006): 49.
[9] This would be, for example, an extreme fanaticism of the "world historical," or, in Heidegger's terminology, of *das Man* run amok.
[10] *Id.*: 34.
[11] *Id.*: 28.
[12] *Id.*: 69-70.

in Meillassoux's argument is the implication that *difference* is the one irreducible metaphysical primitive.[13] What I find troubling and not at all necessary, however, is his Cartesian-Lockean privileging of the *quantitative* over the *qualitative*. On phenomenological grounds, I agree with Alphonso Lingis that "the qualitative features of a thing reveal its nature and reality more than do its quantitative features. In the real colors and resonance and warmth, we perceive the consistency of a real thing."[14] I will argue, furthermore, that in the qualitative—more so than in the quantitative—we perceive the ways in which a thing resists our perception, knowledge, and understanding of it, i.e. the ways in which a thing *exceeds* human measure.

Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which enjoys more prestige in sociology and social theory circles than it does in philosophy, is a source of great inspiration for certain speculative realists, especially Graham Harman and Levi Bryant. What is most attractive in Latour for Harman and Bryant's purposes is his theory of "'irreductionism,' in which all entities are equally real (though not equally strong) insofar as they act on other entities."[15] According to Latour, every entity—from germs and weather patterns to democracies—is an "actor" to the extent that, in the words of Bryant, it "makes a difference" *vis-à-vis* its network with other entities. Both Harman and Bryant leverage Latour's irreductionism in the development of what they call a "flat ontology" (although, as we shall see, Harman rejects the implication that the being of an entity is at all reducible to its effects on other entities): "…the effort to reduce one level of reality to another invariably leaves residues of the reduced entity that are not fully translatable by the reduction…"[16] Another aim of the pursuit of an

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[13] Of course, this premise is shared by others, such as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. In Chapter Three I draw especially on Deleuze for my own argument.
[14] Lingis (1998): 31.
[15] Bryant, *et al* (2011): 5. Cf. Latour (1993): Part Two.
[16] Bryant, *et al* (2011): 5.

irreductive, flat ontology is the neutralization of all metaphysical hierarchies.  To this end,

Manuel De Landa argues:

> While an ontology based on relations between general types and particular instances is *hierarchical*, each level representing a different ontological category (organism, species, genera), an approach in terms of interacting parts and emergent wholes leads to a *flat ontology*, one made of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not ontological status.[17]

On this view, as I understand it, the continuum of being is structured according to an unusual

mereology in which (1) every *part* is also a *whole*, (2) there is no one given part or emergent

whole that can claim ontological dominion over the others, and (3) the emergence or *self-presentation* of new wholes is at once metaphysically and epistemically *bottomless*.  In his popular

blog, Levi Bryant describes this mereology as one of "…objects wrapped in objects, wrapped

in objects, *without* these relations forming a *holistic* unity."[18]

Also against reductionism, Iain Hamilton Grant claims that "what phenomena are

cannot be reduced to how they appear for any given apparatus of reception, technological or

biological."[19]  Harman, Bryant, and Grant all endorse this claim, but for radically antithetical

reasons in light of which we oppose Harman on one side, to Bryant and Grant on the other.

This theoretical divide concerns the proper characterization of ontological excess—what

Harman and Bryant, following Heidegger's notion of *Entzug*, call "withdrawal"—and its role

in the irreducibility of entities, and is of paramount importance for my project.  For Harman,

"real" entities are withdrawn from each other owing to their status as mystical (*qua* ineffable)

*noumena*, vacuum-sealed away from every possible relation.  For Bryant and Grant, in contrast,

"real" entities withdraw from other entities at the *phenomenal* level owing to something

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[17] De Landa (2002): 41.
[18] https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/08/12/more-strange-mereology/.
[19] Grant (2008): 145.

excessive in the nature of appearance itself.  I will develop my own argument in line with the latter view.

Of the four original speculative realists, Harman is the only "object-oriented" philosopher.  On April 23, 2010, Harman joined Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Steven Shaviro in Atlanta, Georgia for the first object-oriented philosophy symposium.  Object-oriented philosophy or, as Bogost prefers, object-oriented ontology [OOO], can be understood as a subfield (or, in Harman's words, a "splinter group") of speculative realism, that is, as another strategy to combat the sterility of correlationism.  In a succinct formulation of this strategy's commitments, Harman argues that "individual entities of various different scales (not just tiny quarks and electrons) are the ultimate stuff of the cosmos,"[20] and that these "objects cannot be reduced to anything else," but "must be addressed by philosophy on their own terms."[21]

Harman articulates two broad paths by which post-Kantian philosophy has tended to reduce objects:  (1) *undermining*, and (2) *overmining*.  One "undermines" objects when one claims that "objects are unreal because they are derivable of something deeper—objects are too superficial to be the truth."[22]  Efforts to reduce objects to some deeper, more essential building blocks, such as atoms, quarks, monads, animal spirits, etc., are examples of undermining.  On the other hand, "overmining"—a Harman coinage—occurs when one claims "objects are unreal because they are useless fictions compared with what is truly evident in them—whether this be qualities, events, actions, effects, or givenness to human access.  Here objects are declared too falsely deep to be the truth."[23]  According to Harman, the strategy of "overmining"—whether in the form of a "reduction" to consciousness, praxis, discourse,

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[20] Harman (2013): 7.
[21] Harman (2011a): 138.
[22] Harman (2011b): 24.
[23] *Ibid.*

textuality, culture, etc.—has been "the central dogma of continental philosophy."[24]  As a "flat ontology," Harman's system bars reduction in either the downward or upward direction.  Let us now briefly take a closer look at the intricacies of this system.

For Harman, every object, as an irreducible, unified whole, is ultimately a constellation of four elements:  (1) the *real* object, (2) *real* properties, (3) the *sensual* object, and (4) *sensual* properties.  As might be expected, only (3) and (4) are *phenomenal*, that is, can be experienced sensuously by other objects.  Let us start with these.

Appropriating Husserl for his argument, Harman observes that every phenomenon, even if necessarily taken up adumbratively, i.e. by way of disparate profiles, is perceived as a unified whole.  I do not first hear the vague crunching noise of tires ascending my worn asphalt driveway as an abstract and loosely connected series of unintelligible sounds, but, instead, as my wife coming home from work.  I do not perceive the western face of the Patterson Office Tower on campus as some discrete thing in contradistinction to the other sides, but rather as a manifestation of the Tower itself.  This is the "sensual object."  The various *properties* by which I come to perceive the sensual object as a whole, properties which I can theoretically abstract and enumerate, are what Harman calls the object's "sensual properties."

Proceeding now via Husserl's eidetic reduction, Harman argues that not every property is equally *essential* to the intelligibility of a given object.  In order to reach the essential, one must engage in what Husserl names the process of "eidetic variation," whereby one imaginatively subtracts away properties from a phenomenon until hitting upon the *sine qua non* that cannot be eliminated without doing violence to the integrity of the phenomenon in question.  Only here do we encounter the *real*, i.e. *intelligible*, properties of a thing, in the absence of which it could not abide as itself.  These properties (or *eidoi*), as Husserl makes clear, are

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[24] *Ibid.*

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accessible only through "categorial intuition," and never through the sensibility. Harman parts

ways with Husserl, however, on the question of the distinction between so-called "intellectual"

and "sensuous" properties:

> …Husserl is wrong to distinguish between the sensual and the intellectual here; both sensual and categorial intuition are forms of intuition, and to intuit something is not the same as to be it. Hence the eidetic features of any object can never be made present even through the intellect, but can only be approached indirectly by way of allusion, whether in the arts or in the sciences. Copper wires, bicycles, wolves, and triangles all have real qualities, but these genuine traits will never be exhausted by the feeble sketches of them delivered to our hearts and minds. A proton or volcano must have a variety of distinct properties, but these remain just as withdrawn from us as the proton and volcano themselves…What we have here is the strange case of a sensual object with *real* qualities. For the qualities of its eidos are necessary for it to exist, but are also withdrawn from all access, and "real" is the only possible name for such a feature.[25]

*Real* properties, then, even as essentially constitutive of the being of a given object, are forever

withdrawn—concealed from intellection and sensation alike—behind the superficial

appearances through which the object is accessible for experience.

Finally, the "real object" in this story is that unified, autonomous whole of which the

so-called "real properties" are essentially delimitative. It is, in Harman's evocative language,

"a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum: irreducible to its own pieces, and equally irreducible

to its outward relations with other things."[26] "Essence," in this view, "means nothing more

than the tension between a real object and its real properties in a single instant, not some

timeless nature that each thing must possess from the dawn of the world."[27] Ontological

*withdrawal* is therefore at the center of Harman's object-oriented position, and he argues for it

in several different ways throughout his body of work, all of which, however, come out of his

rather novel reading of Heidegger's celebrated analysis of tools and broken tools in *Being and*

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[25] Harman (2011a): 28.
[26] *Id.*: 47.
[27] Harman (2013): 27.

*Time*. I provide a more detailed overview of this reading in Chapter Three. For the present I will restrict my exposition to a brief treatment of what Peter Wolfendale has identified as Harman's "argument from *excess*."[28] My motivation here is to uncover what I take to be problematic in Harman's own understanding of objects and, on this basis, to gesture towards a more theoretically satisfying model of objival excess, which I construct over the course of the dissertation as a whole.

We uncover the being of objects within the world phenomenologically by examining our "everyday dealings" in the world—how do objects present themselves amidst our concernful involvement? For Heidegger, "Such entities are not…objects for knowing the 'world' theoretically; they are simply what gets used, what gets produced, and so forth."[29] Such entities are obscured by our "interpretive tendencies" (i.e. our efforts at thematizing). We need to consider them as they present themselves amidst our everyday coping in order to grasp the sort of being they evince in the structure of Dasein's care. Heidegger calls these entities "equipment" [*Zeug*] or "tools." Tools, encountered most primarily as ready-to-hand [*zuhanden*], withdraw from self-conscious reflection: in use, the hammer is transparent; we don't look at it disinterestedly. Further, when engaged in hammering, Dasein is also transparent: We tend to consider only the "in-order-to" for which the hammer is deployed, that is, the end result of the task at hand. When circumspectly [*umsicht*] engaged, we navigate a kind of hermeneutic circle: the hammer makes sense only if we "understand" nails, boards, houses, etc., which only make sense if we "understand" that for the sake of which we are engaged. The latter can be "understood" only to the extent that we know the tools at hand through just the sort of circumspective involvement under discussion. Objects ready-to-hand are defined by their use,

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28 Wolfendale (2014): 66-73.
29 Heidegger (1962): 95.

but their use is understandable only within a referential nexus of other objects and their assignments (e.g. we can understand a chair as such only in light of tables, desks, tasks, etc.).

We can, of course, encounter beings as present-at-hand [*vorhanden*]; we can stare at a hammer and size it up. In order to do so, we "must first penetrate beyond what is ready-to-hand in our concern. Readiness-to-hand is the way in which entities as they are 'in themselves' are defined ontologico-categorially."[30] This is a provocative claim: a chair is as it is in itself when it is understood in he mode of *zuhanden* comportment. Most thinkers before Heidegger would disagree. What can he mean by this? A "chair" is not identical to the stuff of which it is made. That is, we can consider the "chair" as a different object, requiring a different mode of comportment, than the wood, metal, and plastic out of which it was put together.

Dispersed into a general "equipmental" effect, objects vanish into a system of reference, losing their singularity. A tool becomes "present," a figure standing against the background of the world, when it malfunctions. This tells us something not just about the tool, but also about the normal mode in which we typically take it up—amidst a world. The broken tool is seen as "present-at-hand" in a sense, but not only this: it is presented as something which resists one's use and understanding, thus still referring in some way to the world of use as such. In the broken tool's withdrawal from appropriation, it discloses itself as *inexhaustible* by either *zuhanden* (practical) or *vorhanden* (theoretical) comportments. In Harman's reading, the reason for this is that we must understand Heidegger's analysis of "breakdown" as *ontological* rather than *ontic*. That is, a tool does not have to be *literally* broken in order to effect this disclosure; nor does an object have to be *literally* a tool.[31] Every object

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30 *Id*.: 101.
31 Harman (2002): 45.

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can be seen as "broken," and thus as disclosed in its indifferent withdrawal (from human *Zuhanenheit* no less than from human *Vorhandenheit*).

In his book on Meillassoux's "philosophy in the making," Harman articulates this sense of withdrawal in terms of inexhaustibility:  "In Heideggerian terms it is true that phenomena in consciousness fail to do justice to the full depths of things, to their inscrutable being withdrawn from all presence.  Yet it is *also* the case that the practical handling of entities fails to do them justice as well." [32]  So far, so good.  It is with Harman's unwarranted noumenalist conclusion that I take issue.  It is one thing to say that the ongoing being of an object consists in a plentitude so overwhelming as to exhaust the receptive capacities of any given receiving agent.  It is another to claim that there is some determinate nucleus in an object that *ipso facto*, in virtue of its peculiar *kind* of being, remains forever withheld from any access or relation whatever.

As Wolfendale states the issue, Harman "holds that excess is essential because there is an essential feature of entities that is excessive." [33]  "This move," he goes on, "converts the essential excess into an *excessive essence*." [34]  Thus, without reservation, Harman endeavors to unravel the Kantian correlationist edict, grounded in an account of human finitude, by extending finitude beyond the human:  "Far from challenging the retreat of philosophers from the world into the bastion of consciousness, he has simply extended the domain of consciousness into the world." [35]  Harman himself is not shy about this maneuver.  In the "First OOO Lecture in Russia," for example, he boldly asserts:

> Rather than overthrowing Kant in favor of some form of absolute knowledge…what we need is to spread the Kantian vision across the cosmos as a whole.  For what Kant actually gave us was not a poignant theory of the

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[32] Harman (2011c): 135.
[33] Wolfendale (2014): 69-70.
[34] *Id*.: 71.
[35] *Id*.: 105.

special limitations of poor human beings. Instead, he gave us a noumenal/phenomenal distinction that holds for all relations whatsoever.[36]

Leaving aside that this claim results from a rather cavalier reading of Kant, it immediately exposes Harman to the well-known Hegelian critique of the *Ding an sich*, which Rasmus Ugilt articulates thusly:

> The setting of a limit, the drawing of a line, does in itself entail and postulate knowledge about what is to be found on both sides of the line. In other words there is a hidden contradiction in the Kantian setting of final limits within the realm of knowledge, because setting a limit between what we can know and what we cannot know, necessarily entails *some form* of knowledge about what is at both sides of that limit.[37]

Because of its finitude, human being is always in a state of *knowing* and *not knowing*. Being consistent about this Socratic insight entails that one cannot establish the terms of the divide between knowing and not knowing *a priori* without committing oneself to knowing more about what one does not know than one can ever hope to know about it. This is true even if (perhaps *especially* if) the determination under question is presented as merely abstract or structural.

Harman's noumenalism is indispensible to his project as a whole, informing one of the most audacious and, in terms of the ethical, least satisfying corollaries of his object-oriented system: the theory of vicarious causation. As we have seen, the *real* objects of Harman's world exist precisely in a state of unflagging mutual withdrawal from behind contiguous sensuous facades. Every object, whether perceptual or conceptual, from Ernie Banks to Ernie on Sesame Street, is at once *real* and *sensual*. While real objects never interact, their sensual counterparts are, at bottom, *nothing but* the products of interaction, viz., "reality" as *for* some real, experiencing entity:

> If contact in the realm of the real is utterly impossible, but contact in the sensual realm is an absolute requirement, then obviously the sensual realm of experience must be where all causation is triggered. The real objects that

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[36] Harman (2013): 171.
[37] Ugilt (2012): 16.

> withdraw from all contact must somehow be translated into sensual caricatures of themselves, and these exaggerated profiles are what must serve as fuel for the causal relations that are impossible between concealed things. Somehow, the events that occur in the sensual sphere must be capable of a retroactive effect on the reality that lies outside all experience.[38]

In *Guerilla Metaphysics*, Harman's second book, he attacks relational metaphysical theories for being "too reminiscent of a funhouse hall of mirrors."[39] Taking Alfred North Whitehead's position as an example, he notes that although for him when we discuss volcanoes there is some real entity out there in the world to which the name "volcano" refers, "if we try to determine just what this volcano is for Whitehead, it turns out to be nothing more than its perceptions of *other* entities. These entities, in turn, are made up of still further perceptions. The hot potato is passed on further down the line, and we never reach any reality that would be able to anchor the various perceptions of it."[40] Hence, in Harman's view, there must always be some noumenal reality held in reserve away from every possible relational effect, which means that every relational effect occurs only *indirectly*. Yet, it remains unclear how this strategy is able to put an end to the game of metaphysical hot potato, insofar as the potato (the potato of *Being*?) is supposed to rest finally at a place that is *infinitely* removed from the mechanisms of its passing.

Harman's conclusion is disappointing in a number of ways, not least of which are its implications (or lack thereof) for ethics and political philosophy. How, exactly, is one to take seriously the very real "objects" that constitute the socio-political landscape—we typically call such objects "persons"—if these objects never touch, interact, or show themselves? It is not sufficient to point out that such interactions *do* take place, but at the phenomenal level of

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[38] Harman (2011a): 75.
[39] Harman (2005): 82.
[40] *Ibid.*

sensual objects and their properties, because, and this must be kept in mind, Harman is purportedly offering us a robust theory of metaphysical *realism*, a theory, in other words, which at last fulfills Husserl's promise of returning to the "things themselves." Harman, no less than Husserl, fails in this regard.

Such a dearth of potency for thinking through difficult *praxical* matters is not limited to the drawbacks of the "splinter group" in question, but extends to the current state of the parent group as well. Srnicek, for example, "argues that it is…the case that any realist ontology must be devoid of grounds for ethical and political action."[41] Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman point out, indicating directions for future research, that

> a more serious issue for the new realisms and materialisms is the question of whether they can provide any grounds or guidelines for ethical and political action. Can they justify normative ideals? Or do they not rather evacuate the ground for all intentional action, thereby proposing a sort of political quietism.[42]

If all *real* objects are inexorably withdrawn from any possible relation, both at the *endo-* level between the whole and its parts, and at the *exo-* level between the object and other objects outside of it, we seem to end up with a "vacuous actuality," the very thing for which Harman himself criticizes Whitehead.[43]

My own thinking about objects began in 2008, prior to my significantly freeing and vindicating encounter with speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy in 2011. The inchoate seed of this trajectory took root in my Master's thesis, completed at the University of Houston in 2009, titled *Ethics as an Empty House: The Intersection of Art and Place in Late Heidegger*. At the very outset, my theoretical orientation towards objects took shape in the context of

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[41] Bryant, *et al* (2011): 12. Cf. Srnicek (2011).
[42] Bryant, *et al* (2011): 16.
[43] Harman (2011b): 22.

ethics and moral philosophy, informed primarily by Heidegger's famous critique of technology.

For Heidegger, technological discourse unfolds by positioning or enframing [*Gestell*] all entities purely as resources for human consumption. In response to this, I wanted to think of entities in general as *objects* for two reasons. On the one hand, according to the etymology of the word, objects *stand over and against* entities with which they stand in relation. There is a sense, then, of *imposition* to be gleaned from the nature of objects, or, in other words, *demand*. One is *struck* by the self-presentation of objects in specific ways directed or dictated by the objects themselves. On the other hand, something in objects tends to resist or *object to* human appropriation. There is always more to an object than can be encapsulated by technological schemes. The exciting metaphysical framework opened up by Harman, Meillassoux, Bryant, and other speculative realists has given me a clear direction in which to pursue this line of inquiry, both for what that framework leaves out or distorts, and for what it illuminates and gets right.

Meillassoux wants to be able to think being *prior* to or independent of its *givenness* (e.g., to perception, consciousness, praxis, etc.).[44] In contrast, I ask why we should think being in contradistinction to givenness, or, in my own preferred terminology, *self-presentation*. What if, *pace* Descartes, being as such is not some pristine but inert, value-neutral *res extensa* over which we, as essentially *valuative* beings, simply lay our own privileged meaning and significance? What if the various systems of ethics that humans propose simultaneously draw from and conceal an originary *proto-ethicality* at the heart of reality itself? Thought in these terms, *to be* means precisely *to self-present*, and *to self-present* means to manifest as a bottomless series of directives in response to which other beings stand somewhere in a continuum of *adequacy* and

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[44] Meillassoux (2006): 14.

*inadequacy*.  In short, objects for me, as for Harman, are *real*, but, unlike Harman, I am convinced that reality itself is phenomenal *all the way down*.  Instead of as an ineffable, vacuum-sealed, noumenal core that withdraws from every relation, I conceive of the real object as an excessively material, inexhaustible plenum of demands that dictate the terms of an overwhelming, virtually infinite number of relations at multiple levels.  It isn't the case that real objects are entirely non-relational, but, instead, that every relation in which a real object finds itself is both underdetermined and underdetermining.

The argument of this dissertation unfolds by way of three long main chapters.  Before diving into the first, a general orientation to the themes of the chapters and a cast of the major characters who show up in them is in order.  Methodologically, Chapter Two is abstract and historical, Chapter Three is abstract and theoretical, and Chapter Four is concrete and theoretical.

In Chapter Two I weave a historical tale centered on the development toward, and the consequences following, the so-called "is-ought" or "fact-value" distinction.  As is well known, David Hume was the first to formulate the distinction explicitly, which comes up in the context of a rather spare and mysterious passage in his *Treatise on Human Nature* [1738].[45] "Hume's guillotine," as Max Black describes it, drives a hard and fast wedge between descriptive and prescriptive propositions, forever barring the one from being derived from the other.[46]  I argue that this move away from what can be described, if anachronistically, as Platonic moral realism is the result of a contingent historical process, beginning with the advent of modernity:  the productive process of the Cartesian metaphysical subject.

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[45] Hume (1978): 469-470.
[46] Black (1964).

The *subject*, for Descartes, is essentially a *valuative substance*, i.e. the source of meaning and value in the face of a world populated by mute, inherently meaningless *material* substances (*res extensa*). Hume softens the problematic *substantialism* of Descartes' metaphysical dualism, paving the way for Kant's transcendental idealism, wherein, I argue, subjective interiority is opened up far beyond the illuminated and fully knowable *res cogitans* in the cognitively unknowable but "intelligible" *noumenal* domain of moral law. "Knowledge," since Descartes understood as what is certain, is now too weak: it is a moving out towards phenomenal beings whose determinacy is never independent of the subject. We don't *know* the moral law; we *are* the moral law. The establishment of human subjectivity as the absolute source of moral truth (and aesthetic beauty) is now complete.

On the basis of this historical critique, in Chapter Three I develop a "flat" or "egalitarian" ontology according to which every object, from the Acobamba province in Peru, to Floyd "Candy" Johnson, stands on the same metaphysical footing as a source of normative directives. Following Plato's account of the *chora*, Duns Scotus' account of originary univocity, and Deleuze and Guattari's account of the "plane of consistency," I argue that *to be*, *to exist*, means, *in fondo*, to be *different*. To be *different* means, invoking Bryant's phrase, "to make a difference," which in turn means to condition other objects on the plane of consistency. I name this field of mutual conditionality the "inter-object sphere." It is the place where "things happen," that is, where the Being of beings does its work. Taking my cue from Heidegger, however, I emphasize that Being itself is not a being, but rather the ongoing Be-ing, self-presentation, of this or that determinate being. For this insight I look past *Being and Time* to Heidegger's work in the 1940s and 1950s on "the thing" [*das Ding*], and the latter's subversion by the subjectivist "positioning" [*Gestell*] of modern global technology, whereby the singularity

of an entity's demands is *spectralized* (i.e. deprived of any positive substantiality) to fill a universal, functional role.

I claim that each of the major ethical frameworks (i.e. utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics), and, consequently, the fundamental sense in which we humans have tended to conceptualize the ethical as such, operate as technologies precisely in this manner: they strive to artificially simplify for privileged groups of human "subjects" the task of hearing and responding to the demands of objects, an endeavor that has in some cases resulted in the exclusion from the domain of ethical consideration not only nonhuman objects, such as animals and natural ecosystems, but certain human groups as well, including women and non-whites. The chapter closes with a treatment of Jean-Luc Nancy's proposed *ontologization* of the ethical according to which *being* is *being-with*, and *being-with* is always a relation between irreducible singularities. I go farther than Nancy, however, in that I extend the ontological status of "being-singular-plural" beyond the confines of the human to encompass all objects whatever.

Finally, in Chapter Four I attempt to flesh out more concretely the ways in which objects are always in relation to other objects, but in such a way that no one determinate *kind* of relation is afforded ontological privilege. Objects in the inter-object sphere relate to each other *interpretively*, where "interpretation" indicates a state of being exposed or subjected to, but underdetermined by, the demands presented by other objects—by other *beings* in their *Being*. Because every object is theoretically defined as an *ongoing* manifestation of ultimately irreducible and untranslatable demands, cues, or directives, interpretation constitutes an inescapable and essentially unfinishable task. It is also an essentially *aesthetic* task, since the inter-object sphere is an interactive milieu where phenomena show themselves *as* something.

Genuine interpretation aims at uncovering this "as" on the terms of the object's own ongoing self-presentation.

Interpretation, as I develop the concept, wants not to appropriate the other, but to be appropriated by the other. For this reason I try to articulate a hermeneutic theory *from the ground up*, in the pursuit of which I turn not to Hans Georg Gadamer or Paul Ricoeur, but to their less famous Italian counterpart, Luigi Pareyson. Unlike other hermeneuticians, Pareyson offers a theory of interpretation that takes the *object* seriously—whether the "artwork" in the domain of "aesthetics," or the "person" in the domain of ethics and social theory—as an inexhaustible source of cues or directives that condition how the interpreter *ought* to respond to it or take it up. In order to demonstrate more evocatively and persuasively how this theory works in the context of my project as a whole, I orient the chapter towards the very real problem of structural racism and police brutality in the United States. I argue that the two common ways in which we tend to respond to this problem (viz., identification in *subjective* feeling vs. the "view from nowhere" of *objective* statistical analysis), although superficially opposed, ultimately derive from a selfsame source: the subjective turn of early modernity and the "fact-value" distinction born from it.

A major flaw in the essentialist—whether metaphysical or nominalist—discourse by which we strive to tackle complex social, political, and ethical issues is that it is *ontic* rather than *ontological*; it deals with *beings* cut off from their *being*, with *facts* rather than *truth*. Facts are deeper than values, inasmuch as the latter derive from the former, albeit not always explicitly. But *truth* is deeper still than facts. "Truth" is the inexhaustible origin, the ongoing source of beings in their being, that from which individual "facts" are abstracted, isolated, and passed along. Our *ethical* systems are shaped by various assumptions and various constellations of facts interpreted in light of these assumptions. Below this however, there is "the revealing-

concealing advent of being"—the *truth* of being as such. This is the domain of the *proto-ethical*, the bottomless self-presentation of real demands that both pre-exist and exceed all human measure. (Copyright @ Justin L. Harmon 2016)

# 2    CHAPTER TWO:  THE HISTORY OF AN ERROR

*All things are full of Gods.*
               -Thales of Miletus

*An attunement therefore should not properly
direct the things of which it's composed, but
should follow them.*
               -Plato (*Phaedo* 93a)

What would it mean to think through an ethics that takes as its starting place the *object* rather

than the *subject*?  What would it mean to truly begin with the demands of the object (human or

otherwise) instead of with one or another proposed structure of privileged subjectivity that is

supposed to undergird the ethical relation as such?  I offer this dissertation as a sustained and

serious grappling with these questions, which, it seems to me, have not yet been taken seriously

enough.  The purpose of this chapter is to set up the historical trajectory against which alone

it makes sense to ask such abstract and seemingly—when thought in relation to the history of

Western philosophy—exoteric questions.

John M. Rist begins his recent book on Platonic ethics with what seems to be a rather

startling claim:  "In the West we now live in a post-moral society."[47]  This claim seems so

startling because it could be argued that we now find ourselves in the thick of moral

deliberation, in a place and time rendered *placeless* and *timeless* as a result of global technology,

whose reach and frameless saturation of everyday life repeatedly generate and regenerate

ethical questions.  Efforts to respond to these questions are formulized and, for this reason,

characterized by repetition—but by a *ghostly* repetition whose source either remains covered

over by conceptual dogmatisms or denied altogether.  To deny that there is a *real* (i.e., not the

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[47] Rist (2012): 1.

product of human artifice) source by appeal to which moral questions can be answered is to tacitly accept that moral reasoning is pragmatic and instrumental, that moral *problems* as such arise only because we (humans) are the sort of beings who have ends and desires. In other words, the pervasive view in the modern world is one that identifies the *ethical* with *value*, the latter term deriving ultimately from *valuation*.[48] What is valued is what is *valu-able*—not in itself, but as a means to our own preconceived ends. This notion of value as the product of valuation, and of valuation as instrumental reasoning, rests on a metaphysical assumption so deeply entrenched that any attempt to undermine it strikes one as astonishing, naïve, or perhaps both: there is an unbridgeable gap between the realms of *fact* and *value*.

The material universe is itself entirely value-free. Human beings are the bearers of value. The Sartrean nothingness of which we are constituted is really a space for valuation, an indeterminate gap in which fleeting norms take shape and dissolve along with our projects. A third millennium Persian vase on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is described as "fragile" only because there are human subjects who value its present form. Without the axiological *logos* of human subjectivity there is but inscrutable squirming "under the huge abstract boulder of the meaningless blue sky."[49] This dissertation is a challenge to this subjectivist view and to the inveterate "fact-value distinction." It is thus an attempt to locate the source of normativity in a reality whose basic structure is ontologically indifferent to human designs and goals.

Rist's claim is not that the West has *self-consciously* descended into moral nihilism. This would be absurd given, for example, the relative prominence of "applied theory" in college ethics courses and public policy debates alike. One feels required to take up some definite

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[48] Zimmerman (2001): 36-38.
[49] Pessoa (2002): 108.

position with respect to the "issues" of gun control, abortion, secret drone strikes, Internet censorship, and LGBT rights. *Problems* are prepackaged, fixed, clearly demarcated, and formulaic. To take up a position one is compelled, to be sure, to supply reasons in support of it, but these reasons are themselves prepackaged, fixed, clearly demarcated, and formulized. What Rist is getting at, rather, is the systemic failure to entertain what Christine Korsgaard calls the "normative question," i.e. "what *justifies* the claims that morality makes on us?"[50]

As a result of this failure, ethical discourse, Rist observes, tends to be free-floating and arbitrary from the point of view of justification. If I support Obama's aggressive drone program it is because I hold to a particular constellation of values through whose conceptual lens it makes sense to "neutralize" faceless and abstract threats. If you disagree, I might be inclined to think it is because you *choose* not to subscribe to the value-constellation at issue, which itself, from my perspective, implies something suspect about your "moral character." My suspicions may be mitigated, however, insofar as you embrace—more or less robustly— *some* set of values, however strongly I object to it in light of "my own" values.

Notice that this cursory attempt to *explain* moral conviction says nothing at all about whether the latter is *normatively justified* in accordance with some standard or principle *independent* of the contingent social milieu of values in which one finds oneself, or in which one constructs his or her "moral personality." Since it is simply taken for granted that the notion of an externally binding *ground* for moral decision-making is primitive and naïve,[51] one is satisfied to frame ethical discourse purely in terms of moral and social psychology. Every attempt to answer the "normative question" invariably mobilizes some feature of discrete human

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[50] Korsgaard (1996): 9-10.
[51] An obvious exception would be anyone who subscribes to some version of "divine command theory." But in these cases the human sphere is still privileged as the exclusive domain of moral value.

subjectivity (e.g., sentiment, desire, reason, soul, etc.) without which such an answer must be seen as unintelligible.

In this chapter I tell a story about what I call the historical *relativization* of the ethical. One of the distinguishing aspects of modernity[52] is that moral questions and concerns have been indissolubly *relativized* to the human subject. It is now commonplace to lament the thoughtless allegiance of the young to cultural and (god forbid) individual relativism. My claim is much stronger than this. *All* standard views in ethical theory—from utilitarianism to Kantianism—are *in fondo* a (different) kind of "relativism," insofar as they presuppose some more or less generic aspect of subjectivity to which the whole proposed system of morals is relative. As we shall see, the case of Kant is an interesting one. His deontological ethics represents at one and the same time the apotheosis of the subjective relativization at issue and, in an important sense, the most forceful strategy for overcoming the same.

This curious ambivalence is a necessary corollary of the quadrant Kant stakes out in a possible topology of ethical conceptualization, which I take to cover all possible ethical positions. This topology has four regions formed from the possible combinations of two distinct axes: (1) Internal-External, and (2) Objective-Subjective. In ethics, the internal/external distinction has typically centered on the relation between *judgment* and *motivation*. I want to deepen the discussion by shifting the focus from "moral psychology" towards a kind of ontology of normativity. In contemporary moral theory, internalists[53] maintain that one's *judgment* of the morality of an action is sufficient *motivation* for the performance of that action. In other words, ethical internalism—generally speaking—is the view that there is a binding and concretely practical connection between judgment and

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[52] *A fortiori* for "postmodernity," if such an epoch exists.
[53] E.g., Mackie (1977), Hare (1981).

motivation. To *believe* that stealing tires off of parked cars is wrong is sufficient to *motivate* one against stealing tires. Externalists,[54] in contrast, deny such a necessary connection, arguing instead that a number of contingent factors *outside of* one's faculty of judgment are needed to determine proper motivation or *reason* for action.

I will be doing something different with the internal/external distinction. Moving to a more ontological register, internalism holds that the *concept* of morality is the ultimate source of the "ought," while externalists reject the notion that the *formal* structure of moral reasoning is itself the foundation for normativity in general. As we shall see, this grounding "concept" of morality, for internalists, can be either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. For Kant, it is a concept thought *a priori* in the form of the purely juridical character of transcendental rationality. For Hume, it is a concept known *a posteriori* in the form of features common to basic "human nature." The "Objective-Subjective" axis, meanwhile, indicates the degree to which a theorist takes subjective *feeling* or *affect* to play a legitimately *constitutive* role in the morality of actions. Kant, I will argue, is an "internal-objectivist" since he holds the source of norms to be internal, in the structure of transcendental rationality, and at the same time purges all subjective elements from the proper formulation of maxims.

My approach in the current chapter will be in part to fill in this map of the, in Rist's words, "post-moral" landscape by briefly sketching the trajectory of moral thought since Plato. One way to characterize this trajectory is to highlight the trend towards the *de-ontologization* (no pun intended) that is concomitant with the progressive *axiologization* of ethical discourse, a duo that arguably comes to a head in the twentieth century with the publication of G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903). Efforts to separate ethics from ontology invariably end up positing a tacit metaphysics of the subject wherein what one *is* and what one *ought to be*

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[54] E.g., Brink (1989), Svavarsdottir (1999).

are categorially separate.  That is to say, the separation of *fact* (what is) from *value* (what ought

to be)—and the relegation of the ethical to the latter—presupposes a problematic metaphysics,

some version of which is inescapable if there is to be an "I" that endorses or opposes

anonymous Hellfire missile strikes against the vaguely threatening but abstract "Other."  For

this reason I take my cue from Jean-Luc Nancy and maintain that "no ethics [properly

understood] would be independent from an ontology.  Only ontology, in fact, may be ethical

in a consistent manner."[55]

In order for the modern fact/value distinction to take root, a fissure had to be created,

a space cleared on the strength of a radical new *arche* or beginning that set modern Western

thought upon a path irrevocably different from what preceded it.  The establishment of this

new *arche* is frequently referred to as the "epistemological turn," and whether we characterize

it in terms of Wilfrid Sellars' "myth of the given" (Sellars 1956), or Richard Rorty's notion of

philosophy as the "mirror of nature" (Rorty 1980), the real import of the "turn," for our

purposes, is the shift of focus from the contingent *reality* of things as an importunate source

of interest or astonishment to the *subjective conditions* for the attainment of certainty and,

ultimately, control.  In short, the metaphysical compartmentalization of fact from value that

distinguishes the modern period arose in the leeway opened up in the erection of the new

Cartesian edifice.

Ironically, Descartes could raze the old "foundations" of knowledge only by denying

their existence (*qua* "foundational") and by asserting that what were misconstrued as

foundations had nothing whatever to do with "knowledge" as such, but were instead artificially

posed on the strength of traditional myths and illegitimate historical authorities.  Knowledge—

*qua* certainty—is now severed from the *essential* delimitation of what a thing *is* in favor of how

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[55] Nancy (2000): 21

well one's "representation" of a given thing can resist doubt. In the Cartesian framework, epistemology is "first philosophy" and the human subject [*cogito*], *qua* beginning, is the exclusive arena in which scientific and philosophical inquiry can be legitimately undertaken. Before turning our attention fully to this modern historical beginning, it is important to get a clear sense of what exactly preceded it. As Hegel and Heidegger obsessively point out, neither beginnings nor that from which beginnings begin are ever fully abandoned.[56]

## 2.1    Ancient Sources:  Being and Place

### 2.1.1    The *Timaeus* and the Myth of Origin

Plato's *Timaeus*, for a long time considered by commentators (e.g. Proclus) to be the most important dialogue in the thinker's *oeuvre*, is critical for my project in that it best exemplifies the deep and unassailable complicity of ontology and normativity in ancient metaphysics. While the *human* is significantly privileged in Platonic-Socratic philosophy, this is not tantamount to the privileging of the *subject*. This *freedom from* the myopic constraints of a "free" subjectivity allowed Plato to pursue a realistic ethics and derive some rather fruitful and interesting results. I will be critical, however, of Plato's anthropocentrism, which, manifested most readily in his privileging of universality over particularity, for in effect muting the strange and irreducible call of objects. Moreover, there is something problematic about the nature of myth, which, I will argue, "rational" and "objective" modes of discourse have not simply escaped. Our world is still deeply, subtly, and in many respects perniciously tied up with

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[56] Heidegger, for example, writes:  "We must understand the Greek word *arche* in its fullest sense.  It names that from which something proceeds.  But this "from where" is not left behind in the process of going out, but the beginning rather becomes that which the verb *archein* expresses, that which governs" (Heidegger 2003b: 81).

mythic ways of framing reality. This latter claim will be a part of the discussion in Chapter Three.

By shifting the locus of ethical demand from subject to object, my project will in a sense rehabilitate pre-modern thinking. For Plato, the Good *as such* places a claim on one regardless of what set of values one "elects" to embrace. Indeed, the very intelligibility of the world is contingent upon the illumination emergent from submission to appropriation by the "Good." According to the famous mythic imagery of the *Timaeus*, human being at once stands rooted in the earth but oriented towards the heavens. As terrestrial, human beings must respond to the demands placed upon them by terrestrial things. In this lies our mortality. As oriented towards the heavens (but ourselves not *heavenly*), we bear witness to the ways in which things exceed and resist our measure.

In 49b of the *Timaeus*, a break appears in the cosmological narrative, an interruption separating one "likely" story (*eikos mythos*) from "an account not less likely but more so" (49d).[57] At this juncture, Plato has Timaeus "retreat" (49b) momentarily from the foregoing discourse back to the space of originary departure so as to start afresh. A new account must be undertaken in order to "get a view of the nature itself" (49b) of the four elements (i.e. earth, air, fire, water) *before*[58] their concerted constitution of the all. In view of fulfilling his remarkable task of describing "the nature of the all," "beginning from the birth of the cosmos and ending in the nature of mankind" (27a), Timaeus now introduces the *chora*, a mysterious

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[57] Burnyeat (2009) argues that the word *eikos* has connotations that extend well beyond those of the typical translations of "likely" or "probable" in current English language usage. These terms have been corrupted by the development of modern induction (largely by Francis Bacon) for instrumental purposes in scientific methodology. *Eikos* originally carried a sense of *appropriateness* or discursive *adequacy* in addition to that of predictive probability.

[58] I am in agreement with Cornford (1937) that this "before" should be construed logically rather than temporally and, therefore, as a kind of "abstraction" (p. 203) useful in clarifying the cosmological structure being articulated.

"third kind" intended to augment the twofold paradigm-imitation structure delineated in the prior likely story. The *chora*, it seems, serves as a necessary vessel for the intercourse between *being* and *becoming*, itself partaking of no form in particular but capable of defining and at the same time remaining undefined. Neither space nor place but *place allowing*, the *chora* is that which withdraws in the face of particular places' (*topoi*) coming to presence.

At the beginning of the *Timaeus* Socrates, after having gone through a rather selective recapitulation of the *Republic*, expresses a desire to see his fictive political state in action. His desire is analogous, he suggests, to the desire to see beautifully rendered animals "moving and contending in some struggle" that seems "appropriate to their bodies" (19c). It is thus fitting that Timaeus concludes his speech with a depiction of human being in its *proper place*—a proportionate interval between being and becoming, divinity and necessity. As Socrates also suggests, however, Timaeus—having reached "the peak of all philosophy" (19e)—must reach this *topos* of the human by way of a just measure of *atopos*, or "strangeness."[59] Indeed, this is precisely the course Timaeus sets out upon at the moment of interruption and new beginning mentioned above, invoking "god the savior" to grant them "safe passage out of a strange and unusual narration" (48e). The strange could not simply have been avoided altogether; a just articulation of both the *chora* and the human *topos* arising in and out of it is to be arrived at only by means of a language that renders them unfamiliar and thus *question-able*.

Likening it to the selfsame substance of gold that endures through all its diverse permutations in shapes and objects, Timaeus describes the *chora* as a "molding stuff for everything, being both moved and thoroughly configured by whatever comes into it" (50c). It is not, however, to be understood as a *mere* substance, but rather as an elusive yet ever

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[59] Socrates here suggests that while poets are too at home and sophists are too estranged, the philosopher "partakes of both at once" (*Timaeus* 19e).

present "this-ness" in which the fleeting entities of the phenomenal realm can only take on ephemeral "such-like" identities (49e). At the same time, the *chora* should not be understood as a "void which remains completely distinct from the particles moving in it."[60] It is instead a kind of matrix of interrelatedness in which the various elements are compelled by necessity to locate and abide in the place most appropriate to them:

> …when the four kinds are shaken by the recipient [*chora*], who, being herself moved, is like an instrument that produces shaking, she separates farthest from each other the kinds that are most dissimilar, while pushing together as close as possible those that are most similar… (53a).

Like a winnower, then, who separates grain according to lightness and heaviness (53a), the *chora* brings like to like, thereby fashioning separate but not rigorously discrete dwelling places for all of its inhabitants.

*Choric* space, as Edward Casey points out, opens up into *regions* or "primal zones in which elementary sensibilia cling to each other in momentary assemblages."[61] The *chora*'s peculiar necessity, then, is characterized as an active *regionalization* in which "the bulks of each kind stand apart" and "those that from time to time become dissimilar to themselves and similar to others are carried, because of the shaking, toward the region of those to which they've been made similar" (57c). It is in light of this latter observation that the *choric* regions are not "rigorously discrete." Through necessity [*ananke*] they are demarcated and through necessity they tend to bleed into one another, thereby subtly or sometimes dramatically altering in complexion and "spatial" structure. Topologically the *chora* is somewhat messily divided up into broad regions and smaller places [*topoi*] in accordance with the peculiar composition of the entity in question. Let us now turn our attention to the place of the *human as such* in Timaeus' account.

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[60] Cornford (1937): 200.
[61] Casey (1998): 34.

Whether or not the priority of *choric* space in the constitution of the cosmos is to be taken temporally, Timaeus is reasonably clear that it is in an important sense *ontological*; necessity must be in place as a ground for divine ordering:

> …one should mark off two forms of cause—the necessary and the divine—and seek the divine in all things for the sake of gaining a happy life, to the extent that our nature allows, *and the necessary for the sake of those divine things*, reasoning that without the necessary it isn't possible to discern on their own those things we seriously pursue, nor again to apprehend them, nor to partake of them in any way whatsoever (69a).[62]

While divine *nous* (thought in terms of an intelligent attention to measure, place, and limit) is the "highest" pursuit in the trajectory of becoming, the *intelligibility* emerging from its action is only discernable against the *choric* background of marginal indeterminacy. Without *that which is*—but indeterminately, inconclusively so—*that which ought to be* cannot possibly be made sense of. Human being, although a "heavenly plant" (90a), thus has its ground in *choric* necessity as well, that is, in the dark indeterminacy of the real. "Necessity" [*ananke*] here, as John Sallis notes, must not be understood as the necessity of law [*nomos*]: "It is rather a necessity that would operate outside the law, that would even determine this very outside; this necessity would be an outlaw eluding the noetic supervision that determines the lawfulness of ποιησις [*poiesis*], resisting the rule of νους [*nous*] even if responsive to its persuasion."[63] The latter is shown in Timaeus' treatment of the belly and intestines, which, were it not for the intelligent ordering of the divine, would ultimately drive one (*qua* ordered entity) to destruction by gluttony rather than sustenance by nourishment (73a).

Building on this discussion of the human in relation to divinity and chaotic necessity, Plato has Timaeus describe the divine covering of sinews and bone with flesh as an "overshadowing" [*kataskiazein*] (74d), which, as Kalkavage notes, is a "poetic expression for

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[62] Emphasis added.
[63] Sallis (1999): 92.

an act of burial" (74dn).  Although human being is, again, a "heavenly plant," it is nevertheless

trapped, as it were, beneath a death-shroud of skin and flesh in the realm of becoming.  This

is the place of the human:  an ever-fluid interval between the *being* of divinity and the *becoming*

of necessity, always at risk of succumbing amidst the constant *choric* interchange to those

*netherplaces* unfit for human habitation, properly understood.  The divine "arrayers," Timaeus

tells us, structured the mouth as an apparatus eminently illustrative of this essential tension:

"an entrance for things that are necessary but an exit for things that are best" (75e), the latter

feature referring, of course, to the divine human capacity for *logos*.

It is precisely this capacity for *logos* (as well as for mobility) that *earthly* plants, in

contrast, lack.  On the "continuum" of life [*bios*]—as Mitchell Miller (2003) describes it—

stationary plant-life occupies a place at the extremity of necessity.  To be sure, Timaeus assures

us, plants are still "animals," inasmuch as they maintain a kind of "indwelling motion" (77c)

of nourishment.  But they are incapable of the "self-reflection" with which human beings have

been endowed by divine *nous*. It is precisely in virtue of their normative deficiency (inferiority)

with respect to the proper character of human being that the nature and place of plants and

other non-human animals is to be determined.  Only because human beings are capable of

*falling short* of the measure of their proper dwelling-place do we come to apprehend the vast

array of non-human animals in their appropriate homes along the wandering face of the *chora*.

There is something intrinsically "plant-like" about me that comes to the surface when I, say,

watch reruns of *Top Chef* on a Friday night, thereby failing to abide in my appropriately human

"place."  As a result, I learn something about what it means to be a plant by way of analogy.

The apparent anthropocentrism of this claim is mitigated by the fact that the whole protean

configuration in the *chora* is but an *imitation*—an imitation of an essential unity of which human

being can never be said to possess full and complete knowledge (68d). The role of *mimesis* in the *Sophist*, another "late" dialogue, is helpful for thinking through this puzzle.

The *Sophist* is a Platonic dialogue in which a stranger from Elea assumes Socrates' usual role as chief agitator/interlocutor in an effort to assist some youths in theoretically determining the nature of the "sophist." In its course, it offers some intriguing reflections on the nature of *mimesis* and the role it plays in normativity. The Eleatic Stranger points out that "imitation is a sort of production, but of copies and not of the things themselves" (265b). Taking up a distinction made previously in the text (235d), imitation is divided into "likeness-making" and "appearance-making." So as to delimitate the sophist, the Stranger proceeds to analyze the latter. Considering the overtly aporetic ending of the *Theaetetus* (the dialogue narratively preceding the *Sophist*), the Stranger here makes what appears to be a rather presumptuous distinction: "some imitators *know* what they're imitating and some don't" (267b). As an example of the former, the Stranger suggests that someone genuinely familiar with Theaetetus might imitate him. On the other hand, someone ignorant of the "character of justice and all of virtue taken together" (267c) may endeavor to imitate it, though perhaps *believing* that something more than mere "imitation" is occurring. This latter type of imitation is called "belief-mimicry," while the former is called "informed mimicry" (267e).

It is ultimately concluded that the sophist is one who engages in "belief-mimicry." The sophist lacks true knowledge of the nature of virtue, but presents the appearance of possessing this very knowledge. This much Plato makes clear in the text. However, is it possible for one to genuinely *know* justice and the other virtues *and* to imitate them as one would imitate the character of a friend? If so, in such a case would the imitator be legitimately identified as "just" and "virtuous" or simply as effectively "imitating" justice and virtue? Perhaps this is what Plato has in mind as the proper instantiation of, or participation in, the universal forms.

It seems that the text reaches a rather circular clarification of the nature of knowledge: if one properly instantiates a form, then one has knowledge; if one has knowledge, then one properly instantiates a form. This circularity is less troublesome, however, if we reevaluate the relationship of *truth* and *mimesis* in Plato to indicate a sort of "uncovering," in the Heideggerian sense.[64] That is, in effectively *imitating* "justice" I am "uncovering" something true and meaningful about the nature of justice itself. In *imitating* "justice" I realize in a concrete way a *limited* knowledge of it—"limited," that is, by my appropriate place as a finite being. Because of the terrestrial grounding in necessity of the human as *between-space*, it is impossible for one to attain the perfect intelligibility of the divine in any more robust a fashion than by a kind of *a*proximal orientation. This is important. In Chapter Four I will argue in favor of *interpretation* over *knowledge*, *hermeneutics* over *epistemology*. Interpretation is mimetic because the interpreter is *subjected* to the real cues of the Original much like a specular image is ontologically dependent on that of which it is a reflection. *Mimesis* is "good," for Plato, when it is a *mimesis* of *logos*. The sophist, in contrast, is a merchant of cheap simulacra, of prepackaged answers that forego the question, even while squatting in interrogative space. Let us now conclude our discussion of the *Timaeus*.

Continuing on the path of *atopos* initiated at the outset of his "likelier story,"[65] Timaeus proceeds at 82a to explain the state of human nature in pathological decline. The human *region*—presented as a microcosmic imitation of the broader *choric* field—maintains the same "winnowing" principle of "like attracts like." A sort of transient musicality arises as a corollary of this principle, a musicality, which, subsisting as it does in the realm of becoming, is always in danger of dissolution through the "errant wandering" of constitutive elements: "whatever

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[64] See Proimos (2002).

[65] I.e. more *appropriate* for the task at hand.

is unmusical and steps outside these [regionalized] conditions upon leaving or arriving will produce alterations of any and every variety and indefinitely many diseases and corruptions" (82b). He goes on to say that these "diseases and corruptions," having been estranged from the musical order, grow "hostile to whatever in the body stands together and stays in its assigned place [*chora*]" (83a). One can act in a way that contradicts what one *is*, even without the possibility of ever attaining full, determinate knowledge of the nature of the "*is*." This impossibility, moreover, is *ontological*, not *epistemological*. The *choric* membrane in which objects are distributed and delimited is constantly undergoing trans-migratory upheavals. In responding to one another, objects reveal, affirm, and undermine real norms (i.e., adequacy conditions) whose expression is not some extraneous feature, but rather the very protean constitution of the real itself.

After forging these *a*topological distinctions largely by way of a *via negativa*, Timaeus is now in a position to complete the task with which he was charged at the beginning of the inquiry. If the *atopos* of the human is found first in disease and ultimately in trans-*choric* migration to other regions, where is the *topos* to be positively located? It is, as suggested earlier, to be found in a kind of proportion along a continuum—a just and *musical* interval between being and becoming, *nous* and necessity. The body in the human *topos* is the seat of chaotic, "outlaw" necessity. The appetitive part of the soul, however, was positioned by the divine "arrayers" to be as far away as possible from the organ responsive to reason (73a) in order to optimize the natural disposition of the human towards its proper proportion. The "musical" proportion in question is not, as Miller points out, between "body and soul *simpliciter* but, rather, [between] the desires associated with the body and [those associated] with the intellect for nourishment and for wisdom, respectively."[66] This makes sense if we understand the

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[66] Miller (2003): 44.

abiding of the human in its appropriate region as a dynamic and continuous *striving* towards the "good" by which human dwelling is characterized.

To maintain this uniquely human[67] proportion between bodily necessity and divine intellect, the human being must exercise mathematics (as well as dialectic, one would assume) *and* gymnastics (88c). If the body is the *necessary* seat of man's posture towards the divine, then he must either take care of it or submit to the gravitational compulsion towards the earth. "Divine" effort is required—mirroring the interminable "shaking" of the *chora*—to sustain the "heavenly plant" in its abode:

> But if someone imitates what we have called the nurturer and wet-nurse of the all [chora]…then he will not allow foe to be set next to foe to breed wars in the body and diseases as well, but rather he will have friend set next to friend so as to produce health (88e).

Harnessing *nous* in "musical" imitation of the *chora*, the human *topos* carefully sustained can be seen as a microcosm of the justly—where the "just" is understood in light of the *Republic* to mean *properly placed*—ordered external world. In this sense, at least, Kalkavage seems to be mistaken in his characterization of the *Timaeus* as an "*undoing* of the republic,"[68] insofar as the latter was composed at least nominally as a means of coming to terms with the nature of the "just soul."

Kalkavage is correct, however, that the Plato of the *Republic* exhorts us to transcend the indeterminacy of the body towards the being of universal forms, whereas the Plato of the *Timaeus* calls attention—if in an abstract and metaphysical manner—to the place where we must live. This is a place of dark, excessive, ever-shifting, and sometimes violent materiality, a place where objects (human or not) come in and out of being, voicing momentary demands

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[67] Or to be more precise, the uniquely human *male*.
[68] Kalkavage (2001): 19.

and imitating each other in response to these demands.[69] The *chora* is "excessive" in that it always has more to give, and thus more to [mimetically] respond to. In addressing the ontological demands of objects situated within *choric* space, one effects a kind of *horizontal* transcendence, a mimetic operation of outward unfolding in participation with the interrelational placement of things. The *choric* spatial structure is *normative* for objects because it presents itself in part as a continuum of sufficiency and deficiency. By stepping out of the proper place assigned for me *qua* human being, I am no longer readily intelligible. I am no longer readily intelligible because the peculiarly human demands, by expression of which my being is placed in a field of relations with other beings, have been ignored in pursuit of hitherto alien demands, which, calling on me to migrate, become progressively less alien the more I respond to them (concomitantly I become *more adequate* to the hitherto alien *topos* precisely as I become *less adequate* to the place I occupied before). This account of Platonic transcendence stands in stark contrast to the typical received view of the latter as metaphysically *vertical* in character. Of course, verticality cannot be expurgated entirely from the Platonic story, as evidenced by the "heavenly plant" metaphor in the *eikos muthos* explored above, not to mention the famous myth of the cave and the related "dividing line" theory of the *Republic*, the "ladder of love" myth of the *Symposium*, and countless other examples from various dialogues. Rather, the point is that an unduly *univocal* interpretation of Plato's thought is what yields the common casting of it in a dualistic light. If we press on this subterranean current of horizontality[70] in Platonic thought, new ways of appraising the *arche* in question will, I hope, open up.

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[69] The *chora* is described as a "bastard [*nothos*] logos" at 52b.
[70] One can find this current in several other places as well. For example, the theory of *anamnesis* as presented in the *Phaedo* subtly recognizes the ongoing dialectic of *presence* and *absence*, *life* and *death*, in everyday lived experience. Also, several of the most famous and enduring arguments against the "vertical transcendence" of the Platonic forms are supplied by Plato himself in the *Parmenides*.

Now, it might strike one as odd that out of Plato's entire body of work I've selected the *Timaeus* as my focus, given that there are many other dialogues that take up moral questions much more directly and overtly. However, my chief task in writing this dissertation is to illuminate the nature of *normativity* as such, and the *Timaeus* is the only Platonic work that gets at normativity as such. The "moral" or "ethical"—I use these terms interchangeably—is but a particular way of framing or articulating normativity in discourse. In other words, I will not proceed by positing the "moral" and the "aesthetic" as *species* of the "normative" as *genus*. The aesthetic and the moral are intimately bound up in the self-presentation of beings. Thus, for example, the way in which the so-called "Hyperion"—now considered the tallest tree in the world, located somewhere in the Redwood National Park in California—visually *calls* for one to adjust one's whole bodily posture to its overwhelming size and majestic upsurge is not different *in kind* from the way a famished child with sunken eyes and distended belly *calls* for one to give her nourishment. Both examples, each, obviously, calling for radically different responses, are illustrative of objects manifesting themselves in the expression of complex adequacy conditions that are not extraneous to what one might identify as the underlying "nature" of the objects themselves. I will have much more to say about this claim in the chapters to follow. It is enough to say at this point that the mythical cosmology developed in the *Timaeus* provides us with a model by which to think the inextricable collusion of *being* and *normativity* within the world of *experienceable* reality, i.e. a place which Plato in the *Republic* presents as "the cave."

## 2.1.2 Ethics of Inertia, Politics of Domination

Failure, disease, corruption, pathology, self-destruction, decay, deficiency, etc. are articulated in this framing as consequences of literally being *out of place*. It is possible on this basis to

rethink standard Platonic "moral realism"—as developed in dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, the *Charmides*, the *Euthyphro*, the *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, etc.—in terms of a *choric* topology in which *immorality* always results from the failure of an object to abide in its *appropriate* place and measure. The formation of a Callicles or a Thrasymachus ultimately results from a deficient and misguided *psychic* orientation. For Plato, as is well known, the "good life" presupposes a total *turning* of the soul towards the intelligible demands of "the good" as such. In the *Gorgias,* Callicles sees himself as a leaky sieve, a materially needy being whose actions are shaped by the context of an *internal* emergency, the ongoing resolution of which requires an inertial program of *external* domination. He takes it for granted that his own desires—whatever they may be— must be satisfied and that only a fool would sacrifice perpetual self-gratification in recognition of the force of external claims since the latter can only be the artificial contrivance of other agents in the selfish pursuit of their own genetically opaque projects (492). Callicles' self-measure is inadequate to the place of the human; Socrates effectively says as much when he compares Callicles to a greedy and incontinent bird (*kharadrios*) that shits only to fill itself again (494). He must live as something he is not because of an inadequate measure of inside to outside, drawing up a pale topography of reality like a cartoonish pirate villain whose working map is narrowly populated by treasure chests and sea monsters.

The problem, as Socrates explains it to his increasingly recalcitrant interlocutor, is the conflation of the "the pleasant" (an internal principle for action) with "the good" (an external measure and guide of behavioral adequacy). If the pleasant really were the metaphysical source of norms, then—despite Callicles' insistence to the contrary—we would be slaves to our own inscrutable and insuperable desires, and "justice" would be a mere name which we cynically attach, moment by moment, to whatever is most instrumentally expedient for our own ill-defined ends. On this view, politics—the grounding and sustaining of community—is

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impossible because the very nature of *demand* that would give rise to socio-political discourse, practice, and compromise is conceived of as *specular*. Demands of "nature" (*physis*) are immediate and solipsistic; they are simultaneously the source of *pain* (as a lack) and *pleasure* (the filling of that lack). Demands of "custom" (*nomos*)—the satisfaction of which, on Callicles' view, is the source of the various "virtues"—are artificially derived from natural desire as a way for the weak (those who are not strong enough to satisfy their desires) to control the strong. The notion of "*self*-control" (*sophrosyne*)—that by which one abides in one's proper place on the guidance of a measure that is neither self-authored nor epistemically exhaustible (which would amount to the same)—is utterly incomprehensible to Callicles (491). The only demands and constraints to which one *must* respond are one's own desires, and in this case *response* can mean only fulfillment.

In light of the foregoing, let us now place Plato in one of the quadrants of the topology introduced above. Plato views the metaphysical source of normativity as *external* and *objective*. By "external," to put the matter simply, I mean external to the moral concepts of the experiencing subject. By "objective," I mean *normatively binding and obligatory* independent of the contingent interests, feelings, and motivations of the experiencing subject. The so-called "forms" (*Ἰδέες*)—whether understood vertically (as in the "divided line" analogy of the *Republic*) or horizontally (as in the present treatment)—are principles of intelligibility that transcend every particular, embodied intelligence to which they give direction. In other words, if every human *subject* were to disappear from the face of the earth, the forms would still exist as loci of prescriptive force. This prescriptive force, insofar as it arises as part and parcel of the basic ontological constitution of the real, is non-negotiable.

Now, it is true that Plato—like Aristotle after him—presents the health of the soul (*psyche*) as what is most at stake in matters of moral deliberation. In many dialogues, for

example, Socrates argues—usually without convincing his interlocutor or audience—that *doing* injustice is worse than *suffering* it.[71] Acting unjustly, on the Socratic view, does damage— sometimes irreparably—to the soul, whereas suffering injustice but results in temporary, physical scars beneath which a sufficiently *sophron* individual can hold himself in place by a measure of resilient integrity. But—and this is certainly true in the case of Aristotle—it would be a mistake to interpret this concern for the health of the soul as a concern for the "subject," understood as the ultimate source and protector of values. The fact that Socrates often appeals to his interlocutors' desire for health as a rhetorical gesture shouldn't be surprising given that health is something nearing universal desirability, at least in the case of finite human beings. It seems clear, however, that Plato's metaphysics would disallow this sort of consequentialist normative grounding. A better interpretation of the Platonic position would be as follows. A healthy soul—while in an obvious sense desirable in itself—is something after which one should strive precisely because *it does justice to the nature of the transcendent real.* Insofar as the soul bears a mimetic—and erotic—relationship to the real, a soul with "health" would be one that is structurally adequate to the fundamental constitution of reality. The healthy soul *bears witness* to the simultaneously *generous* and *indifferent* forms from which the world is generated and perennially regenerated. To claim, then, that the maintenance of a healthy soul is the "final cause," as it were, of properly ethical action is to put the proverbial cart before the horse.

### 2.1.3   Ethics is a Messy Business

Contra Kant, the Aristotelian *eudaemonist* view can be interpreted in a similar way. *Happiness*, for Aristotle, is not a transient subjective feeling, but an adequate attunement to being. We find ourselves *in the midst* of being, a milieu of dynamic forces. When our measure of the self-

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[71] E.g., *Republic*, *Gorgias*, *Charmides*, *Apology*, etc.

presentation of an entity is adequate to it, we in a particular way *become that entity*.[72] This is why

Aristotle defines the soul in part as "the place of the forms," albeit only *in posse*.[73] When we

know an entity *theoretically*, its essential *eidos* is actualized in the place of the intellectual soul in

such a way that our capacity for *receiving* its impression is realized. This has to do with *theoria*

and is what separates *knowing* from *perceiving*. *Phronesis*, or, "practical wisdom," is inextricably

tied to the latter mode in such a way that knowledge, to be adequate for its task, cannot abstract

away from sensuous, material accident.

     *Aisthesis* (sense-perception) is an essentially mimetic operation whose decision [*krisis*]

cannot be carried out with the same degree of certainty as that of the mathematical sciences.

The most salient distinguishing feature of the latter is their ability to fix the field of inquiry in

advance of any concrete situation. The ethical, in contrast, having its epistemic ground in

*aisthesis*, can only approximately meet the demands[74] of beings owing to the latter's deep

material and contextual complexity.[75] Repetition and practice are necessary for the virtuous

man to develop an adequate attunement to the demands of both himself and others in his

community. Accident plays as substantial a role in this attunement as essence. The resultant

contingent character of ethical decision-making is not something to be overcome; indeed, the

learned ability to accept the loose and protean kind of "rigor" peculiar to ethical discourse is

an important mark of the *phronetic* individual. It is just as much a mistake to expect *certainty* in

ethical matters as it is to sloppily offer an incomplete geometrical proof. The final

undeterminability of the ethical is an unavoidable corollary of the nature of *sublunary place*, as

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[72] *De Anima*: 418a.

[73] *De Anima*: 428a.

[74] While Aristotle does not use this particular ethical vocabulary, his teleological approach seems to suggest that beings do indeed have demands in virtue of what they *are*, which is determined primarily by the beings' *final good*.

[75] *Nicomachean Ethics*: II.IX.8.

characterized in Aristotle's cosmology. *Aisthesis*—as our primary means of opening up to the sublunary world—is a peculiar sort of *logos* that must be grasped on its own terms. This *logos* dictates that sense and the sensible are really one to the extent that the latter directs the former if a concrete ratio (experience) is to be sustained.[76] The *fact* of human experience is always a precarious ratio between the demands of one's organism and those of external things. This fact forms the basis of Aristotelian ethics and, especially, politics, where an appropriate topology of the real importantly serves at the same time as the optimal political constitution.

William Desmond describes the view of *choric* spatiality I've been developing as "dialectical, though in a metaxological sense rather than Hegelian."[77] He stresses the originary ambiguity of the word "*meta*" as meaning "in the midst of," in addition to "beyond." Accordingly, the *metaxu* is a *between-space* in which "opposites" co-appear together "because of the interplay to and fro, back and forth, in and out, up and down."[78] *Choric* arrangements in Plato are normative in the same way that the notion of *topos* is normative in Aristotle's *Physics*. Place, for Aristotle, is an originary and constitutive category of being (as developed earlier in the *Categories*) that functions teleologically; every distinct *topos* possesses a unique character as well as a kind of normative *potency*. Entities of a fiery nature tend to move upwardly because the upward region is where they properly abide. In contrast, rocks, dirt, and plant life tend to move in a downward direction on account of their earthly *telos*. Hence, place, rather than being understood as a homogenous container, ought to be seen as a source of power or draw: "…these places do not differ merely in relative position, but also as possessing distinct

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[76] *De Anima*: 426b.
[77] Desmond (2003): 42.
[78] *Ibid*.

potencies…   If this is its nature, the potency of place must be a marvelous thing, and take precedence of all other things."[79]  The *topos*, in a sense as subtle as it is important, *is* the *telos*.

An ontology of place, on this view, would be at once an ontology of *powers* and thus of the norms by which such powers are delimited.  By "norm" I mean a determination of *what is called for*.  Furthermore, it would be an ontology of the *absolute* (in the sense of being non-relative) *physis* (nature) of place.  That is, the normative potency of each place-region is "in *nature*" distinct from the others "taken apart by itself."[80]  In addition to existing independently of the relative position of oriented bodies, places also exist—like "transportable vessels"— separately from the bodies they contain.[81]  For this reason, the place of a thing can be neither its *form* nor its *matter*.  Yet, places, for Aristotle, are not like transportable vessels in that their circumscribing potencies are fixed immovably from the start.  Whereas the *chora* is *passively* receptive, thereby requiring the seminal intervention of the masculine demiurge for ongoing topographical distributions, Aristotle's place is "actively *circumambient* rather than merely receptive,"[82] making it more *intrinsically* normative than in Plato's—to invoke Derrida's phrase—arguably "phallogocentric" conception.   Aristotelian place expresses itself plurivocally:  I am simultaneously *in* the place of my home office and *in* the place of a doctoral student by presently dissertating.  In other words, I occupy (1) a role whose contours are established in advance of my coming to be circumscribed by them, and (2) a physical place whose inner contour delimits and renders manageable the "place" that in part defines who I am and what is possible for me according to such a self-understanding, which, importantly, is not self-authored.

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[79] *Physics*: 208b.
[80] *Ibid.*
[81] *Ibid*: 209b.
[82] Casey (1997): 55.

*Being*, for Plato and Aristotle, is a dynamic milieu that is shaped and governed by norms through and through—not as an extraneous axiological layer superadded from the top like icing on a cake, but as indissolubly built into its basic structure. Korsgaard, for this reason, asserts that ancient thinkers in the Platonic tradition viewed *values* as "more real" than empirically determinable entities in time and space.[83] While this claim is true in some sense, it is to my mind fatally anachronistic. The *idea* or *eidos* of a thing, that by which it places claims on rational agency in the way of grasping its *whatness*, has nothing to do with our modern notion of "value," contaminated as it is with economic concepts of instrumentality and calculability.[84] Rather, the *idea* is the essential self-delineation or self-adumbration of an entity in whose sensuous self-unfolding a whole constellation of directives or "oughts" is given expression. Attributing value reification to the ancients misses the mark because it thoughtlessly imports the taken-for-granted fact-value distinction for explanatory purposes when it is this very distinction, it seems to me, that is in question. Korsgaard is right to understand "value" through a constructivist lens, inasmuch as it is we who constitute systems of value through a historical self-reflective process. "Value realism" would thus appear to be a self-deluding view whereby one's materially efficacious or, at the very least, comforting, convictions are, in the words of David Hume, "spread…on external objects,"[85] transforming

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[83] Korsgaard (1996): 2.

[84] There are, of course, alternative conceptions of value in the modern world, such as those of Georg Simmel and Max Scheler, for example, which challenge the purely economic and instrumentalist view. However, as Simmel himself points out (Simmel 1997: 264-265), values that are intrinsically of a different order than the economic—that is, non-fungible values—are in modern capitalist society becoming increasingly divested of their concrete "personal" character and forced to fit into an exchange economy where even the most intimate, incalculable source of worth is fixed with an abstract "price." I maintain that this ubiquitous transition towards fungibility is a corollary of the basic notion of "value" as such, insofar as it is grounded in "valuation." As I will show below, this seems to be in part what Heidegger has in mind in his critique of values-based ethics. In any case, the notion that there are several theories of value from which we can simply choose from a neutral starting place overlooks the way in which the instrumental view has established a transparent hegemony in the realm of ideas.

[85] Hume (1978): 167.

the latter into sources of ideological validation. Far from giving justification for the rejection of realism in morals, this observation, to my mind, instead calls for at least a momentary suspension of our commitment to an *axiological* grounding of the ethical. In other words, perhaps the clean division of the world into "facts" on one side and "values" on the other—where *ontology* addresses the former and *axiology* the latter—is itself a source of many seemingly intractable theoretical entanglements. Value requires valuation. But this requirement presupposes, as I will argue, a real and, in some sense, indifferent plenum of sense that calls for recognition as a basic and irreducible feature of its being.

## 2.2    Myth and Truth

In the foregoing section I attempted to highlight the deep entanglement of being and normativity in ancient metaphysics. However, Plato's sustained treatment of this entanglement in the *Timaeus*—the primary object of my analysis—is overtly deployed in the register of a mythic account, thereby undermining its credibility from the point of view of Philosophy "proper." Since I will continue to draw on the theoretical insights of Plato's account of the *chora* in the chapters to follow, and since, moreover, I will also characterize technological discourse as *the* organizing myth of modern capitalism (inextricably tied to modern subjectivism), a brief digression on the nature of *mythos* seems in order. I want to suggest that our modern relationship to mythicality is problematic and not well understood. In this section I will talk about the relationship of myth to truth primarily as a preparatory gesture for the discussion of modernity to follow. As we shall see, the modern epistemological turn begins essentially in the rejection of myth as a legitimate source of knowledge. Rene Descartes' method required a total razing of the inherited intellectual edifice. Famously, David Hume urged his readers to "commit to the flames" those texts that purport to sell wisdom

but, grounded neither in mathematics nor in verifiable empirical inquiry, really offer only "sophistry and illusion."[86] Yet the Cartesian subjectivist turn, which, I will argue, inaugurated the development of what would become the "fact-value" distinction, helps lay the groundwork for what I will identify in Chapter Three as the *myth of global technology* in which we are presently ensnared.

By "myth" I mean the more or less continuous organizational frame in which we understand each other and things, and in which time imposes a form on space—through stories of *origin* (past) or *progress* (future)—in the revelation and conservation of possibilities. For Roland Barthes, the "very principle of myth" is its function of transforming "history into nature."[87] Mythic narratives are generated out of complex layers of historically contingent signs and signifiers, which are understood by "readers" of myth—those caught up in it—to adequately *render*[88] the intelligibility of the whole world all at once. Past myths organized socio-cultural space according to *tradition*; that is, they were *backwards-looking*. Today the dominant *mythos* of global technology, in contrast, shapes our places and institutions by orientation towards the *future*. Modern myth, starting with Descartes' belief in an a-historical, tradition-free foundation for knowledge, is *forward-looking*.[89] One way to figure modernity is to highlight its project of *demystification*, which can be characterized at least in part as one of *demythification*. We have become deeply suspicious of myths, and rightfully so. The perpetuation of myth is

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86 Hume (1999): 211.

87 Barthes (1972): 129.

88 I use this term in the sense of "video rendering," i.e., the post-production process of adding visual and auditory effects to individual frames, which are then seen by spectators as a seamless, fluid whole.

89 This is, of course, a rather large generalization. "Backwards looking" myths still abound, perhaps *more* pervasively in fully developed countries than in developing ones where aggressive, unchecked exploitation is justified as a means to a future in which the problem of "uneven development" is overcome. The point I want to press is that the dominant "macro myth" (Macluhan 2005) of the modern West is *essentially* future-oriented.

essentially an effort to colonize space (i.e., our places, institutions, practical possibilities, etc.) according to time (whether the *past*—in the form of traditions—or the *future*—in the form of promises), which, fraught as it is with inescapable tensions and contradictions, has a tendency to explode. One need only look to the unspeakable atrocities committed by totalitarian regimes throughout the twentieth century for verification of this claim. Politically, myth serves a conservative and essentially reactionary function: it ensures a level and coherent historical compearance of entities that effects and maintains a normative delimitation of place. This delimitation is thus at the same time a *displacement*: a well-ossified myth lets us know simultaneously what belongs and what does not belong. The necessarily *exclusionary* operation of myth—a corollary of its *place-making* operation—is what makes it so politically suspect.

### 2.2.1 Myth as Inter-ruption

It is precisely a sense of belongingness that we hear resoundingly lamented as missing in our contemporary global (Western) worldview. As Jeff Malpas asserts, echoing Heidegger, "homelessness has come to prevail as the almost universal condition for human being."[90] The traditions that we come to identify as sources of our being have themselves been uprooted to reveal an abyss (*Abgrund*). As a result, our own traditions (e.g. gender roles, the institution of marriage, religious ceremonies, holiday practices, etc.) are becoming less and less convincing— a condition that has finally made possible what Nancy presents as the *interruption* of myth,[91] that is, the interruption of time's *transparent*—per Barthes, in the form of a seemingly "natural"—dominance over space. This idea of myth's *interruption* is informed by Georges Bataille's fragmented ponderings originally published in the catalogue of the Paris exhibition, *Les surrealisme en 1947* [1947] in which he evocatively writes, taking his cue from Nietzsche's

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[90] Malpas (2006): 280.
[91] See Nancy (1991).

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Zarathustra, "'Night is also a sun,' and the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the purest, the only *true* myth."[92] The absence of myth is also a myth. According to the modern natural-scientific conception of truth, myth has no place in the fabric of knowledge. Consequently, the stories and traditions through which we live are brought into sharp relief. They are no longer *diaphanous*; in other words, they are no longer *alive*. Bataille, like Nietzsche before him, treats this "crisis of values" as a profoundly liberating opening. The abyss of *meaningless*, infinite, uncolonized space—displacing and terrifying though it may be—amounts to a kind of sublime revelation of our freedom. In the absence of myth, an immense void remains, a void which, serving as the only stable ground on which to act, is also the perennial source for the drawing up of new mythic realities, new ways of living. Once our myths are revealed to be contingent, alien to any stable, *necessary* order, we begin to accommodate ourselves to a new, freer, "*truer*" mythical framework, one which must constantly work to undermine itself.

"Myth," Nancy writes, "is the opening of a mouth immediately adequate to the closure of a universe."[93] Positively and negatively (that is, in its *mythic absence*[94]) myth works to make the universe in various ways manageable *for us*, and this is what is essentially at play in every construction of a "world" (e.g., an intelligibly circumscribed system of relations). But, in its very enunciation *as myth*, that is, in its being so identified, myth always interrupts itself. It names what it is not, or what it can no longer be. When we discuss "myth" or "mythology" now, it is invariably from an external perspective, a gazing from outside upon a life no longer lived. It is a mistake, however, to consider this a privileged (or degraded, depending on whom

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[92] Bataille (1994): 48.
[93] Nancy (1991): 50.
[94] I say "mythic" absence because we now inhabit primarily a narrative of reality (a kind of myth) that wants to characterize itself as *free from* myth.

you ask) position of moderns or postmoderns; the naming of a myth has *always* been its interruption. Hence, Nancy observes, "This is why our scene of myth, our discourse of myth and all our mythological thinking make up a myth: to speak of myth has only ever been to speak of its absence. And the word 'myth' itself designates the absence of what it names."[95] To articulate myth *qua* myth is to introduce a fissure between the named discourse and that which it gathers, between *form* and *content*. But, of course, this fissure, or distance, is illusory; we always remain in the overwhelming midst of an excessive milieu that resists our contingent framing. In this sense, then—a sense I will develop as the dissertation unfolds—the characterization of that which underlies or remains outside of myth as a void or *Abgrund* is, pace Nietzsche, Bataille, and Heidegger, off the mark. It isn't so much a gaping *nothingness* that confronts us, but a paralyzing *plentitude*.[96] Myth has always been an essentially self-undermining endeavor to stake out a place *within* this plentitude, and the ways in which this action is negotiated can be very telling.

A common trope in the history of philosophy has been the opposition of *logos* to *mythos*. The pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece, so the story goes, initiated a new *arche* in the historical movement of thought out of a fundamental dissatisfaction with "mythological" discourse, i.e., with the communal, and thus, limited, dissemination of stories as a means for explaining the astounding diversity of natural phenomena. Instead of relying on the precarious contingency of an oral tradition for knowledge, these thinkers sought to uncover through thinking an irreducible *rational principle* at work in the order of the cosmos, a determinate *unity*

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[95] *Ibid*: 52.
[96] While Bataille seems to flirt with this Heideggerian and existentialist rendering in the text quoted above (e.g. "Myth and the possibility of myth become impossible: only an immense void remains, cherished yet wretched" [Bataille 1994: 48]), he explicitly calls it into question in another 1947 work, "From Existentialism to the Primacy of Economy."

that could support and survive the most violent of changes.[97]  It is for this reason that Thales—who posited *water* as the first, unifying principle—is ubiquitously known as the first philosopher of the Western tradition.  While there is some truth to this received account, it ignores a certain ambiguity with respect to how *mythos* and *logos* were taken up and deployed by the ancients, from Homer and Hesiod through Plato.  The dichotomy of *mythos* and *logos*—in part responsible for the modern "epistemological turn" we meet in Descartes—is deeply problematic because it disavows its own situatedness within a kind of mytho-logical narrative; it is, at bottom, an *origin story*, which *ipso facto* cannot help but unfold within and hold fast to an obscure trajectory precariously shrouded in fog and mist.

### 2.2.2   Myth and Logos: An Unstable Dichotomy

The root of the Greek word "*logos*"—signifying at once *word*, *account*, *ratio*, and *reason*—is *leg-*, which essentially means "gathering," "picking up," or "choosing."[98]  Both Homer and Hesiod use the terms *mythos* and *logos* interchangeably to mean a story or narrative in which an assortment of elements are intelligently gathered up and preserved together, but without ever calling attention to their status as either *false* or *true*.[99]  Parmenides vacillates between describing his *true* account of reality as a *mythos*[100] and a *logos*,[101] while Xenophanes—an outspoken critic of Homeric mythology—uses the two terms more or less synonymously in his prescription for the "righteous" to "praise god with auspicious stories (*euphemoi mythoi*) and pure words (*katharoisi logoi*)."[102]  Pindar uses the terms *mythoi* and *pseudea* (fictions, lies) interchangeably to

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[97] For example, see:  Nestle (1940): 1; Brumbaugh (1962): 5; West (1986): 116
[98] Naddaf (1998): *viii*
[99] The term "*logos*" appears only twice in Homer (*Iliad* 15.392; *Odyssey* 1.56), in both instances signifying a *story* or *account*.  In *Works and Days* (194), Hesiod asserts that *mythoi* (words) can be "crooked" (*skolioi*), and in *Theogony* (890), that *logoi* (words) can be "deceptive" (*aimulioi*) (*Ibid.*).
[100] DK 28B8.1-2
[101] DK 28B8.51-52
[102] DK 21B1.13-14

denote stories as to be distinguished from his own "true account" (*logos alathes*).[103]  In the same text, however, he still refers to his presentation of traditional stories as a "*logos*."[104]  Heraclitus was the first figure to explicitly make a special place for *logos* [λόγος] in his philosophy, often using it as a technical term to mean *rational principle that governs reality*.  It wasn't until Plato, however, that the dichotomy between *mythos* and *logos* became explicitly articulated and incisively explored.  But, in the case of this seminal thinker for whom, as suggested above, *being* and *normativity* are indissolubly bound together, the nature of the dichotomy— traditionally articulated in light of the Enlightenment as a teleological progression from *superstition* to *reason*—is not so straightforward.

Recall our above discussion of the *Timaeus*.  Plato here uses the language of *eikos mythos* (likely, appropriate story) to describe what the titular character is up to in laying out a cosmogony in speech.  What motivation does Plato have for employing this term rather than "*logos*"?  One clear impetus is that neither Timaeus nor any other character is capable of verifying or falsifying this—or any—cosmological narrative.  The story of the generation of "the all" out of splintered elements that precede time and space is a way of framing reality that one cannot abscond from in order to offer a critique.  One is *caught up in* the unfalsifiable— though somehow *appropriate*—narrative in such a way that critical distance is impossible.  This device is pretty typical for Plato throughout his dialogues; the shift from dialectic or *logos* to myth is usually awkwardly presaged by some kind of explanatory *apologia* that serves to demarcate what follows from what came before, often delivered in terms of the respective moments' truth status.  It is a hallmark of Platonic irony that he often ensnares his readers in a myth from which—as for the characters in his dialogues—no empirical considerations can

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[103] *Olympian Ode* 1.28-29
[104] *Ibid.* 7.21

extricate them.   By calling attention to its status *qua* myth, however, he supplies tools with which the problematic nature of received accounts can be fruitfully questioned.   The myth of the *Timaeus*, as we've seen, is introduced as "strange" (*atopon*), but nevertheless "appropriate," or "probable" (*eikos*).   Similarly, in the *Gorgias*, before launching into the closing myth (regarding the judgment of the dead), Socrates offers a preface intended to give his interlocutors (and, by extension, we the readers) pause:  "Listen, then, to a very fine story [*kalou logou*], which, will, I suppose, seem to be myth [*mython*] to you, but is fact [*logon*] to me; what I'm going to tell you I tell you as the truth" (523a).  A final example[105] is the so-called "noble lie" of the *Republic*, viz., that the citizens of the *kallipolis* grew "autocthonously" from the earth, each in part formed of a particular metal which will determine his or her respective role, is clearly and unapologetically identified precisely as *myth* before it is presented by Socrates to Glaucon and Adeimantus (414b).[106]  As this shows, *mythos* can, through its own peculiar potency, disclose something *true*, albeit non-verifiably.  This makes myth extremely powerful, but in the same measure, extremely dangerous.

Plato's Socrates, all but universally embraced as the original champion of rational dialectic and philosophy over rhetoric, myth, and poetry, is obviously willing to participate in mythic discourse, but only insofar as the latter is clearly illuminated as such by way of an *interruption*, or momentary *re-orientation*.  This propensity for a caveat is what sets Plato's *mythos* apart from that of the ancient poets, of whom he, like Heraclitus and Xenophanes before him, is trenchantly and polemically critical.  Just as Socrates sometimes makes bold epistemic claims that are not immediately defensible (e.g. about the study of *erotics*), Plato at certain moments

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[105] There are many more examples, e.g., *Phaedo* 108c; *Phaedrus* 265b; *Symposium* 201d, etc.
[106] "The effect of this kind of strategy," Penelope Murray writes,  "…is to distance the protagonist (Socrates, Critias, or whoever) from the story he is telling and to mark off the myths from the dialogues in which they are embedded in such a way as to draw attention to their problematic status, particularly through the playing around with the notions of *muthos* and *logos*" (Murray 1999: 256).

finds it necessary to transition into an overtly mythic register. What distinguishes the two from, respectively, sophists and poets is precisely their pained (in the case of Socrates, fatal) insistence on a high degree of self-awareness: a limpid awareness of both the inescapable contingency (viz., the historical situatedness) of the mythic account to be offered and, in spite of (or even, perhaps, *because of*) this contingency, the ways in which the myth is *appropriate* for the circumstances of the discourse at hand. Myth is appropriate when it deals with "non-verifiable aspects of experience that are beyond ordinary mortal knowledge: the distant past, the life of the soul after death, the divine creation of the universe, and so on."[107] Or, as Luc Brisson puts it: "Myth is a 'beyond' which must be located in a distant past or a space which is different from the one in which the narrator and his public reside."[108] We may now be able to settle on a tentative interpretative principle regarding this nuanced Platonic approach: self-consciously deployed *mythos* is morally acceptable only insofar as its peculiar *logos* (as only "*eikos*," that is, "probable" in the sense of being "appropriate") is submitted to dialectic (i.e., speech through which what was previously hidden is exposed to the light of day). In other, simpler words: to be appropriate discourse, the confounding *strangeness* of *mythos* must not be concealed. A myth is strange in part because, although convincing in a seemingly "natural" and visceral way, there are no immediately clear and determinate reasons why it, the myth, historically developed as it did instead of in some other, perhaps equally "appropriate," fashion.

A consequence of this principle is that *mythos* is not opposed to *logos*, but is a particular variety of the latter—a variety that has a particular role and place. A responsible narrator is aware of this and, as a result, has a handle on when and how her prospective *mythos* is called

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[107] *Ibid.*: 254.
[108] Brisson (1998): 7.

for by and in response to the particular situation in which she finds herself. "Sophists" are deficient in this regard precisely because they treat *mythos* in a strictly rhetorical fashion, taking it to be simply one neutral *form* of speech among others through which any content whatever can be articulated, depending on the capricious whims of the speaker or audience. Hence, Protagoras, in Plato's dialogue of the same name, presages his speech (concerning the teachability of virtue) by asking the audience, "Would you rather that I showed you by telling a story (*mython legon*) or by providing a systematic exposition (*logoi diexelthon*)?"[109] After receiving the answer "to proceed in whatever way he preferred," the reputable sophist decides to take the route of *mythos*: "I think it will be more enjoyable to tell you a story…"

The implication here is that the appropriate *form* of discourse is arbitrary. Protagoras *could* go either way, but chooses *mythos* for no reason other than that it is more "enjoyable" or entertaining. Another related implication is that speech-forms are themselves neutral, arbitrary, and thus basically interchangeable; they are tied to their "content" in no less contingent a fashion than the way in which I sometimes fill my oversized messenger bag with books and at other times with musical equipment. This view is connected to that of the allegorist[110] who thinks that what "he finds in the myths is the very same Logos which the wise author had concealed within them."[111] *Logos* itself is one, timeless, placeless, and univocal; whether it is articulated dialectically, mythologically, scientifically, poetically, etc. is of secondary, stylistic importance at best. What Plato seems to be suggesting, in contrast, is that *logos* is "plurivocal": the *appropriate* way in which the sense of things should be communicated discursively will depend on the demands of the situation.

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[109] *Protagoras* 320c.

[110] For a history and discussion of the allegorical approach to mythos, see Naddaf (2005), Most (1999), and Tate (1929).

[111] Most (1999): 34.

### 2.2.3 Noble Lies and True Falsehoods

Much ink has been spilled over the questionable moral status of Plato's so-called "noble lie," initiated by Socrates in Book III of the *Republic*. If justice is essentially a matter of literally *minding one's own business*, of doing, that is, what one is disposed by divine *nous* to do and nothing else, then the guardians of the *kallipolis* (the just state) must equip themselves with some device with which to ensure the proper and sustained distribution of appropriate behaviors. Socrates suggests that the rulers charged with caring for the just state ought to foist upon their young a fantastical fiction whose "nobility" will be measured by the extent to which it inculcates in them loyalty and the disposition to tend to one's *own business*: every citizen sprouts spontaneously from the earth bearing traces of a metal whose nature will determine the basic character of that citizen and, thus, whether he or she will become a craftsman or merchant (bronze), a soldier or police officer (silver), or, a ruler/public servant (gold). Socrates initiates the story by referring to a discussion in Book II of the ambiguous nature of *mythos*, the latter being a [false] variety of *logos* of which there are two types: (1) "*true* falsehood," and (2) merely "*spoken* falsehood" (382a-d). The "noble lie" to follow will be an example of (1). What can the paradoxical formulation of a "true falsehood" possibly mean?

At 377a, Socrates specifies two types of *logoi*, one *true* and the other *false*. He then asks, "Should children be educated in both, or only in the false ones?" Adeimantus is perplexed at the question, prompting Socrates to explain: "Don't you know that we tell myths to children first of all? And myth is in general false, but also contains some truth." At 414b he elaborates on how a myth, while false by definition, could in some measure be "true": if it is of "the kind which arise as the occasion demands." What seems so sinister about the "noble lie," however, is that its efficacy would presumably demand that those caught in its grip remain ignorant of its truth status, aligning it dangerously with the myth *qua* "spoken falsehood" of the poets. In

the face of this worry, we ought to keep a couple of things in mind: (1) Socrates does not try

to pass the myth off as true to his listeners, which means, in turn, that Plato does not try to

pass the myth off as true to his readers, and (2) the function of the myth in the context of the

dialogue seems, as Jonathan Lear suggests, "*epistemologically* revolutionary" even while being, in

a *prima facie* way at least, "*politically* conservative."[112]  We are meant, in other words, to reflect

on the inadequacy of the various *mythoi* in which we were brought up as children, and to bring

into relief the heretofore-invisible frame of falsehood in which we have been obliviously living,

albeit, perhaps, more securely, more comfortably.  In the *kallipolis*, a maker of horseshoes can

rest confident of the rightness of his profession because he believes himself to be laced with

bronze rather than silver or gold.  *Readers* of the proposed myth, in contrast, immediately see

something flawed, something deeply repulsive about it.   This interpretation is bolstered by

the appearance in Book VII of the so-called "allegory of the cave," perhaps the most famous

image in the history of philosophy.  Like the benighted troglodytes of the *mythos*, we have

always taken the superficial immediate presentation of things, shaped and determined by the

historical contingencies of the culture in which we happen to find ourselves, as what is most

real.  Plato's "truly false" *mythoi* are in part[113] contrived to inspire dissatisfaction with the *simply*

false ones (e.g., the theological myths of Homer) by which our spaces have been perennially

colonized.  As such, they represent a *reorientation* by way of *disorientation*—a rendering strange.

Indeed, Glaucon's first reaction to Socrates' illustration of the cave is to exclaim, "A

strange picture.  And strange prisoners."  To which Socrates replies, "No more strange than

us" (515a).  Lear's treatment of this moment in the dialogue is fascinating and worth quoting

at length:

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[112] Lear (2006): 32.

[113] Before one can even begin to fathom the sun (truth), one must recognize the *inside* of the cave.

The Greek word for "strange" is *atopos*, which means more literally *out of place*; most literally it means *without a place*, *unlocated*. But "unlocated" is precisely the "position" of an allegory-not-recognized-as-such: we do not yet know its place in the scheme of things. Insofar as we, as children, lack the capacity to understand allegory as such, *we* shall be unlocated, for we cannot orient ourselves with respect to these allegories. Now the story of the cave is ostensibly being told to Glaucon, who does have the capacity to recognize allegory as such. But he stands in relation to ordinary experience—to physical objects, artifacts, contemporary beliefs about the good life—as children stand to allegories: he cannot yet locate them as imitating the Forms. As a young adult he lacks the capacity to recognize the allegorical nature of ordinary experience. He cannot locate his experience in relation to reality—to the Forms—and thus he remains unlocated, *atopos*. The Cave is an allegorical attempt to get him to recognize that.

Being ignorant of the politically conservative *telos* of the origin-metals myth, the members of the *kallipolis* would thus be ignorant of its real *place* in their world. Glaucon can see this, as he has a uniquely privileged perspective on it. He precisely lacks such a privileged perspective on how his ordinary everyday experience, like that of the cave dwellers, is characterized by illusion, delusion, and a general kind of obscurity. For this reason, Glaucon himself "remains unlocated, *atopos*."

An example of the corruptive violence that unrecognized *mythos* wreaks on the soul is offered in the figure of Cephalus at the very opening of the *Republic*. Having spent his whole life in "the cave," so to speak, the old man—coming close to the end of his life—suddenly occupies most of his time performing the pious rites whose divine necessity was scored into him through early and repeated exposure to childhood myths. Instead of participating (along with Socrates, Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Thrasymachus) in the rational discussion of the nature of "the just as such," Cephalus is compelled by deep-seated and irrational fears to perform the perfunctory motions of piety as prescribed by his culture. One insight we can take away from this contextual detail is the following. If we do not call into question the "spoken falsehoods" of our cultural heritage by, for example, thinking and talking about the nature of justice, we are likely to be inclined to think of the latter as being nothing more than

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the observance of certain rules. If we reduce justice entirely to the production and observance of contingent *nomoi*, "we may, in turn, be tempted to agree with Thrasymachus' view that these rules are *so many devices for securing the interests of others against our interests*."[114] As a result, ethics becomes a purely instrumental kind of *techne* or technology; below it is but a gnawing abyss.

### 2.2.4 Mythic Closure as Opening

Myth is essentially strange and estranging, a *saying* that illuminates distances towards which we can only gesture. It is an obscured, self-concealing origin of historical meaning whose contours remain indeterminate, and, at the same time, both familiar and strange. We must not confuse "origin" with "cause," however, for reasons elaborated by Hannah Arendt. An event or state of affairs can be traced back to an origin only insofar as the latter is understood to have crystalized, as is the nature of myth, into "fixed and definite forms."[115] Yet, no event can be *deduced* from these forms in the manner of a clear, explanatory causal inference. The origin is too complex, too protean, too mercurial, and too teeming with possibilities to be approached causally. Arendt makes the point in order to stress that the concrete elements that make up the historical origins of totalitarianism cannot be adequately thought in terms of efficient causal agency. To think origins in such a way would be to assume an excess of distance from them and also to risk succumbing to the sort of smug self-satisfaction that accompanies explanatory fixing. Myth, as a kind of origin, must be stayed with and dynamically illuminated by the events that emerge from its murky depths. Not all myths are *myths* of origin, but all myths are *originating*.

We need not dwell on Heidegger's critique of the "*onto-theological*" origins of metaphysics to see how it applies to the peculiar perniciousness of *mythos*. In myth, as argued

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[114] Irwin (1995): 305. Emphasis added.
[115] Arendt (1966).

above, we always seek a *beyond* that is supposed to be ontologically superior to our present mode of being—an explanatory source from which we have *descended*, in the moral as well as genetic sense.[116] We find ourselves like squinting cave dwellers longing for the sun, or like confused, directionless adults wishing there were some trace metal with which we were endowed by the earth as children to confirm the rightness of our social roles. As a potentially truthful kind of "saying," it is a mistake, however, to pit *mythos* strictly against *logos*. To close this section with an observation of Lugi Pareyson (whose relatively little known but powerful theory of hermeneutics will be appropriated in Chapter Four), "the myth which would destroy *logos* is not myth, but an embryonic *logos*, and the *logos* that would want to destroy myth is not *logos*, but oblivious [*inconsapevole*] myth."[117] We must not seek to *overcome* myth, insofar as it serves to equip theory with a remarkably potent speculative *logos* of that which couldn't care less about who we are, of an *object-being* that is ontologically indifferent to any relational system or operational scheme. Instead, vigilant in our stand against the conservative, sometimes *thanatopic* tendencies of mythic discourse, evident notably in the violent political and philosophical irrationalisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we must try, in the language of Nancy, to *interrupt mythos*, to allow its essential *questionability*—rather than its *credibility*—to claim us. We turn to stories like those in the *Timaeus* and the *Republic* "not to learn what is known but to know what cannot be known, for it is ongoing and we are in the middle of it."[118] We live in *mythos* as the self-effacing, perennial beginning of all our thinking-trajectories.

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[116] It is worth noting that the scene of the *Timaeus* is narratively placed a day after the discussion of the *kallipolis* in the *Republic*. Timaeus begins his speech about the origin of the all by claiming that Socrates' proposed mythic "beautiful city" existed in the place of Athens at a time long forgotten and inaccessible to contemporary Athenians.

[117] Pareyson (1971): 29. Translation mine.

[118] Brown (1996).

### 2.3   Prefiguring The "Post-Moral" Landscape:  Descartes to Kant

The historical shift towards modernity is marked in no small part by the systemic, cross-disciplinary repudiation of *mythos*—conceived of as a crassly irrational, anthropomorphic, and politically/epistemologically conservative way of organizing the world and our place within it—in favor of a *logos* narrowly understood in technical, instrumental, and mathematical terms. In a word, we find a new *arche* unfolding in the seventeenth century, a new beginning whose basic orientation towards the world is best described as one seeking a univocal *certainty-control*. On this view, the fables and myths of the past are but confused and barbaric fantasies borne out of the minds of primitive individuals.  In contrast, the world characterized as "modern" is "a society, which unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future, rather than the past."[119]  Of course, not all "early moderns" accepted this deflationary and, in the words of Pareyson, "oblivious" reading of *mythos*.  Giambattista Vico [1668-1744], for example, argued that mythic beliefs are not free creations of the mind, but reflections—albeit distorted ones—of *social* reality.  The ideas of an epoch emerge out of a mimetic process in which humans react to each other and their environment.[120]  The content of these ideas, overtly mythic or not, is *reality*; "everything depends on the recognition of the underlying reality in a given case, a reality reflected even in the darkest cult."[121]  For Vico, the most obscure *mythos* of a people cannot be sharply distinguished, in terms of content, from the most sophisticated and rigorous metaphysics.  Descartes' epistemological foundationalism, precisely in striving to ground such a distinction, becomes a kind of "oblivious" mythology by telling a story that disavows its own socio-historical roots.

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[119] Giddens (1998): 94.
[120] See Vico's *The New Science* (1984 [1725]), especially Book II.
[121] Horkheimer (1987): 71.

### 2.3.1 Mathesis Universalis: A New Arche

The new *arche* that opens up in modernity is that of *certainty-control*. The hyphen in this formulation does not replace or reveal a conjunction; it points to an inextricable univocity. For early modern thinkers like Descartes and Bacon, certainty *is* control. As I will try to show in this section, the self-consciousness achieved in the *cogito* is concomitant with self-assertion. The birth of the metaphysical subject—ontological and epistemological bedrock—gives way to the search for pervasive technological means for the sustainment and enhancement of the subject over mere "nature."

Making sense of what demarcates one historical epoch from another (or, indeed, of what even constitutes an "epoch") is of course a messy and thoroughly complicated business, which, to be executed rigorously, requires a simultaneously expansive and detailed kind of treatment that I cannot afford to give in the present context. Consequently, my capitulation of the "modern" trajectory of ethical thought towards the *relativization* of the latter *to the subject* will have to be conducted—like Heidegger's program of *destruktion*—in broad strokes. I maintain, in brief, that with the birth of the modern metaphysical *subject*, Descartes opens up a clearly delineated space for *human freedom* in which moral philosophers—from Hume,[122] to Kant, to Mill, and beyond—seek to place the *source* and forms of ethical obligation. In this section I will trace the specific moments of this trajectory, focusing primarily on Descartes, Hume, and Kant.

Thomas Hobbes' well-known mechanistic ontology lays the groundwork for a view of ethics and politics that can best be described as "inertial." Without some objective *telos* like "the Good" towards which to strive, human desire only satisfies itself in order to perpetuate

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[122] The matter is of course more complicated in the case of Hume, given the intransigence of his skepticism regarding the existence of a unified "self."

itself.[123]  The sole way to ensure that one's desires are continuously met is to ceaselessly augment the scope of one's power to negotiate and neutralize the numberless obstacles and constraints that populate the natural landscape.  Descartes, having already contributed to the advancement of metaphysical mechanism with his account of bodies as "automata," avoids Hobbes' physical reductionism by making room for the *res cogitans* as a substance *ontologically* distinct from the *res extensa*, characterized by an entirely different "primary attribute" (e.g., *thought* rather than *extension*).  Gassendi's proposed "mitigated skepticism" in the face of a largely indeterminate physical world explodes into the radical—albeit artificial—doubt from whose limitless corrosion Descartes is able to rescue the *thinking subject* as the most directly knowable thing of all.

It is now more or less customary—at least in academic philosophy—to criticize so-called "Cartesian dualism."  Mind/body dualism has now attained the status of something like a *mythos* (a "likely" and "appropriate" story):  its essential parameters—allowing for some superficial modification—are firmly entrenched in the cultural consciousness; it is an accepted, orthodox idea whose origins remain (for the average non-philosopher) more or less hazy; like the Platonic "forms," finally, it helps us to connect our most *real* and irreducible being (e.g., the *subject*, the *mind*, the *soul*, etc.) to a timeless, aspatial, transcendental beyond.  Even Gilbert Ryle's famous critique of Cartesian dualism bears the provocative title, "Descartes' Myth."[124] Of course, Descartes himself rejected *mythos* or fable as a legitimate epistemic resource—albeit one whose "charms" might "awaken the mind."[125]  He was quite convinced that the new

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[123] The same holds for the desire for fame and power:  once attained, both must be perpetually expanded in order to continue at all.
[124] Chapter One of *The Concept of Mind* (1949).
[125] Descartes (1998a): 3.

epistemological foundations he was laying were "clearly and distinctly" *intuitable* and, thus, beyond doubt.

Unfortunately, Descartes' two methodological rubrics, *foundationalism* and *skepticism*, when brought together, are ultimately self-undermining: the presupposition of the necessity for a univocal metaphysical foundation for knowledge *qua* certainty works to unravel the skeptical approach before it even gets going, ultimately condemning Descartes to the untenable dogmatism that Hume and Kant would so decisively refute. I will flesh this claim out in some detail in what follows, drawing primarily from three texts of the Cartesian corpus: *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (probably written in 1628, though first published posthumously in 1701), *Discourse on Method* (1637), and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641).

In Rule Three of the *Regulae*, Descartes introduces a technical concept central to his whole methodological project: *intuition*. For Descartes, there are only two intellectual means by which "knowledge of things with no fear of being mistaken" (Rule III: 368) is possible: *intuition* and *deduction*. Descartes presents his admittedly "novel" employment of the term "intuition" as follows: "the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason" (Rule III: 368). This definition is so vague as to border on worthlessness. However, Descartes puts this essential vagueness to use as the basic foundation on which are built ever more complex structures of knowledge that include empirical observation. "Deduction" is the first such extension.

Intuition, for Descartes' method, is primary. We arrive at "first principles" or "simple natures" intuitively. It is necessary to include "deduction," however, "since very many facts which are not self-evident are known with certainty" (Rule III: 370). Thus, after having established through intuition such self-evident truths as one's own existence, or the three-line boundedness of a triangle, for example, one can connect such foundational truths to further

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facts *deductively*, thereby creating a structure of knowledge analogous to a "long chain" (Rule III: 370). It is at this point that the distinction Descartes makes between *simple deduction* and *enumeration* comes to the fore.

In simple deduction, the intellect moves inferentially from one simple point or principle to the next.[126] By contrast, the act of *enumeration*—which Descartes identifies with "induction" (Rule VII: 388)—is the "thorough investigation of *all the points* relating to the problem at hand" (Rule VII: 38).[127] In other words, *induction*, for Descartes' peculiar purposes, consists in the active process of cognitively putting together the *deductive* links of a long chain of inquiry. This is important, Descartes points out, because just as "our eyes cannot distinguish at one glance all the links in a very long chain…if we have seen the connections between each link and its neighbor, this enables us to say that we have seen how the last link is connected with the first" (Rule VII: 389). For example, if we follow the multiple deductive links that connect the originary *Cogito* in Descartes' argument in the *Meditations* all the way to the last one in which the existence of the external world is firmly established, we are engaged in the practice of *enumeration*. Since the foundation for this process of following the chain of inquiry is the simple and indubitable act of intuition, the knowledge attained through enumeration (induction) can be regarded as certain.

Further support for this point is offered in Rule Eleven. Descartes notes that there are "two things required for mental intuition: first, the proposition intuited must be clear and distinct; second, the whole proposition must be understood all at once, and not bit by bit" (Rule XI: 407). This might seem to suggest that the notion of enumeration given above cannot

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[126] As an example, Descartes describes how we come to the inference that "2 plus 2 equals 3 plus 1: not only must we intuitively perceive that 2 plus 2 make 4, and that 3 plus 1 make 4, but also that the original proposition follows necessarily from the other two" (Rule III: 369).
[127] Emphasis added.

count as intuition, thereby mitigating the potential for certainty of the whole inductive process. Later in the same section, however, Descartes observes that by repeatedly and attentively using the fallible faculty of memory to enjoin distant links, one is able to move from the first point in the deductive chain to the last "so quickly that memory is left with practically no role to play" (Rule XI: 409), thereby enabling one to seemingly intuit the entire structure at once.[128] In this way, the process of post-deductive enumeration or induction comes to resemble simple intuition and, therefore, to yield certainty.

Given the centrality of deduction and "demonstration" to Descartes' method, it is easy to see why commentators would be inclined to think that the latter commits him to the extreme view that *only* mathematics is capable of yielding knowledge, thus precluding the possibility, for example, of a truly rigorous *science* of morals.[129] There are numerous instances throughout the *Rules* in which Descartes extols the relative epistemological superiority of geometry and arithmetic. For example, in Rule Two he remarks, "of all the sciences so far discovered, arithmetic and geometry alone are…free from any taint of falsity or uncertainty" (Rule II: 365). The operative phrase of the sentence, however, proves to be "*so far discovered*," especially in light of the caveat Descartes provides later in the same Rule:

> Now the conclusion we should draw from these considerations is not that arithmetic and geometry are the only sciences worth studying, but rather that in seeking the right path of truth we ought to concern ourselves only with objects which admit of as much certainty as the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry (Rule II: 366).

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[128] "Say, for instance, in virtue of several operations, I have discovered the relation between the first and second magnitude of a series, then the relation between the second and the third and the third and the fourth, and lastly the fourth and the fifth: that does not necessarily enable me to see what the relation is between the first and the fifth, and I cannot deduce from it the relations I already know unless I remember all of them. That is why it is necessary that I run over them again and again in my mind until I can pass from the first to the last so quickly that memory is left with practically no role to play, and I seem to be intuiting the whole thing at once" (Rule XI: 409).
[129] See Hatfield (1988).

Far from aiming to limit his scientific method to the mathematical sciences, then, Descartes wants to discover the element[s] that allow[s] common mathematics to admit of such a high degree of certainty. In support of this point, Desmond Clarke writes:

> …it is incidental that common mathematics is concerned with numbers and figures, for if one properly understands the method being proposed by Descartes (he thinks) then one can hope to have discovered the key to a scientific understanding of anything, including numbers and figures, but also sounds, and stars, and…[130]

The import of Descartes' remark in Rule Fourteen that he "would rather that [the reader] had not yet embarked upon [arithmetic and geometry] than that he had been taught them in the usual manner" (Rule XIV: 442) is in this light made less cryptic. He goes on to assert that his "Rules are so useful in the pursuit of deeper wisdom" (Rule XIV: 442) that "mathematical problems should be studied almost exclusively for the sake of the excellent practice which they give us in the method" (Rule XIV: 442). *Mathesis universalis* is thus a formal methodological bridge into the world through which alone any inquiry, including *ethical* inquiry, might enjoy the possibility of *certainty*, i.e., *knowledge*.

In Rule Four, Descartes discusses this "universal mathematics," and clarifies his primary concern with mathematical science in general:

> When I considered the matter more closely, I came to see that the exclusive concern of mathematics is with questions of order or measure and that it is irrelevant whether the measure in question involves numbers, shapes, stars, sounds or any other object whatever. This made me realize that there must be a general science which explains all the points that can be raised concerning order and measure irrespective of the subject-matter, and that this science should be termed *mathesis universalis* (Rule IV: 378).

Thus, as suggested above, the method set forth in the *Rules* should be regarded as general enough to apply to any domain of scientific inquiry, insofar as that domain can be structured in an *orderly*, *measurable* way. This does not mean, as is sometimes suggested, that the deductive

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[130] Clarke (1982): 168.

method vaguely and often misleadingly invoked throughout the *Rules* limits the scope of inquiry to the impotently circumscribed sphere of numerical abstraction.

What *mathesis universalis* specifies as a formal method applicable to any content whatever is a new, dogmatic kind of "objectivity." In *The World* [1664], Descartes describes—in a mythic register,[131] it should be noted—what features a perfectly ideal materiality would possess:

> To this end, let us expressly suppose that it does not have the form of earth, fire, or air, or any other more specific form, like that of wood, stone, or metal. Let us also suppose that it lacks the qualities of being hot or cold, dry or moist, light or heavy, and of having any taste, smell, sound, color, light, or other such quality in the nature of which there might be said to be something which is not known clearly by everyone.[132]

An ideal materiality, in short, would be one whose determinacy is figured by the absence of any incidental features not immediately reducible to a preformed scheme. This is what perfect objectivity would amount to: univocal structuration determinable *a priori* by anyone with an intellect. Descartes never substantially developed something that could be legitimately termed an "ethics," but—in virtue of the few places in his work where a discussion of the latter can be found—it is clear that an *adequate* science of ethics would contain apodictic truths. Descartes' approach, unrealized though it may be, violates a basic principle of Aristotelian science, viz., that the *kind* of rigor appropriate to a particular sphere of inquiry is contingent on the way the object of said sphere shows itself. Descartes' radically new *mathesis universalis* is based on an *a priori* mistrust of sensuous self-showing, that is, of the aesthetic mode generally. For Aristotle, it should be recalled, because the ethical is inextricably bound up with experience and, ultimately, sense perception, any such *mathematical* approach to it would

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[131] "For a while, then, allow your thought to wander beyond this world to view another world—a wholly new one which I shall bring into being before your mind in imaginary spaces" (Descartes 2007: 90).

[132] Descartes (2007): 91.

be necessarily doomed to a woeful *lack* of rigor, properly understood. It is clear from this consideration that the ancient view of theory as a thinking whose beginning and developmental contours are determined by the norms of the object has been supplanted by a univocal and technical *a priorism* according to which what is most real about the object is what is can be grasped by the method.

### 2.3.2    A Provisional Code

Descartes "delighted most of all in mathematics because of the certainty and evidence of its reasonings."[133] But, in the *Discourse*, as in the *Rules*, he points out that the formal mathematical approach to science had not yet been used properly as a "noble foundation" for, among other things, the study of morals. Accordingly, he holds that the "very magnificent palaces" of ancient, "pagan" moral theory were "built on nothing but sand and mud."[134] In other words, lacking a clear and distinct metaphysics of morals, the ancients could not satisfactorily answer the "normative question," i.e. are the norms we take to ground ethical obligation *really* binding, and, if so, why? In the absence of a firm, indubitable, *mathematizable* foundation for ethics, Descartes resolves in Part Three of the *Discourse* to adopt *for himself* a "provisional code of morals" consisting of "but three or four maxims,"[135] which Donald Rutherford nicely distills as follows:

> The first was to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood…. The second maxim was to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain…. My third maxim was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world…. Finally, to conclude this moral code… I thought I could do no better than to continue with the [occupation] I was engaged in, and to devote my whole life to cultivating my reason and

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[133] Descartes (1998a): 4.
[134] *Ibid*: 5.
[135] *Ibid*: 13.

advancing as far as I could in the knowledge of the truth, following the method
I had prescribed for myself.[136]

The first two maxims seem to commit Descartes to a kind of Hobbesian moral conventionalism. An action ought to be pursued only insofar as it is prescribed by the norms of one's community. On the Hobbesian view, however, community norms are as artificial as the body that prescribes them;[137] in their *natural* condition, human beings really have only one "norm" of which to speak: self-preservation. The basis of this view, as is well known, is an ontology that is simultaneously *mechanistic* and *atomistic*: humans are radically separate machines of desire. Hobbes mercilessly attacked the idea—like that of Grotius, for example—that the *reality* of norms somehow extends beyond the juridical language in which they are articulated and the executive power by which they are enforced. "Moral truths" are only pragmatically worked out according to an ongoing *logos* that determines what a people is willing to sacrifice in order to keep itself going. As Knud Haakonssen puts it, "Hobbes had to seek a political solution…to the impasse in his moral theory."[138] Descartes' "provisional moral code" can be accounted for in similar terms, but with some very important differences provided in maxims three and four.

The third maxim of Descartes' provisional morality echoes the ancient stoicism to which his brand of skepticism, as developed in the *Meditations*, is much more indebted than it is to ancient skepticisms, for example, that of Sextus Empiricus. Relatedly, the last maxim of the code suggests that, despite Descartes' injunction for a radical new foundation for knowledge, he still stands with the ancients in the idea that *theoretical* wisdom supports *practical* wisdom. Of course, in the moral domain one must *act* even when not possessing clear and

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[136] Rutherford (2013), quoting Descartes (1998a): 13-15.
[137] I.e., the "sovereign," or, *leviathan*.
[138] Haakonssen (1996): 31.

unshakable knowledge of the entities and matters involved, hence the import of the second

maxim (and why Descartes "settles" for a provisional code at all). Nevertheless, for Descartes,

the extent to which one perfects one's theoretical knowledge—requiring, ultimately, the

reduction of its scope to a firm foundation of a finite number of "clear and distinct ideas"—

is also the extent to which one can hope to perfect one's practical knowledge. Evidence for

this holistic foundationalism is found in the preface to the French edition of Descartes'

*Principles of Philosophy*:

> Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the
> trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other
> sciences, which may be reduced to three principal ones, namely medicine,
> mechanics and morals. By "morals" I understand the highest and most perfect
> moral system, which presupposes a complete knowledge of the other sciences
> and is the ultimate level of wisdom.[139]

In the next paragraph Descartes admits to being "ignorant of almost all of" these very

important branches that must be "learnt last of all."[140] He is nevertheless quite certain that

*moral* knowledge is attainable only on the basis of an insuperable metaphysical ground, which,

as is well known, is found in the *Cogito*: that which is always already known in advance—the

ultimate *mathēma*.

For Hobbes, in contrast, advances in science can only succeed in illustrating the vast

and insuperable divide between the domains of ethics and "natural philosophy." Or, perhaps

more accurately, Hobbes thinks that the twofold development of the *mechanistic* view of human

nature and the *representational* view of human perceptual consciousness works to demonstrate

the purely arbitrary and artificial character of so-called "moral truths."[141] Descartes, by

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[139] Descartes (2007): 186.
[140] *Ibid.*
[141] For example, in the *Leviathan* [1651] Hobbes writes: "For these words of good, evil, and
contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply
and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects
themselves, but from the person of the man (where there is no commonwealth), or (in a

contrast, holds out for the eventual acquisition of firm, indubitable ethical knowledge, subscribing to Hobbesian conventionalism as a temporary and, as he characterizes it, *provisional* source of guidance for the interim. In a word, to employ anachronistic language, Hobbes' ethics is *decidedly* anti-realist while Descartes' is only provisionally so.

### 2.3.3    The New Cartesian Architecture: From Doubt to Subjectivity

Nevertheless, whatever degree of "moral realism" we may ascribe to Descartes' position is undermined by his unique skeptical methodology, which, like the ancient stoic pursuit of the state of *ataraxia* ("tranquility," or "contentment"), demands a *turning inward*. As Michael Williams argues, "Cartesian and classical skepticism are radically different in kind."[142] For Sextus, the skeptic first learns to doubt because of disappointment; finding that all of one's beliefs can be replaced by their opposite with equal plausibility (a condition named *isothenia*), the skeptic resolves to suspend all judgment as a means for overcoming the perturbation associated with epistemic defeat,[143] thereby attaining—provided he is diligent in maintaining this *epoche*—a state of *ataraxia*, peace of mind. The skeptic doubts but then, finding that her doubts have no hope of ever being resolved, *gives up on* the prospect of attaining theoretical certainty. Bitter doubt gives way to irenic resignation. Only when the skeptic fully and actively gives up on the possibility of certainty can she reach contentment. According to classical ancient skepticism, then, in order to achieve and maintain *ataraxia*—which, it is worth noting, was also the goal of the stoics and epicureans—one must be satisfied to live "by appearances."[144]

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commonwealth) from the person that representeth it, or from an arbitrator or judge whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the rule thereof" (Hobbes 1994: 28-29).
[142] Williams (1986): 118.
[143] When he finds, for example, that a proposition like "the rock is warm" is both true and false, depending on various perceptual conditions.
[144] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I.24.

Descartes' need for univocal certainty immediately puts him at odds with this tradition, not only in terms of the means for the desired end, but also in terms of the beginning. The "hyperbolic" doubt undertaken in the first *Meditation* is unapologetically artificial and contrived. Descartes is at pains to remind the reader of this fact, asserting parenthetically, for example, at the close of the introductory synopsis of the six *Meditations* that "no one of sound mind has ever seriously doubted" the very things he will set out to doubt.[145] Indeed, as Myles Burnyeat has emphasized, the ancient skeptics never adopted a methodological program of doubt whereby things like the existence of the external world and of the material bodies therein were subjected to genuine suspicion.[146] Indeed, these skeptics embraced the noncommittal state of *isothenia* as the only viable way of living harmoniously in a messy, chaotic world whose existence was unreflectively taken for granted. Descartes, in contrast, willfully and strategically begins his *Meditations* as a purely theoretical enterprise, withdrawing from the world of action, which, he insists, remains entirely unaffected by the experiment. Furthermore, this new skeptical approach comes equipped with a readymade list—today prepackaged as canonical for every introductory philosophy course—of epistemological problems (e.g. the untrustworthiness of the senses, the difficulty of distinguishing dreams from reality, etc.). For classical skeptics like Sextus, by contrast, the dubitability of belief applies to all beliefs equally; no one belief is inherently more problematic than any other.[147] The reason for this difference is crucial: despite the conceit of initiating the *Meditations* free from presupposition, quietly attending to his thoughts while sitting in his pajamas beside a gentle fire, Descartes carries with him a number of assumptions which his own skeptical method, at least on the face of it, would seem not to authorize.

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[145] Descartes (1998b): 56.
[146] Burnyeat (1982).
[147] Williams (1986): 122.

The primary assumption at play is one we have touched on already, viz., that knowledge is analyzable in terms of a *foundational* structure understood by analogy to architecture. Descartes begins the first *Meditation* by identifying his task as one of razing to the ground everything he thought he knew and beginning again "from the original foundations."[148] He goes on to say that he need not subject "each opinion individually" to doubt, "because undermining the foundations will cause whatever has been built on them to crumble of its own accord…"[149] This is not, as Williams points out,[150] an innocent matter of mere procedural convenience. If Descartes did not pursue this radical skeptical experiment on the basis of a foundationalist account of epistemic justification his hyperbolic doubt would dissolve into classical *isothenia*. Not content to "live by appearances," however, Descartes advances his entire project on the strength of the decidedly *unskeptical* assumption that nothing short of absolute certainty can legitimize knowledge claims, and that absolute certainty is possible. For his part, Sextus implicitly rejects foundationalism, arguing that any final criterion we might appeal to in order to decide between two conflicting beliefs would itself require justification according to some higher order criterion, and so on, giving way to a regress. Descartes' strategy is to assume *without argument* that knowledge, if it exists, is hierarchical, and that the myriad confused appearances by which our lives are continuously destabilized can be adequately accounted for and securely grounded by recourse to one indubitable level of epistemic bedrock. This bedrock turns out to be the *cogito*.

The connection of this procedure to ethics is made clear by looking back to Part Four of the *Discourse*, where Descartes writes:

> For a long time I had noticed that in matters of morality one must sometimes follow opinions that one knows to be quite uncertain, just as if they were

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[148] Descartes (1998b): 59.
[149] *Ibid*: 59-60.
[150] Williams (1986): 124-125.

indubitable…but because I then desired to devote myself exclusively to the search for the truth, I thought it necessary that I do exactly the opposite, and that I reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable.[151]

While the impasse in Hobbes' theory of morality—namely, that all of the latter's "rules" are entirely arbitrary—compelled him to seek a *political* solution, the same impasse forced Descartes to pursue a *metaphysical* one through a subtle new epistemological attunement. What is this new attunement? To put the matter simply, truth is no longer thought in terms of the self-disclosure of phenomena, as, for example, in Aristotle, for whom the mode of theoretical engagement is determined by the nature of the object and its particular milieu. Instead, truth is understood as that which emerges unscathed from out of the acid bath of doubt wherein being is measured, not on its own terms, but according to an arbitrarily decided *certitude*. The bedrock of this certitude turns out to be the *subject*, the *cogito ergo sum*, as is so well known that I do not need to rehearse the story here in detail. *Everything* the thinker previously thought to be certain, from the existence of physical objects in the world, to even the conclusions of logical demonstration and mathematical proof, is now held in a theoretical quarantine of suspicion. The one thing he cannot doubt is that he is doubting—a species of *thinking*—and, consequently, that *he* exists, not as a body, as that much is still dubious, but as a *thinking thing* [*res cogitans*]. The *cogito* therefore initiates at once both modern subjectivism and the doctrine of mathematical objectivity, insofar as it, as Jan Patočka asserts, is "a mathematical certitude…because it does not come from 'without' but rather is ascertained in pure reflection."[152]

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[151] Descartes (1998a): 18.
[152] Patočka (1989): 292.

In order to avoid the unsavory pitfall of solipsism, the story continues, Descartes must prove the existence of God (on the basis, of course, of the *cogito*, the sole truth at this point available to him), only after which can he be assured of the veracity of appearances. This movement on the basis of an apparently innocent methodological embrace of foundationalism requires another key assumption, viz., that bodily sensation and perceptual experience are also species of *thought*. In *Meditation Two*, for example, Descartes observes that while such acts as seeing a light, hearing a noise, and feeling heat are called "sensing," the latter, "precisely so taken, is nothing other than thinking."[153] In *Meditation Three*, our meditator elaborates:

> …I have previously admitted many things as wholly certain and evident that nevertheless I later discovered to be doubtful. What sort of things were these? Why, the earth, the sky, the stars, and all the other things I perceived by means of the senses. But what was it about these things that I clearly perceived? Surely the fact that the ideas or thoughts of these things were hovering before my mind. But even now I do not deny that these ideas are in me.[154]

My *visual sensation* of the coffee mug on the table before me and the *mental image* of a tiny salamander wearing basketball shoes that I presently entertain are both "ideas," *modes* of my activity as a "thinking substance." This (not argued for) inheritance from scholastic ontology is critical for Descartes' project inasmuch as it allows him to argue that the perceptual *ideas*—only apparently "adventitious"—he has of things in the world may have originated within him. Since they *appear* not to have originated within him, however, these "ideas" are untrustworthy. Only the idea of infinite God (which turns out to be "innate") has more "objective reality" (i.e., the content *represented*) than "formal reality" (i.e., my thought doing the *representing*), and thus can be *clearly and distinctly* known to have originated elsewhere. Finally, because God, by definition, is no deceiver, I can rest assured that whatever else I *clearly and distinctly* perceive is true.

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[153] Descartes (1998b): 66.
[154] *Ibid.* 70.

The famous ball of wax example from the second *Meditation* is supposed to show that the domain of sense perception—taken by empiricists to be the *sine qua non* for our knowledge of the external world—ultimately serves to tell us more about ourselves than the objects purportedly engaged.  Beneath the teeming surface of ever-shifting perceptual properties, I have a clear and distinct intellectual grasp of the wax as a unity of pure extension, "extended substance" [*res extensa*].  Seeing, feeling, and cognizing the wax in its various modes reveal the formal modes available to one's own being *qua* thinking substance.  "For there is not a single consideration," Descartes writes, "that can aid in my perception of the wax or of any other body that fails to make even more manifest the nature of my mind."[155]  All knowledge becomes *self-knowledge*, though not in the Socratic sense of a hard won awareness—subtended, as it were, by an attention to one's inexorable ignorance—of how one lives one's life in a linguistic community of others.  For Descartes, all knowledge is self-knowledge because it originates out of a measured attunement to the certainty of the *cogito*, i.e, metaphysical subjectivity.  So the passage in the *Discourse*[156] where Descartes describes his admittedly abstract and impractical *Meditations* paints the overarching procedure in the following way.  Dissatisfied with the shaky indeterminacy of (overwhelmingly Aristotelian) classical ethics, Descartes resolved—as a purely theoretical effort—to commit all that he previously thought he knew, from ethics to metaphysics and everything in between, to an acid bath of unrelenting doubt.  This corrosion continues until he hits upon some foundation impervious to doubt, which then functions as epistemic bedrock.  His own existence *qua* immaterial, immeasurable, impenetrable thinking subject fills the role.  More succinctly, the movement looks like this: *morality    doubt    cogito    subjectivity*.

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[155] *Ibid.* 69.
[156] Quoted on page 44 above.

Presumably Descartes thinks that moral *knowledge* (as indubitable) is ultimately possible on the basis of this new, unshakable foundation, although he never substantively pursues this thread. More generally, the Cartesian claim that sets the stage for the modern supplanting of metaphysics by epistemology, is that an absolute grounding of our ways of representing reality must precede any pretense to knowledge of it. This would appear to be an unobjectionable and judicious approach if it weren't for two persistent features: as discussed above, the approach first of all problematically presupposes a univocal foundationalism, disguising the latter as an innocuous matter of procedural convenience, and second, the claim appropriates scholastic ontology in advancing a proto-idealistic representationalism. According to the first assumption, knowledge is hierarchical; certain pieces of knowledge are privileged as necessary for others. Descartes subscribes to a version of the principle of sufficient reason according to which the succession of one's "ideas"—be they sensuous or otherwise—can be traced back *causally* to some final, unaccountable metaphysical ground, viz., God. In virtue of the second assumption, so-called "external" reality is always only mediated through "internal" ideas or representations whose causal origins are ascertainable by reason alone.

Since the *res cogitans*, whether infinite (God, divine subjectivity) or finite (human subjectivity), is ontologically distinct from and epistemologically prior to *res extensa*, physical substance, Descartes' privileging of the former as the ground for his new intellectual architecture effectively opens up an ahistorical and placeless space of perfect intellectual intelligibility that would make even the most "vertically" minded Platonist uncomfortable. The being of material entities in the world is thought, on this approach, as univocally *mathematizable*. This means that we can make sense of being in terms of what is extended spatially (abstractly, quantifiably) before us. The changes in appearance that a thing undergoes are but ephemeral *modes* of an extension that is always present and intelligible as such. Thus,

the disparate self-showings of phenomena are superficial and ontologically unimportant. Heidegger, for this reason, points out that the Cartesian mathematization of the world remains the central unexamined presupposition underlying the reductive view of being as *Vorhandenheit*, "presence-at-hand," or, "presence *for* a subject."[157] This presupposition serves an approach that would posit bare mathematical extension as the substratum to which subjective "values" can be tacked on like any other ephemeral property. Our being always already caught up in the world is simply an inessential artifact of our attaching value to it as a self-same, abstractly "present" substance: "The senses do not enable us to cognize any entity in its Being; they merely serve to announce the ways in which 'external' things within-the-world are useful or harmful for human creatures encumbered with bodies."[158] *Mathesis univeralis* is about *control*: values are attributed to entities within-the-world (in themselves merely present and available in a uniform way) by a substance (*res cogitans*) whose immediate *self-certainty* is translated to *certainty* full-stop.

### 2.3.4    Bacon's Inductive Physics

Although Francis Bacon, as is well known, privileges physics and induction over mathematics and deduction, it is clear that he shares many of the tendencies that I have thus far characterized as "modern." Like Descartes, Bacon seeks a new foundation for knowledge outside of myth, tradition, and history. Also like Descartes, Bacon's scientific methodology calls for an understanding of *objectivity* hitherto unseen. Indeed, and this is what Heidegger's critique gets at, Descartes' enthusiasm for a *mathesis universalis* is an endorsement of a pure epistemological objectivity for which all of reality is uniformly knowable (and manipulable). Unlike Descartes, Bacon's empiricism starts with the senses, yet it never pretends to contact a

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[157] Heidegger (1962): 123-134.
[158] *Ibid*: 129.

subject-independent reality. "Objectivity," for Bacon, means to square with a nature pulled

from its own milieu by way of human "experiment." In *The Great Instauration* [1620] Bacon

asserts that "the office of sense shall be only to judge of the experiment, and that the

experiment itself shall judge of the thing," a paragraph earlier having written that "the

testimony and information of the sense has reference always to man, not to the universe."[159]

Thus, for Bacon and Descartes, "objectivity"—conceived of *mathematically* for the latter and

*physically* for the former—hardly connotes a principled way of allowing nature to show itself

independently of human design and interest. Rather, to undertake science "objectively" means

to proceed from an *a priori* conceptual framework that univocally reduces the *truth* of nature

to what can be made certain and infinitely malleable for our own ends and purposes.

### 2.3.5    Hume and the *is-ought* Divide

The empiricism of David Hume, more sophisticated than that of Bacon, repudiates Descartes'

rationalist foundationalism but effectively extends his representationalism much more

radically. Both moves indicate the deepening entrenchment of the so-called "epistemological

turn." Hume is committed to a sense-data theory of perception whereby we only have access

to our "perceptions," and never to the "external" *objects* thereof.[160] However, he is also a

deflationist when it comes to *reason*, privileging "sentiment" as our primary means of knowing

the world and ourselves. While Descartes insists that one can willfully withhold or assent to

one's beliefs according to rational criteria, Hume argues that reason has very little to do with

the *formation* of belief, false or true.[161] The difference between *true* belief and the entertainment

of a fiction or falsity is a matter of feeling. I can *conceive* of a baseball spontaneously shape-

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159 Bacon (1999): 79.
160 Hume (1978): i.ii.vi.
161 Hume (1999): 124.

shifting into an enormous beetle upon being struck by a bat, but I can never—however hard I may try—transform this imagined result into a bona fide belief. The reason for this is not that the notion of a weirdly morphing baseball is *unreasonable*; in fact, I can entertain the thought of it without contradiction. Rather, the notion is *unbelievable* precisely because it isn't "excited by nature,"[162] it doesn't grip me in a visceral, prereflective way. Hume's aim here is to provide a *naturalistic* account of the sources of mental states such as beliefs. If we understand how mental states are formed we can avoid the speculative pitfalls of rationalism in particular and dogmatic metaphysics more generally by confining our focus to the only domain capable of yielding knowledge: experience. Hume's reflection on the nature of experience leads to his famous critique of *causation* as an object of knowledge and thence to a bold and thoroughgoing rejection of rationalism. Yet, perhaps ironically, Hume's *naturalism* fits quite well in my story of the modern *arche* of certainty-control: certainty is now a "natural," subjective *feeling* in virtue of which norms are established and justified.

The strength of Descartes' arguments is predicated on the acceptance of a scholastic understanding of the cause-effect relation. I experience doubt. According to Descartes, the state of doubt, a species of thinking, must be the effect of some underlying substantial cause possessing *at least as much* "reality" as the effect produced, viz., *res cogitans*. Similarly, the content of my "idea" of God necessarily exceeds the finite parameters of my own thinking, and so must be the effect of an infinite cause or origin, viz., God himself. Descartes takes it for granted that for every effect there is one necessary cause and that this cause—leading all the way down the contingent etiological chain to God, the very first cause—is accessible by reason. Hume dismantles this naïve dogmatic view by jamming a hard and fast wedge between two types of knowledge that, as discussed above, Descartes took to operate together in the manner

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[162] *Ibid.*

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of an architectural design: deduction and induction. For Descartes, deduction and induction (or "enumeration") work together to form a superstructure atop of the foundation of indubitable intuitions (his "clear and distinct ideas"). Hume, in contrast, argues that (1) experience is constituted entirely of sense *impressions* and *ideas* (which are but faint images of impressions), (2) we make sense of these impressions primarily through *causal inference*, and (3) there is absolutely no *rational* basis for the ascription of necessary causal connection.

This is a powerful check on the overly robust claims of rationalist metaphysics. The so-called "Cartesian circle"[163] is essentially a narcotic feedback loop resulting in the hyperbolic security of one's own self-awareness being inferentially spread uniformly across a homogeneous, caricaturized field of things. Hume's skeptical critique shows that the certainty we enjoy in causal reasoning, the very certainty that underwrites the legitimacy of our predictions about the future, owes its genesis to an a-rational *feeling* constituted out of the sediment of past experience, e.g., habit. I take this to be a fruitful step forward inasmuch as it posits and takes seriously the non-identity of objects and our preformed ideas about them. But it goes too far, in effect augmenting the gap, already established by Descartes' dualist ontology, between two distinct poles of existence: subjects and objects. The subject—or "mind"—at this stage, it is true, is conceived of reductively as a "bundle" of "internal" and "external" impressions. Yet, it is still nevertheless a discrete domain—characterized by *feeling* or *sentiment*—set against an "objective" realm[164] of things with which we never enjoy even the most modest degree of contact. The unreflective, "vulgar" notion that our ideas and impressions accurately represent the objects of this latter realm is itself but a rationally

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[163] The "Cartesian circle" is shorthand for the way in which, for Descartes, the existence of God guarantees the veracity of our "clear and distinct ideas," and, conversely, the immediacy of our "clear and distinct ideas"—through the *cogito*—guarantees the existence of God.

[164] This is not to be understood as a kind of "noumenal realm," *a la* Kant. For the latter, the noumenal is precisely the sphere of "pure reason" in which the moral law abides.

unaccountable subjective feeling. This extreme division of the world into two poles opens a space for Hume's understanding and initiation of the famous "is-ought" or "fact-value" distinction. The problem with empiricism, which phenomenology has tried, inadequately, to correct, is that it presents "facts" as simply and immediately *given*. The pointilistic data of sense experience are given directly and straightforwardly to the feeling agent whose interior world is therefore where all the interesting, complicated stuff—i.e., "mediation"—happens.

In Book III of the *Treatise*, Hume draws a distinction between statements of "ought" and statements of "is," claiming:

> For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it.[165]

It is difficult to definitively conclude what Hume means by this brief passage because he provides no detailed argument for its elaboration. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that Hume's moral theory appears to violate the very principle under discussion, inasmuch as it—like that of Hobbes—proceeds from an account of human nature to an account of the origins of obligation.

One way to save Hume from charges of inconsistency is to interpret his so-called "subjectivist" moral view[166] as descriptive rather than prescriptive: in declaring your action to be morally blameworthy, I am simply stating a fact about my own affective constitution. Thus, I do not *deduce* an ought from an is; what is affirmed in the language of "ought" / "ought not" is simply a capitulation of my own sentiments.[167] This is, of course, where Hume runs into

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[165] Hume (1978): 469.
[166] Moral subjectivism, simply stated, is the view that the existence of moral facts is dependent on the subject's mind that entertains them.
[167] This idea was given rigorous elaboration in the twentieth century through C.L. Stevenson's theory of "emotivism." See Stevenson (1963).

trouble, with regard to his aesthetic theory no less than with his moral one. If moral judgment and aesthetic taste are at once descriptively ascribable to subjective affect *and* intersubjectively consistent (as arising out of purportedly stable features of human nature), then he has to account for the binding force of *common* sentiments. In other words, Hume has to account for why we are justified in judging the actions of others despite the fact that morality itself issues from radically subjective *feeling*. In the end, Hume is pressed to adopt the same sort of conventionalist position that Hobbes does with respect to sources of normativity: we abstain from actions that are conventionally considered base or vicious out of fear of censure. Similarly, we strive to align ourselves with prevailing norms in matters of aesthetic valuation in order to avoid excommunication from communities of taste. Tracing the sources of normativity thus becomes a circular enterprise, oscillating between the poles of communitarian convention and individual affect. The moral sense may begin in subjective affect, but it is subsequently *internally* adjudicated by the desire to avoid falling short of community standards. When the obvious question arises, viz., Whence *community* standards?, Hume can only respond by vaguely positing the existence of a more or less fixed and uniform "human nature." The origin of normativity, for Hume, thus appears to be *human nature* itself.

For my part, I agree with Hume that "ought" statements cannot be *deduced* legitimately from statements of "is." For example, just because it *is* the case that the U.S. has historically subscribed to capitalist ideology, it does not follow that it *ought* to continue to do so (contrary to what certain conservatives suppose). The "moral realist" view that would underwrite such a deduction has been rightly taken to task by skeptical "error theorists,"[168] as well as by

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[168] See Mackie (1977), and, more recently, Joyce (2001). Moral error theory holds that propositions expressing moral facts are false, since there are no moral facts. However, the *fictional* discourse in which we articulate moral claims (which are untrue) may be found through a cost/benefit analysis to be preferable to the alternative of participating in no moral discourse at all.

advocates of moral cognitivism, such as Korsgaard. Hume's point is a logical one about the status of moral arguments, namely, that no moral principle, however persuasive it may be, has any deductive validity whatever. The passage in question briefly concludes a long and forceful critique of moral systems that strive to ground ethical obligation in reason, i.e., in "relations of ideas." Reason can neither motivate action, nor tell us anything new or interesting about the world on the basis of which we might draw motivation. At best, reason can help us sort out how to optimally meet an obligation given several options, but this always presupposes a more or less established grasp on what counts as virtuous and what as vicious. Instead, the *source* of obligation lies in a kind of affective faculty unique to human beings.

### 2.3.6   Hume's Transcendental Project

Hume, no less than Kant, is a "transcendental" philosopher. He works primarily to identify the conditions that must be in place in order for the various dimensions of human experience, as we understand it (causality, moral and aesthetic judgment, etc.), to be possible. Hume rightly points out, for example, that our experiences of conjoined events, taken individually, cannot produce an impression of causal necessity. Instead, such an idea emerges as a psychological projection of the mind out of repeated perceptual experiences. For the notion of causal necessity to be possible, we have to be the sort of beings capable of projecting our own cognitive tendencies onto the world. The same goes for Hume's account of moral and aesthetic judgment:   For action A to be morally condemnable, there must be an intersubjectively verifiable ground beyond the outwardly sensible elements involved, namely, human sentiment. Recall, however, that his moral theory is not in itself a normative one. That is, to identify the source of obligation in human sentiment is simply to give a *descriptive* account of moral judgment. If there were no "subject," there would be no moral right or wrong.

The role of affect in Hume's theory is arguably, for this reason, metaphysical, despite his aversion to metaphysics. I say this because Hume is committed to a dualistic ontology that radically separates value-neutral *fact* from *feeling*, the latter providing the *subjective* space for what we might call "moral reasons."[169] Moral *belief*, what one takes to be right or wrong, is born in affect. The reflexive recognition of such a belief—*a la* internalism—is sufficient to generate *reasons* for acting on the belief. Affect thus yields reasons. In contrast, the role of affect in the later chapters of this dissertation will be epistemological, or, better, *hermeneutical*. And it is precisely because I do not burden affect with the task of providing a metaphysical ground[170] for moral and aesthetic judgment that it can serve a function in an economy of normativity. Affect arises as a response to the claims placed upon us by objects, be they human beings or desert rock formations. The ultimate *ground* for actional, ethical, affective response lies in objects themselves, in rich but partially withdrawn normative structures inaccessible in their totality because they are inexhaustible. But let us not get ahead of ourselves.

There is a deeper upshot, related to affect, of Hume's critique of the Cartesian approach to causation. As we have seen, both Descartes and Bacon sought a method ("*mathesis universalis*" and "experiment," respectively) that would permit perfect "objectivity." But objectivity so understood, as abstracted from all individual experience, cannot possibly lead to an *indubitable* knowledge of casual relation. If I prick my finger with a needle, a font of blood will begin to form and subsequently drip at a particular rate. From the *objective* point of view I cannot *know* that a causal relation took place. I can only know that one event was followed by another in time. It is rather the *subjective* side of things, my experience of pain, which ties the

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[169] Although controversial, my identification of Hume as a kind of dualist is not unprecedented. See Flage (1982).

[170] By "ground" I mean something like the antecedent of a conditional, i.e., a *reason* in virtue of which a consequent follows.

moments together meaningfully and affords a sense of confidence about the reality of the situation. From the objective standpoint, only after repeated trials can I hazard a hypothesis that would ground the "necessary connection" between events. For Hume, however, at the end of the day, this notion of *necessity* is still no more than a subjective *feeling*. If this is true for the understanding, it must be doubly true for the so-called "moral sense." Given the *praxical* (i.e., "outwardly" oriented) nature of moral discourse, it might *seem* that moral judgment hinges on something less tenuous than one's sentiments. This is merely a product of the ultimately unaccountable (it is *certainly* unaccountable for Hume) consistency found in subjective experience.

### 2.3.7   Reflective Endorsement and the Domain of Feeling

Hume is a proponent of what Korsgaard calls the "reflective endorsement" theory of ethics.[171] What is normative on this view is the feeling of approbation or disapprobation that arises when one contemplates the character or actions of another. According to the moral topology proposed above, Hume would find himself in the internalist-subjectivist camp. As *internal*, the source of normativity is grounded in human nature itself and not in any *objectively* "real" facts "out there" in the world. As *subjective*, a genuine knowledge of norms must appeal to one's subjective *feeling*. Reflecting on the ethical character of Obama's drone program, reason tells me that it has certain advantages. Preemptive "surgical" strikes on "known" terrorist training facilities in Pakistan will help to interrupt and significantly paralyze the development of potentially catastrophic operations carried out on our own soil or on that of our friends and allies. At the same time, reason also tells me that the drone program could potentially have the opposite effect. Missile strikes are never quite as "surgical" as prevailing rhetoric makes

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[171] Korsgaard (1996).

them out to be, and the "collateral damage" that they frequently bring about has led to further "radicalization"—another popular ideological buzzword. In the end, my approval or disapproval of this bellicose use of drones (also called "Unmanned Aerial Vehicles," or "UAVs") will require an a-rational (not "irrational") reflection on how I *feel* about it. Hume is no individual relativist, however: this subjective reflection must be deployed in consideration of "whether every man, who has any regard to his own happiness and welfare, will not find his account in the practice of every moral virtue."[172] While moral judgment is empirically *grounded* in individual sentiment, the latter should be informed by the norms of one's community. Presumably, given Hume's ultimate billeting in Hobbesian conventionalism, the scope of "every man" in this case would not include people like the Taliban. Nevertheless, it is by appeal to one's "faculty" of "moral sense" that one achieves conviction in moral matters.

For this reason, oddly enough, reflexivity on *ethical* questions often serves to mitigate skepticism, while, as we have seen, in matters of the *understanding* reflexivity can only exacerbate it. In the *Treatise*, Hume writes: "But this [moral] sense must certainly acquire new force, when reflecting on itself, it approves of those principles, from whence it is deriv'd, and finds nothing but what is great and good in its rise and origin."[173] This is a matter of human nature; we have much greater access to the content of our "inner sense" than we do to that of our "outer sense." One is reminded here of Descartes. While Descartes views the *extensio* of the *res extensa* univocally, that is, as the only way in which "external," physical nature intelligibly presents itself, Hume ascribes this univocal status to "sense-data" alone. However, Hume denies as a Barmecidal artifact of the "great propensity" the mind has "to spread itself on external objects,"[174] the certainty that Descartes dogmatically ascribes to one's intellection of

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[172] Hume (1999): ix.2.
[173] Hume (1978): III.3.vi.
[174] *Ibid*. I.3.xiv.

"extended substance." We find in Hume, then, a narrowing of the scope of certainty to an "internal" domain[175] of *feeling* and sensation which serves as the source of valuation and, by extension, value as such. But, to risk beating a dead horse, the nature of this certainty is *subjective*: what feels right to me may not feel right to you. Again, in order to overcome individual relativism, one must square the descriptive content of one's feelings of approval and disapproval with the backdrop of prevailing cultural propriety, which, far from being simply arbitrary, is presumed (vaguely, perhaps misleadingly) by Hume to be a matter of common human nature. As we have seen, even Descartes, for pragmatic reasons, would concede this. The upshot is that for the modern thinkers discussed so far there is still some measure of *non-arbitrariness* involved, despite its grounding in ill-defined notions of "human nature." Let us now direct our attention to the radical turn inaugurated by Kant's so-called "Copernican revolution."

### 2.3.8  Kant's Transcendental Idealism

A common approach in twentieth century moral theory has been to make a clean break between Kant's metaphysics and his ethical system, and to jettison the former. John Rawls, for example, does precisely this. It seems clear to me, however, that Kant's peculiar brand of deontology cannot be abstracted away from his transcendental idealism. In fact, as Arthur Schopenhauer pointed out, the categorical imperative, Kant's "supreme principle of morality," was born not in the *Groundwork* or the in second *Critique*, but in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's definitive statement on metaphysics.[176] The so-called "Copernican revolution" of Kantian metaphysics is simultaneously a taming of the excesses and a radicalization of the

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[175] Hume loves writing in spatial metaphors despite the questionable empiricist justifiability of doing so.

[176] Schopenhauer (1969): 523.

epistemological turn discussed so far. The question is no longer, How does mind conform to the conditions of external reality?, but rather, How does external reality conform to the conditions of mind? As Quentin Meillassoux has forcefully argued,[177] Kant's transcendental argument turns Copernicus on his head: while the Copernican cosmological picture displaces Man as the center of the universe, Kantian ontology moves him right back home.

For Kant, like Descartes, there are two ontologically distinct causal orders. Unlike Descartes, however, Kant is no "substance dualist." The category of "substance" is supplied by the understanding as a necessary condition of experience, i.e., as a principle of organization without which experience could not take place. But Kant's "mind" is not the *Cogito*. It is not a "type" of substance that can serve as one object of knowledge (for Descartes, as we've seen, the purest object of knowledge) alongside others. For Kant, "the self" [*das Ich*] is not an object in space and time like a Cheetah or a shot glass, subject to the laws of causality and substantial temporal perdurance. Rather, the Kantian self is a necessary condition for the possibility of any unified experience of causal relation whatever. Kant concedes Hume's refutation of Cartesian dogmatism: we cannot *know* the self because knowledge is always knowledge *of* an object or event in space and time, and the self is not an object. Nevertheless, contrary to Hume's skeptical reductionism, we can *think* the self *a priori* since even the most quotidian act of cognition necessarily presupposes it. Thus, for Kant, the mechanistic, deterministic account of the material universe ushered in by the development of modernity is right as far as it goes. But since the self in itself, i.e. as *noumenal*, is not an object of experience but an *a priori* condition for the possibility of experience as such, it is not subject to the determinate, causal laws governing empirical reality. It follows that there must be two distinct *formal* orders: (1) a *phenomenal* one governed by "laws of nature" (knowable, determinate, mechanistic,

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[177] See: Meillassoux (2006), especially Chapter Five.

predictable), and (2) a *noumenal* one governed by "laws of freedom" (unknowable, indeterminate, spontaneous, outside the sphere of scientific predictability, i.e., induction).[178] Again, this is no simple substance dualism that puts two opposed substantial natures on equal ontological footing. Transcendental idealism presents the order of undetermined freedom (reason) as *ground* of the order of determined sensibility.[179] What this amounts to is a radical reification of Hume's "fact/value distinction."

For Kant, I submit, the only "thing-in-itself," [*Ding an sich*] is the human being. The underlying moral motivations for Kant's transcendental metaphysics are well known: he wanted to make a space for freedom in a universe increasingly understood in the mechanistic terms supplied by modern physics. The bare "fact" [*Faktum*] from which we derive the "three ideas of reason"—*freedom*, and from this *immortality* and *God*—cannot be found empirically; it is *recognized* in a freely actualized deed. This actualization is achieved on the basis of a *feeling* of respect for the moral law towards which we are called whether alone or in the presence of other autonomous beings. In the language of the *Groundwork*, only humans (as rational agents) are "valuable" above any instrumental "price," because only humans possess the "dignity" of being inherently autonomous. The second formulation of his *categorical imperative*, the supreme principle of morality, explicitly states that human beings cannot be used as a *mere* means to one's end. The status of *mere* instrumental worth is reserved for exclusively phenomenal entities, whose mode of "being"—if they can be said to "be" at all—is one of pure fungibility. Each animate or inanimate object that I take up in the pursuit of my projects has its axiological

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[178] For Kant, it doesn't make sense to talk about "*noumenal* objects," since, on his view, an object *just is* an appearance *for* a subject.

[179] While it is true, for Kant, that the ground at issue is a *synthesis* of what is given in the sensory manifold and the categories of the understanding, the former is *passive* and therefore dependent on the spontaneity of the transcendental subject. Kant makes this point more explicitly in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where freedom is given ontological priority.

ground—that by which it has value and is *justifiable*—in the intersubjective "kingdom of ends" of which I am a legislating member. These objects do not *participate* in the relational structure from which they take on value. It is an asymmetrical, unilateral constitution of meaning, which means, in the final analysis, that it is not a genuine "correlation"—where each correlate does equal work—at all.[180]

Beings are understood to exist noumenally beyond the limits of phenomenality. In this lies their freedom precisely as the freedom *from* the determinate constraints of phenomenal causality, and the freedom *to* instantiate "pure reason." It is the presence of this freedom that evokes in us the dual feeling of "humiliation/respect" before the moral law.[181] Thus, whether we see Kant's dualism on this point as *metaphysical* (whereby there are two distinct *realms*) or as *epistemological* (viz. Allison's "two-aspect" hypothesis whereby there are two ways of looking at things, *qua* phenomenal and *qua* noumenal) it seems to follow that the "noumenal" is a descriptive term applicable only to humans (*qua* rational beings). The world of mice, snakes, brine, dolphins, hunks of obsidian, clouds, deciduous forests, beach blankets, bank statements, and dark matter, on the contrary, lack the noumenal *depth* (or *height*, to employ a different spatial onto-theological metaphor) necessary for freedom and are, consequently, *ontologically* severed from the legitimate sphere of moral consideration.

The causal order of the sensible world is confined to appearances. Every appearance can be analyzed into *form* and *content*: the subject's modes of representation, and an amorphous sensory manifold, respectively. The human subject is indeed a part of and therefore subject

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[180] Of course for experience to be possible on Kant's view there must be *something* given from without to the categories of the understanding, but since the *noumenal* domain is postulated by practical reason (viz. "will" itself) as the unknowable realm of *freedom*, it is not at all clear that Kant wants us to imagine the existence of "free" noumena existing *behind* the phenomenal countours of dung beetles, clothes pins, fichus trees, and hydrogen compounds.

[181] Kant (1996): 203-204.

to the causal order of the *natural* world of appearances.  But insofar as the subject possesses a faculty that establishes an authentic connection to an ideal world (i.e., the "kingdom of ends") that *does not appear* yet at the same time commands a peculiar causal efficacy, the subject can be regarded as *free*.  "This faculty," Kant tells us in the *Prolegomena*,

> is called *reason*, and insofar as we are considered a being solely as regards this objectively determinable reason, this being cannot be considered as a being of the senses; rather, the aforesaid property is the property of a thing in itself, and the possibility of that property—namely, how the *ought*, which has never yet happened, can determine the activity of this being and be the cause of actions whose effect is in appearance in the sensible world—we cannot comprehend at all.  Yet the causality of reason with respect to effects in the sensible world would nonetheless be freedom, insofar as *objective grounds*, which are themselves ideas, are taken to be determining with respect to that causality.  For the action of that causality would in that case not depend on anything subjective, hence also not on any temporal conditions, and would therefore also not depend on the natural law that serves to determine those conditions, because grounds of reason provide the rule for actions universally, from principles, without influence from the circumstances of time or place.[182]

The *ought* is born out of reason as an undetermined (free) form-giving principle.  By "objective grounds" Kant means *universal* and *necessary*.  It is an odd sort of necessity, however, peculiar to the nature of rationality as such.  Because of Kant's singular rethinking of both rationality and objectivity he seems to occupy a strange theoretical space between moral cognitivism and non-cognitivism.[183]  On the one hand his meta-ethical stance pits him against the obvious non-cognitivism of Hume's feeling-based subjectivism.  Autonomous *reason* is the source of every truly moral determination.  On the other hand, *knowledge* of the moral rightness or wrongness of an action is impossible[184] on Kant's view since knowledge applies only to objects of

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[182] Kant (2004): 96-97.

[183] See King (1992): 444.

[184] We cannot *know* that the (subjective) maxims we propose for ourselves are fully adequate to the (objective) moral law.  If we did possess this kind of determinate knowledge of *ourselves* (qua moral legislators), the danger of succumbing to what Timothy Morton—drawing on Hegel—calls the "beautiful soul syndrome" would loom large.  It is essentially a self-righteous orientation to the world where one presumes to "close the gap," as it were, between the phenomenal world and one's

experience, which are subject to the laws of *natural* causality. Seen in this light, Descartes'

hope for a golden age of perfected moral epistemology seems risibly ill fated. But Kant is

about as much of a moral skeptic as Pat Robertson is, so how do we make sense of this? We

cannot *know* the moral law; we *are* the moral law.

### 2.3.9 Kantian Constructivism

Kant is a kind of *constructivist*, not *cognitivist*. "Subjective" interiority is opened up far beyond

the shallow, illuminated, and fully knowable *res cogitans* in the cognitively unknowable but

"intelligible" *noumenal* domain of moral law (whose intelligibility is heightened by the

"disinterest" of aesthetic judgment).[185] "Knowledge," since Descartes understood as what is

certain, is now too weak: it is a grasping of phenomenal beings whose determinacy is never

independent of the subject. By entertaining the "ideas of reason," that is, by *turning inward*, we

begin to see ourselves as free (spontaneous, undetermined by natural causality) architects of

an *objective* (universal) "kingdom of ends." The establishment of human subjectivity as the

absolute source of moral truth (and aesthetic beauty) is now complete.

In an obvious sense Kant is simply furthering the "reflective endorsement" approach

of Hume, inasmuch as moral determination for both thinkers requires a kind of reflexive

appraisal of the source of judgment. For Kant, however, Hume's tracing of this source to

subjective *feeling* can only render the verdicts of moral deliberation hopelessly arbitrary. Feeling

is incapable of attaining universality and, thus, objective necessity. If, on Kant's picture, the

human subject cannot *know* the moral law but is *identical with it* as "will" or "practical reason,"

how does this not render its determinations as arbitrary—in the sense of being a contingent

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conscience. This orientation, as Morton understands it, leads to the extremes of either hippie
quietism on the one hand, or violent terrorism on the other (Morton 2007: 118-120).
[185] See Kant (2009): Part 1.

product of "human nature"—as those in Hume's account? Kant answers this worry by explaining that, though the causal order of freedom originates in the subject's will, the latter must be understood precisely as *pure* will, that is, as a will undeterminable by any contingent, subjective condition. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant writes, "But it is requisite to reason's lawgiving that it should need to presuppose only *itself*, because a rule is objectively and universally valid only when it holds without the contingent, subjective conditions that distinguish one rational being from another."[186] This is why "the moral law expresses nothing other than the *autonomy* of pure practical reason, that is, freedom…"[187] It is not the *empirical* subject that is the source of objectively binding laws, but the *transcendental* subject, i.e., pure reason itself. The moral agent must be just as free from "internal" constraints (feelings, desires, fears, etc.) as from "external" ones if she is to maintain her autonomy. "Hence," Kant explains,

> the difference between the laws of a nature to which *the will is subject* and of a *nature which* is subject *to a will*…rests on this: that in the former the objects must be the causes of the representations that determine the will, whereas in the latter the will is to be the cause of the objects, so that its causality has its determining ground solely in the pure faculty of reason, which can therefore also be called a pure practical reason.[188]

In short, Kant parries the charge of arbitrariness by transforming the subject that is the moral law into a *non-subjective* site of pure reason. It is one that exists in an impersonal, a-spatial, a-temporal *space of reasons as such* to invoke a Sellarsian locution.[189] To exist in a "space of reasons" is to make oneself beholden to a publicly accessible standard of correctness that is

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[186] Kant (1999): 154 (*5:21*).
[187] *Ibid*: 166 (*5:33*).
[188] *Ibid*: 175 (*5:44*).
[189] See Sellars (1997) and (2007). While there is certainly a limit to this comparison owing to the eminently *pure* and *abstract* character of Kant's "transcendental subject," it is a comparison worth making for just that reason; Sellars helps us think the problem more concretely, albeit not unproblematically.

independent of the particularities of one's own existence. It is, in a word, to "be at home with normative discourse, *responsive to reasons as such…*"[190]

Autonomy is the central concept in Kantian ethics. Autonomous beings are responsive to reasons only because they originate those reasons. *I* (transcendental) am the ultimate source of moral authority because all maxims that would guide moral behavior are authored by *me*. Moral agents are and in principle must be self-legislating beings. Yet, for Kant, truly autonomous self-legislation is carried out via *rationality* alone, which, as the basic principle of humanity, is universally shared. When *I* dictate the moral law, I do so for *all* rational beings, and precisely as any rational being would do. *Transcendental* subjectivity means, essentially, *intersubjectivity* (viz., "common rationality"). Autonomy presupposes an understanding of the ineluctably *common* nature of the moral project, and such an understanding undergirds any and all objectivity. The so-called "kingdom of ends" is a regulative concept according to which the subject self-identifies with reason as such, and this identity with reason is common to all rational agents. As Rawls puts it, "we share a common standpoint along with others and do not make our [moral] judgments from a personal slant."[191] This is a compelling blow against egoist and subjectivist frameworks, but the privileging of "intersubjectivity"—*a fortiori* Kant's abstract notion of intersubjectivity as grounded in *pure reason*—is forever in danger, at the empirical level, of collapsing back into a privileging of *mere* subjectivity, albeit one of a communitarian variety. The "kingdom of ends" is a closed aristocracy whose idealistic postulation was first made possible by Descartes' dividing of the world into "thinking things" on one side and "extended things" on the other. I do not mean to suggest that Kant accepts the dogmatic metaphysical view of the subject as a peculiar kind

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[190] DeVries (2011). Emphasis added.
[191] Rawls (1971): 453.

of substance. Nevertheless, Kant does indeed argue that humans, *qua* rational beings, fill a fabulously special role in the constitution of the world: *we* (humans) represent reality's highest purpose. Over against *teleological* rational intersubjectivity Kant posits materiality as brute, inert stuff to be appropriated. In Part Two of his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes:

> Now we find in the world beings of only one kind whose causality is teleological, or directed to ends, and which at the same time are beings of such a character that the law according to which they have to determine ends for themselves is represented by them themselves as unconditioned and not dependent on anything in nature, but as necessary in itself. The being of this kind is man, but man regarded as noumenon…His existence inherently involves the highest end—the end to which, as far as in him lies, he may subject the whole of nature, or against whom at least he must not deem himself subjected to any influence on its part.[192]

It is man's nature as "rational" to dominate material nature (i.e., all that is not man) for his own ends. Yet, as Adorno and Horkheimer show in their critique of Enlightenment thinking, the domination of nature can only happen coordinately with the domination of other human beings.[193] Effective domination of the natural world requires the founding and clever sustainment of social institutions whereby subjects are *called to* their subjectivity in specifically circumscribing modes of self-recognition.[194] This provides the basis for a dangerous politics of exclusion by which the subject of legitimate political interest is always disposed against an amorphous world of inert objects, among which "other" human beings, to be sure, can too easily find themselves. At the heart of Kantian inclusiveness lies an irremediable exclusiveness, an *a priori* delineation of "us and them." The transcendental logic of "us and them" cannot help but manifest itself, however surreptitiously, in the empirical logic of concrete experience.

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[192] Kant (2009): 263-264.

[193] "A philosophical world history would have to show how, despite all the detours and resistances, the systematic domination over nature has been asserted more and more decisively and has integrated all internal human characteristics. Economic, political, and cultural forms would have to be derived from this position" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2001: 185).

[194] This is what Althusser means by "interpellation," which I will discuss in Chapter Three.

### 2.3.10 Failure of the Transcendental Argument

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* [1788], Kant argues that consciousness of the moral law is simply an indubitable "fact of reason" that cannot be demonstrated.[195] Both Lewis White Beck [1960] and Henry Alison [1990] convincingly argue that Kant's proposed *Faktum* is not an intellectual intuition arising from experience, but a properly transcendental element of the basic structure of reason as such.[196] Consciousness of the moral law is the *only* fact of reason, which means it is not some contingent, empirical feature, but is rather decisively constitutive. To demonstrate this, Kant offers a thought experiment:

> Suppose someone asserts of his lustful inclination that, when the desired object and the opportunity are present, it is quite irresistible to him; ask him whether, if gallows were erected in front of the house where he finds this opportunity and he would be hanged on it immediately after gratifying his lust, he would not then control his inclination. One need not conjecture very long what he would reply. But ask him whether, if his prince demanded, on pain of the same immediate execution, that he give false testimony against an honorable man whom the prince would like to destroy under a plausible pretext, he would consider it possible to overcome his love of life, however great it may be. He would perhaps not venture to assert whether he would do it or not, but he must admit without hesitation that it would be possible for him. *He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he is aware that he ought to do it and cognizes freedom within him, which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown to him.*[197]

Again, Kant is claiming to have proved much more than his premises allow. Cognition of the moral law and subsequently of one's freedom is not the only possible source of the awareness of *ought* that arises in this scenario. Marx might say it is a particularly benign example of the internalization of ideology, a process which makes abstract ethical theories like Kant's so well-suited for the sustainment of capitalism. Freud, meanwhile, would attribute the awareness of *ought* to the transparent normalizing of the "super ego." What Kant *does*, arguably, succeed in demonstrating here (and what the theories of Freud and Marx fail to demonstrate) is that

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[195] Kant (1999:164 [*5:31*]).
[196] Alison (1990: 232); Beck (1960: 168-169).
[197] Kant (1999: 163-164 [*5:30*]). Emphasis added.

ethical demands are *objective*: they are binding quite independently of the characteristics of the particular "subject" entertaining them, and they continue to place a claim long after they have been ignored. The agent of Kant's thought experiment *recognizes* through an act of *interpretation* that the other makes a claim on him that is radically at odds with his own interest. This is a tremendously important observation, and it is one that many ethical theories get wrong.[198] But the *motivation* to recognize the moral claims that others place on you has to do with the opportunity to view oneself as free and thus as more than a passively determinate phenomenal body. Perhaps more simply, the *formal* character (qua imperative) of moral claims is *sufficient* motivation for the moral agent to uphold them. The *possibility* of seeing oneself as a moral agent is underwritten by the "fact of reason" (non-deducible, immediate), which exposes one's "own nature" as strictly autonomous—a *domain* or *aspect*, depending on whom you ask, uncovered in the third antinomy ("On Freedom") of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[199]

Kant is thus an *internalist-objectivist* with respect to our working moral topology. His brand of objectivism, namely, of considering morality in the form of the *imperative*, brings us, I think, on the right path. This effort is seriously compromised, however, by his insistence on the purely formal (juridical) character of the imperative, and on the latter's nature as a "fact of pure *reason*." Kant's deontology is frequently extolled as having positively defeated Hume's subjectivism because of his successful expurgation of all empirical (and therefore dubitable) considerations from the moral realm. But it could be argued that Kant's proposed "fact of reason" is no less empirical than Hume's notion of "moral sentiment" as an irreducible feature of "human nature." "No," one might object, "the *fact of reason* is precisely that: a fact of reason *as such*. That human beings happen to possess reason is only coincidental to the argument. If

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[198] Subjectivism and utilitarianism, to name just two.
[199] See Allison (1990) for an account of the "two-aspect" reading of Kant's transcendental idealism.

another species—perhaps an extraterrestrial one—is found to possess reason, it too will be subject to the moral law." Here's the rub. Since, as discussed above, the *fact* of reason is allegedly *transcendental* rather than *empirical*, and since transcendentality is purportedly understood by means of a first-personal reflexive movement, it is very hard to imagine the conditions under which we would ever be in a position to extend rationality, and thus morality, beyond the scope of our own transcendentally revealed "nature."

A half a decade before the publication of the first *Critique*, Kant speculated about the moral character of the inhabitants of the other planets of our solar system.[200] Curiously, he seems to take it for granted that if intelligent life does not presently exist on Jupiter and Saturn (then the most distant astral bodies known), its eventual emergence on these most obscure of locales is a matter of inevitability. In a brilliantly telling passage, Kant asks

> Does not a certain middle position between wisdom and irrationality belong to the unfortunate capacity to sin? Who knows whether the inhabitants of those distant celestial bodies are not too refined and too wise to allow themselves to fall into the foolishness inherent in sin; whereas the others who live in the lower planets adhere too firmly to material stuff and are provided with far too little spiritual capacity to have to drag the responsibility for their actions before the judgment seat of justice?[201]

"Sin," or immoral action, arises out of the "middle position" between the extremes of immaculate reason and dumb, crude matter; what separates the human from the divine is simply man's temporary entombment in the latter. All spiritual beings in the phenomenal realm depend, for the duration of their emplacement, on the material stuff of which they are constituted. Since the dwellers of the "highest planets" are located "far from the mid-point of the power of attraction and inertia in the planetary system"[202] (i.e. Earth and Mars), the material of which they are composed must be more subtle, more fluid, less bulky, and less

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[200] *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (2008) [1775].
[201] *Ibid*: 158.
[202] *Ibid*: 157.

coarse then that to which we in-betweeners are accustomed.  Like the image of the cloak in

Plato's *Phaedo*, the bodies of rational Earthlings are here conceived of as preposterous,

ponderous prisons impelled by the inertia of phenomenal forces to forsake their true spiritual

calling.  Jovanian materiality, in contrast, is so refined, so exquisitely ethereal, that its role in

the phenomenal instantiation of transcendental reason can only be one of fruitful

accommodation.  In short, the present or future inhabitants of Jupiter *look like us*—an idealized

us, divested of the heavy, dumb stuff in which we find ourselves mired on the third planet

from the sun.  From the angle of this extreme (but no less probable as a result) ideal, *every*

morally relevant being must look like us, but where the being and significance of the "us" is

categorically indifferent to the dirty, stinky, suffocating physicality of the phenomenal realm.

The transcendental does not *exist* in the manner of empirically knowable entities; it is

not an object and, therefore, cannot be *known.*  Reflection on the conditions under which the

transcendental shows itself, however, reveals that it always does so, as Quentin Meillassoux

insists, from a particular "point of view."[203]  In other words, for the transcendental to do its

work, it must first "take place" in an empirically determinable, embodied context:

> The subject is transcendental only insofar as it is positioned *in* the world, of
> which it can only ever discover a finite aspect, and which it can never recollect
> in its totality.  But if the transcendental subject is localized among the finite
> objects of its world in this way, this means that it remains *indissociable from its*
> *incarnation in a body*; in other words, it is indissociable from a determinate object
> in the world.  Granted, the transcendental is the condition for knowledge of
> bodies, but it is necessary to add that the body is also the condition for the
> taking place of the transcendental.[204]

We are cut off by the nature of transcendence from ever ascertaining the kind of empirical

considerations that might in a concrete way establish the rationality—the *sine qua non* of moral

beings—of non-human entities *that don't look like us.*  One gets the idea that we would recognize

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203 Meillassoux (2006): 24.
204 *Ibid*: 25.

extraterrestrial intelligence immediately and without effort, that "reason here" grasps "reason there" regardless of the profoundly disparate material conditions under which it articulates itself.      This is what I find so problematic about *internalist* accounts of the source of normativity, even those, like Kant's, which are bolstered with a structural dose of "objectivity." Deleuze sees the furtive empiricism at play in Kant's metaphysics when he points out that in purporting to *think* the *idea* of pure reason, "Kant traces the so-called transcendental structures from the empirical acts of psychological consciousness."[205] *Pure thought* only exists in *pure thought*…which doesn't exist.  This is what makes idealism—even Kant's mitigated version— potentially dangerous.  One does well to note (although one shouldn't press the connection too vociferously) that the philosophical foundations of fascism were in fact born in idealism. Giovanni Gentile—twentieth century neo-Hegelian philosopher and chief theoretical architect of Mussolini's state—also insisted on the transcendental/empirical distinction, and it is here where one begins to see spots of ambiguity so easily exploitable by a self-interested regime.[206] Mussolini's injunction to Italy to "Believe, obey, fight" was passed off as an expression of the *transcendental* will of the people, where an identification is made between the latter and "the state." As an individual manifestation of the universal statal consciousness, I am free to realize for myself—through self-reflection—what is transcendental and what is merely empirical. Consequently, because *I am* the state, this "transcendental" quality is universalized for *everyone else*.  It is in virtue of this "transcendental" moral license that Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935, where it immediately went to work tossing out this "empirical" difference and "overcoming" that "empirical" division to ultimately realize the great "transcendental unity" underlying both states, into which Italy (at the expense of the evidently less rational Africans) had tremendous

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[205] Deleuze (2004): 171.
[206] Cf. Gentile (1960), especially Chapter XIII.

insight. The point of inevitable reversal in the transcendental-empirical order is precisely the space of concrete, material, and historical embodiment where projects of politico-ethical delimitation—self-aware or not—are carried out much more arbitrarily than idealists (in all senses of the term) care to acknowledge.

## 2.4 Coda: The Way Forward

Let us take a brief pause to recuperate the red thread of what we have ventured so far. One of my main contentions in this dissertation is that *ontology*, *ethics*, and *aesthetics* are deeply complicit fields distinguishable only in abstraction. Ontology is normative not because *what is* is how it *ought to be*, but because every being is [aesthetically] expressive simultaneously of both registers. I *am*, I *ought to be*. We should not understand the *is* and the *ought* in this formulation as standing together in a relation of either cause and effect or of temporal succession. To say I *am* and I *ought to be* is to say that my being *is* always already the expression of demands. This chapter started with the ancients precisely because they seem to have taken this insight—the complicity of *being* and what we now call *value*—seriously.

We can see the turn into the modern period—what I have characterized as the *relativization of the ethical*—as a concerted though varied effort of epistemological reductivism, i.e., the reduction of being to *knowledge of* being, of *self*-presentation to *re-presentation*. It is not fair, to be sure, to leave the ancients entirely out of this indictment. Plato's reduction of knowability to the immaterial domain of "forms" [ιδέες], and Aristotle's reduction of beings to formal "essences" [ουσία] are just two arguable examples of this. However, a decisive development occurred with Descartes' turning of certain threads of ancient skepticism and stoicism towards the attunement of *certainty*. This epistemological attunement on the basis of a suppressed set of metaphysical assumptions enveloped, as we have seen, the ethical as well. Philosophy, for Descartes, is therapy because it offers us certainty-control. My claim is that

the dogmatic search for certainty—ultimately for the purposes of control—annuls the ongoing demands of objects by way of a multifarious mechanism of reduction. Descartes reduces matter to *pure extension*—in principle *malleable* and serving as a featureless seat over which various values can be "posited" and endlessly interchanged.[207] On this view, "natural" matter is *in itself* alienated from the ethical; it is that of which we are the "possessors and masters."[208] Hume reduces knowledge—now framed univocally as *certainty*—to experience, and experience to sense data, thereby at the same time undermining the modern bid for *rational* certainty. There is, of course, no room for the ethical in a field of brute *facts*, so morality must be a matter of unaccountable conviction attained on the basis of subjective *valuation*. For Kant, the human/humanoid subject is the only (non-divine) *active* agent in the cosmos. All else is but inert, featureless stuff to be organized by human cognition.[209] The ethical, then, must be *in* the subject; no—it *is* the subject, *qua* self-legislating *noumenon* (limit, what is never presented, never known, never encountered). For this reason, Kant famously asserts in his *Lectures on Ethics* [1779] that all animals exist solely as a means for human ends, and that we have no "immediate duties" towards them; every duty we think we have towards animals turns out to be an "indirect duty" to humanity.[210] This is true, for Kant, because on his view whatever is said to possess "value" does so only in relation to human projects.

Yet, it cannot be overlooked that Kant's notion of the *transcendental* reflects a rather profound change in terms of how the nature of subjectivity is conceived. The "transcendental" is a structurally distinct plane of being of which we can have no positive

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[207] Contrast this view of matter with that of Aristotle: matter (*hyle*) is pure *potential* but not uniformly so. The "stuff" of which I am made differs ontologically from the stuff of which the computer on which I presently type is constituted. For this reason, matter is normative: its peculiar being and quality dictate what forms it can adopt or be compelled to adopt.
[208] Descartes (2008): 35.
[209] Interestingly, Marx seems to share this same view, but he substitutes "labor" for "cognition."
[210] Kant (1980): 212.

knowledge. While the Cartesian subject is an empirically determinable being *found* at the event horizon where ontology and epistemology meet, the Kantian transcendental subject is *ipso facto* elusive. The transcendental subject, strictly speaking, just *is* the event horizon, which, according to theoretical physics, constitutes the insuperable limit to the knowledge-being relation. We cannot see our eyes precisely because we see from them. The transcendental subject only "shows itself" in the negative, as that which withdraws from any positive account one might muster. But it is also what makes positive accounting at all possible. All positive accounts are dogmatic; if we *could* give one for the Kantian (transcendental) subject the latter would cease to be free and, consequently, moral. The post-Kantian philosophical landscape is fraught with tension: being good Humeans and Kantians, we want desperately to avoid dogmatism. At the same time, however, we find ourselves less and less satisfied with the transcendental strategy; just what the hell *is* the "transcendental"? How can we talk about it? How is it that we *are* it? What if "we"—*qua* fabulously special and inimitable beings—*aren't* the event horizon where being falls away from knowing? What if the event horizon lies at the heart of every being, from hair-sculptures to hand-grenades, from hydrogen compounds to hematomas? What if Kant's notion of radical transcendental freedom, thinkable for pure reason, is *in fondo* reflective of the unbridgeable lacunae between *all* beings?

To begin with the object is to recognize that the self-giving of things *for* a unified sentience is always coupled with an *objection*—a recalcitrant shrinking away from one's projected needs, wants, expectations, and understanding. Such recognition can be understood as an authentic concession of *otherness*, that is, an otherness inassimilable to both Kantian "sublime" comprehension, and Hegelian self-mediation—an otherness that remains radically *different*, alien, obscure, and threatening. William Desmond articulates the ethical *and* aesthetic ramifications of this point as follows:

> Even if the "for" acknowledges a relativity, even co-relativity of self and other, does the "for the self" inevitably place the other in an ultimately subordinate position in the intermediating relation as a whole? The "for" then covertly signals the project of the self to stamp its own self on the relation as a whole, not only vis-à-vis the origination of the relation, but also its final determination and consummation.[211]

This passage echoes the speculative realist's worry about "correlationism." While Meillassoux seems to think that all post-Kantian philosophy (including the "analytic" variety) amounts to a deeply buried idealism that comes to the surface only when rigorously pressed, Desmond expressly brings the relevant ethical and aesthetic ramifications to the fore by treating the contributions of Kant and his successors as arising out of an irresolvably ambiguous subjectivism. The issue is this: the subject/object relation by which the field of metaphysics has been conceptually dominated since modernity's "epistemological turn" is driven by an oft-concealed internal logic that always effects the same sort of result, whether it is framed as Hobbesian individualism or as the Kantian "kingdom of ends." Like the man in the Parisian park whose initially vague presence was able to destabilize Sartre's entire identity by dramatically *stealing his world* as through a drain hole,[212] the "subject" is an almost comically versatile force field capable of drawing street lamps, Italian loafers, labradoodles, mortgages, baryonic matter, steam engines, cheerleaders, saints, and comic book villains into its relentless vortex.

In closing, I ask again: what would it mean to think through an ethics that takes as its starting place the *object* rather than the *subject*? What would it mean to truly begin with the demands of the object (human or otherwise) instead of with one or another structure of privileged subjectivity that is supposed to undergird the ethical relation as such? Having

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[211] Desmond (2003): 93.
[212] Sartre (1984): 343.

examined the necessary historical and conceptual context for the entertainment of such

questions, let us move forward and hazard a response. (Copyright @ Justin L. Harmon 2016)

# 3 CHAPTER THREE: OBJECTS AND BEING

*If the doors of perception were cleansed
everything would appear to man as it is:
infinite.*
> -William Blake (*The Marriage of
> Heaven and Hell*)

*We only arrive at the thing in itself if our
thinking has previously reached the thing as
thing.*
> -Martin Heidegger (*Insight Into
> That Which is*)

Nearly every summer, when conditions are amenable, billions of pilchards move north along the east coast of Africa after having spawned in the cool waters of the Agulhas Bank. This relatively shallow part of the southern African continental shelf is where the warm waters of the Indian Ocean converge with the frigid currents of the Atlantic, generating a churning contexture characterized as much by an astounding diversity of fluid, shifting beings as by the peril it presents for those mammals whose complex economic, social, and other, less "rational" drives compel them to return intermittently to their strange primordial home by means of strong and delicate prostheses. Scientists are still perplexed as to why the virtually countless number of newborn pilchards—more commonly known as the foodstuff "sardines"—make the six hundred mile journey against the unrelenting countercurrent of the Atlantic, and in the face of untold fierce predators from below and above. The dominant hypothesis is that a particular subspecies of the African pilchard makes the journey as a seasonal reproductive migration, favoring the colder waters and greater nutritional resources of the north for fulfilling its biological imperative.[213] Data suggests that the pilchards hang around the northern

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[213] Fréon *et al.* (2010).

part of the KwaZulu-Natal coast for several months before initiating the less exacting return south, a journey that typically goes unnoticed owing perhaps to the great oceanic depth and distance from the coast at which it is made. The warmer surface and coastal currents drive them to the deep and the dark. In terms of sheer biomass, experts believe the so-called "sardine run" might rival the great wildebeest migration of East Africa.

With schools of migratory pilchards extending beyond four miles in length and nearly a mile in width, this remarkable phenomenon invites upwards of eighteen thousand common and bottlenose dolphins, countless bronze whaler, dusky, blacktip, grey nurse, and spinner sharks, and innumerable king mackerel, Garrick, and bluefish, not to mention the myriad determined squadrons of seagulls and cormorants that dive in pursuit of the teeming and apparently inexhaustible font of fleshy sustenance. Largely in response to the dolphins' herding action, the pilchards form massive and distinct shoals whose protean configuration and dynamic, unpredictable shifting challenge the agile predators to improvise their tactics. The shoal becomes object. Irreducible to the sum of its parts, the fluid pilchard shoal *presents itself* from out of the nebulous choric milieu of inter-oceanic forces as a distinct being expressive of a particular set of demands or directives as to how it is to be negotiated. Yet, this singular entity self-organizes precisely in response to the tenacious demands of so many sharks and dolphins, withdrawing in autopoietic formation from gnashing teeth, aquadynamic diving dorsa, and impenetrable black eyes that betray threat by concealing an inner world forever withdrawn, baffling, and silent.

During the second Gulf War I served as an intelligence analyst in the Analytical Control Element (ACE) of 5th Corps Headquarters in Baghdad. I was the Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge (NCOIC) of the Collection Management cell whose role was to control and oversee all collection assets in country, from sophisticated signal interceptors to human

intelligence (HUMINT) agents gathering through interviews/interrogation. One of our most powerful assets has garnered significant attention in recent days under the Obama administration: the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), more commonly known as the "drone." It is astonishing to consider the quasi godlike meta-perspective over the whole vast and diverse topography of Iraq that these drones afforded us, all while being controlled in real-time by young enlisted men and women occupying air-conditioned Las Vegas facilities more than seven thousand miles away. More famous now for dishing out unforeseen death from above by way of hundred pound Hellfire missiles, the drones we controlled (Hunter and Shadow models) were mostly employed as extra, far-reaching eyes, imparting greater visibility to operations on the ground for generals and other commanding officers. Our interface with the prosthetic eyes of the remote-controlled drones was limited to what could be portrayed on a small, virtually antique-looking television monitor. This ironically unimpressive window on the now placeless place of what we call the "cradle" of Western civilization would reveal tiny, indeterminate objects—slow moving, pixilated, and delimited by hazy contours. These objects were *represented* to viewers, through a complex process of mediation, *as* "threat."

In July 2003 the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division launched Operation Ivy Serpent. The objective of the operation was to soften insurgency actions against Coalition troops expected to take place during upcoming holidays marking historical Baathist events. Our little RQ-5A Hunter UAV—boasting considerably less offensive capability than the Predator, its CENTCOM-controlled sibling—had night eyes on what was believed to be a Baathist insurgent camp near the northern city of Baiji. Several small objects flickered on the video-feed, ostensibly coming in and out of existence as seconds elapsed. The distance/nearness achieved by our prosthetic god's-eye view *represented* the barely identifiable human figures precisely at the scale of operational functionality. The shadowy, pixilated concentrations of

material energy depicted on our dated office screen stood out in relief to the trained eye against a low-definition rendering of topographical features. These figures could not be said to be human. Rather, they were specters—*there* but *not there*, insofar as the "there" itself was manifested forcibly according to operational design strictures. The demands of the operation were such that the figures be seen but not seen. Suddenly, one black figure flittered into a flash of light, giving way to a vaporous upsurge of monochromatic digital dust. Laughter and applause broke out across the ACE, most of whose personnel were now huddled around the video-feed like partygoers anticipating the ball drop on New Year's Eve. Another black constellation of pixels exploded into white, followed by another, and then another, the duration separating events steadily collapsing. Located more than one hundred miles south, squatting in one of Saddam Hussein's many (formerly) luxurious palace compounds, the 5$^{th}$ Corps ACE erupted in mild jubilation, high-fives and "attaboys" abounding. Seven thousand miles away and eleven hours behind, the Hunter operator in Las Vegas presumably celebrated as well, stretching her compacted legs and cramped, but dexterous fingers in appropriately measured glee. I was not immune to the revelry. There is pleasure in accomplishing a shared goal, however distant the real conditions surrounding, supporting, and governing that goal may be. Six months later I was revisited unaccountably by these ghostly figures, these revenants, while ordering a sandwich at a Houston cafe. Something excessive, irreducible, and obstinate, something that *objects*, manifested itself in my—to use Proust's language— "involuntary memory" from "beyond the reach of intellect." [214] Beneath the spectral representation are traces of real objects presenting themselves, announcing the conditions of their being precisely *in being* what they are. And *what they are* is an inexhaustible and, thus, in

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[214] Proust (1982): 48.

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principle, *unaccountable*, source of demands—demands that cannot be met, but which *demand* notwithstanding.   Is this not what we identify as *haunting*?

In this chapter I propose to work through a series of reflections on objects and "spectralized" objects in the interest of developing an ontology that serves at the same time as a metaethic.  While the history of modern moral theory in the occidental world has been inescapably subjectivist, moments of pushback on the part of objects have found expression in the work of a handful of heterodox thinkers whose ranks have expanded considerably in recent years under the banner of "speculative realism."  As asserted in the foregoing chapter, every object—from the finless eel to the Dogecoin—just *is* its self-presentation, which can be analyzed according to two irreducible poles:  demand and withdrawal.  The inclusion of "withdrawal" in the model is aimed at guarding against the reduction of being to mere presence—a pernicious tendency of scientific technologism about which Heidegger and Derrida, to name just two, were very much concerned.  Every object, in virtue of its withdrawal, is marked by spectral traces.  These traces reveal, albeit opaquely, the peculiar history of a thing and its varied commerce with other things.  Yet, objects can be exsanguinated at the conceptual level, diminished until only their relational traces remain, garishly illuminated like privileged neural pathways in an fMRI machine.  Global technology achieves this in every case *a priori* insofar as for each object there exists in advance of its self-showing a functional scheme to which it is submitted by the imperative of instrumental reason.  In this way technology *spectralizes* objects, i.e., "de-objectifies" them, and it does so through a transparently rhetorical *mythical* gesture that promises us, and I mean this both literally and figuratively, a "spectacular" future.

The heterodox heroes with whom I will be in dialogue throughout the present chapter are, in no particular order:  Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Nancy, Herbert Marcuse, Maurice

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Merleau-Ponty, Carlo Michelstaedter, Arthur Schopenhauer, Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, Louis Althusser, Jane Bennett, as well as certain contemporary proponents of "speculative realism," namely, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and, especially, Graham Harman. Each of these thinkers challenges—albeit, obviously, in significantly different ways—the metaphysical assumptions undergirding modern subjectivism (as articulated and defined in Chapter Two). I will draw on them as resources for the task of thinking through an adequate ontology of objects. This ontology, strictly, speaking, *will also be* a metaethic. That is to say, the task of the present chapter is not to set up an ontology of objects that will serve as the *foundation* for a metaethical theory, where the latter is construed, *a la* Descartes, as a discreet branch to be worked out separately in contradistinction to the trunk and roots from which it extends. Such a method is essentially symptomatic of the modern *arche*, first opened up in Descartes but already present as an inchoate seed in Plato, according to which being is understood univocally. The univocity of Cartesian being is precisely the impoverishment of being *as such*, i.e., the reduction of being to what can be attuned to the *certitudo*, viz., "bare extension" (cognized in "pure thinking"). Instead, as we shall see, the ethical mode simply *exposes* what the ontological *disposes*. If metaphysics is first philosophy, so is metaethics. Furthermore, while my approach may seem a radical departure from traditional moral theories, it is indeed *metaethical* and in a rather straightforward sense. Metaethics is the study of the *sources* of normativity; object-oriented ethics (OOE) locates those sources in *objects themselves*.

One defect of current approaches in speculative realism (SR) and its weird cousin, object-oriented ontology (OOO), is that they don't, at least not in any explicit manner, offer resources for thinking about *human* social dynamics. While I am sympathetic to the anti-anthropocentric character of SR and OOO, I still maintain that critical social theory is of tremendous import for thinking through and addressing the myriad global problems presently

facing us. For this reason, I will end the present chapter with an account of subjectivity from the perspective of object-oriented ethics (OOE). Harman, Bryant, and Bogost—all advocates of OOO—tend to sweep subjectivity under the rug of a general ontology, holding not only that all phenomena can be explained in terms of objects and objects alone, but also that the very notion of "subjectivity"—conceived of in the Cartesian manner of a distinct and necessary pole by and for which all objects are *represented*—is inherently flawed and theoretically misleading. I think this is correct, as far as it goes. However, I also believe it is imperative to work through from an object-oriented starting place just what it is we are talking—but misleadingly talking—about when we invoke the concepts of "subject" and "subjectivity" in efforts to explain experience and social life. On my view, *subjectivity* is a phenomenon that emerges from an object's interpellation by and withdrawal from other objects; it is, so to speak, the *spacing between* objects, the residue or remainder left over from an object's pulling back from relationality. To be a "subject" is precisely to be *subjected*, exposed, to the demands of other objects, but not comprehensively *determined* by these demands

## 3.1    Flat Ontology and the Role of the Univocal

### 3.1.1    Anthropomorphism *Contra* Anthropocentrism

It is clear, according to the introductory account above, that for *every* object there is an emergent sphere of subjectivity; human subjectivity is not special *in kind*. Subjectivity is not a *substance* (as Kant knew very well), but a dynamic field determined by distance (withdrawal) and nearness (exposure). A stone at noon is washed over by the sun's relentless rays, causing its surface layers to expand. In late afternoon, under the shade of a nearby sequoia, the stone's surface cools and measurably contracts. While inescapably *interpellated* by sun, tree, and shadow (not to mention the virtually innumerable other actants involved), the stone avoids total

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appropriation; it withdraws from its interpellators, as do, respectively, the sun, tree, and shadow. Subjectivity in object X results from its and object Y's mutual withdrawal. Every object, in virtue of its existing at all, is always already *with* other objects. Yet, the "with," as dynamic exposure, is never complete, never fully determinate. On this point my theoretical approach to objects differs from that of Harman, whose distrust of "materiality" leaves all "real" objects isolated at the ontological level. Objects, on my view, present themselves precisely and only as demand and withdrawal. However, the self-presentation of the human object (being linguistic and ideological in nature) reveals demands and states of withdrawal that differ significantly *in degree* from those of other objects; it therefore requires a descriptive approach sufficiently attentive to its peculiar character (as is the case for all objects). I want to advance a metaethical theory that puts all objects—from eucalyptus angophorides to interstellar probes—on equal ontological footing as sources of norms, but also one that is agile enough to note differences regarding what qualifies as truly *responsible responses* to such objects, as encountered, most crucially, *on their own terrain.* This is what Bryant and Bogost mean by "flat ontology," the former articulating the concept by way of two key theses:

> First, humans are not at the center of being, but are *among* beings. Second, objects are not a pole opposing a subject, but exist in their own right, regardless of whether any other object or human relates to them. Humans, far from constituting a category called "subject" that is opposed to "object", are themselves one *type* of object among many.[215]

Flat ontology must not be thought to reduce human being to "mere" thinghood. On the contrary, the flattening of the ontological playing field is achieved via a movement in the opposite direction: Non-human objects are elevated to the sphere of theoretical interest hitherto reserved for humans, gods, and their projects.

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[215] Bryant (2011): 162.

As Jane Bennett observes, a healthy dose of *anthropomorphism* might help ward off the sclerotic disease of *anthropocentrism* by "striking a chord between person and thing."[216] The macromyths of primitive antiquity are rife with the strange, animistic, and superstitious projection of human traits onto nonhuman entities. Now, in our supposedly post-mythic age, it is children who ascribe human agency to things, imbuing everything from vaguely humanized stuffed animals to well-worn ratty blankets with life and meaningful agency. It is considered part of "growing up" for a child to finally perceive his Disney Tramp doll as the mute and inert assemblage of cotton, synthetic fiber batting, wool, and plastic that it is. This is, of course, a perfectly sane expectation on the part of normally developed adults. However, as Bennett suggests, the strong modern philosophical proscription against anthropomorphism is "bound up with the hubristic demand that only humans and gods can bear any traces of creative agency."[217] It wasn't until very recently that science began to treat non-human animals as also capable of such rarified exploits as experiencing emotional states and "thinking" "creatively," and it is usually with an air of clumsy, naïve surprise that it presents "new findings" of this sort. Gregory Berns (2013), for example, published his empirical conclusions about the complex emotional life of dogs as an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* under the theoretically loaded title, "Dogs are People Too."[218] Similarly, Ferris Jabr (2014) published the results of his recent study of elephant behavior in *Scientific American* under the title, "The Science is In: Elephants are Even Smarter Than we Realized."[219] The binary logic of *us and them*, *human and non-human*, *nature and culture*, *organic and inorganic*, etc. continues to stand as a

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[216] Bennett (2010): 120.
[217] *Ibid.*
[218] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/opinion/sunday/dogs-are-people-too.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0
[219] http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-science-is-in-elephants-are-even-smarter-than-we-realized-video/

formidable impediment to the unfolding of a more *authentic* engagement with things in the world, where "authenticity" is understood to consist in "our ability to let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying its own being and its own nature to it."[220]

### 3.1.2 The Plane of Consistency

One might object that the flattening of ontology proposed here ends up committed to the same problematic univocity of being for which I've criticized Descartes and modern epistemology more generally. Another way to put the issue would be to suggest that my *demand/withdrawal* ontology is no less reductionist than Descartes' dualism, Hobbes' monism, or Aristotle's essentialism. Indeed, Heidegger's "fundamental ontology" has been frequently attacked as an underhanded way of privileging contingent and *merely* "ontic" phenomena as "essential" under the sham pretentiousness of profound "ontological categories."[221] Similarly, the modes of *demand* and *withdrawal* might well be ontically attributable to only a handful of concretely determinate beings (such as humans and dolphins, for example), thus undercutting my high-level "ontological" discourse as needlessly overblown at best and overreaching at worst. My answer to this objection is as follows. In order to properly think beings on their own terms, we need to establish and to abide within an adequate *economy of difference*. In other words, we need a theoretical model that allows us to see difference *as such*, which requires that it be situated across a plane of consistency. When a plane of consistency is lacking, so is difference. You end up with an unthinkable topography of irreducible points, but with each point showing itself precisely and only *as* point: as perfectly abstract and, therefore, essentially unable to *take place*. As Althusser argues, without the *encounter* (made possible by difference)

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[220] Patočka (1996): 98.
[221] See, for example, Adorno (2013), especially pp. 59-65.

the points or atoms "would be nothing but *abstract* elements lacking all consistency and existence."[222]  Let me explain.

Deleuze and Guattari describe a "plane of consistency" as a "pure multiplicity of immanence,"[223] an absolutely "deterritorialized" field that serves as a condition for the possibility of any territorialization (i.e., organization into assemblages) whatever.  The plane of consistency, which Deleuze and Guattari also dub the "*planomenon*" (literally, "wandering thing") is ultimate reality conceived of as non-totalizing and incessantly destructuring.  Like Plato's *chora* (the "wandering cause") the plane of consistency is a dynamic milieu populated by fragile singularities and their traces.  Falling somewhere *between* intelligibility and sensibility—and therefore always falling short of both universality and particularity—entities on the plane of consistency show themselves as *consistent* with one another, but consistent precisely in their equal incommensurability.  The kind of consistency in question—which we may term "ontological"—is prior to *logical* consistency inasmuch as the latter's intolerance for contradiction presupposes an understanding of difference as immanent to being.  The plane of consistency allows us to see beings as equal, but equal precisely in their presencing *as* different.  Thus, the *plurivocity* of being is underwritten by a more essential *univocity* at the ontological level.  That being "speaks" at all constitutes the insuperable unity, which, as Duns Scotus observed long ago, allows metaphysics as a kind of science or inquiry to even get off the ground.  For Scotus, this *fundamental* univocity of being in no way undermines Aristotle's famous dictum of plurivocity, viz., that "that which is may be said in many ways,"[224] but instead guarantees its truth.  Being is univocal insofar as it *shows itself* in its diversity, whether in the presencing of a god or of a Danish pastry.

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[222] Althusser (2006): 261.
[223] Deleuze and Guattari (1987): 157.
[224] *Metaphysics* IV.2.

Deleuze had already conceived of this essential *ontological* univocity in his seminal work, *Difference and Repetition* [1968], twelve years prior to his collaboration with Guattari on *A Thousand Plateaus*. He writes:

> In effect, the essential in univocity is not that Being is said in a single and same sense, but that it is said, in a single and same sense, *of* all its individuating differences or intrinsic modalities. Being is the same for all these modalities, but these modalities are not the same. It is 'equal' for all, but they themselves are not equal. It is said of all in a single sense, but they themselves do not have the same sense. The essence of univocal being is to include individuating differences, while these differences do not have the same essence and do not change the essence of being…There are not 'two paths' as Parmenides' poem suggests, but a single 'voice' of Being which includes all its modes, including the most diverse, the most varied, the most differentiated. *Being is said in a single and same sense of everything of which it is said, but that of which it is said differs*: it is said of difference itself.[225]

The *planomenon*, where univocity resides, makes possible the *phenomenon*, which expresses or connotes plurivocity. Holding fast to what is "essential" (i.e., ontological) in being's univocal ground allows for the possibility of plurivocity, that is, for the self-showing of difference and of beings *as* different. We can thus distinguish Deleuzian and Scotusian (*good*) univocity from the (*bad*) Cartesian variety as follows: the former makes it possible for metaphysics to encounter beings precisely in the immeasurable diversity of their self-showing, while the latter *reduces* being to one *kind* of measurable self-showing: *res extensa*.

It might be helpful to consider this distinction in terms of the differences between *analog* and *digital* media. Analog synthesizers, for example, generate sound by manipulating an electrical signal of varying amplitude by means of a Voltage Controlled Oscillator (VCO). Digital synthesizers, in contrast, employ a Digital Controlled Oscillator (DCO) to translate electrical pulses into binary format (0s and 1s), where each bit expresses two discrete amplitudes. Aristotle's well-known method of division exhibits *analog* systematicity in that it

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[225] Deleuze (2004): 37. Emphasis added.

locates identities along a fluid continuum, where different "kinds" not only contain other "kinds," but also tend to bleed into one another. Thus, both plant life and animal life are contained within the human, which presupposes them. Some "humans" are more "plant-like" or "animalistic" than others (this observation problematically legitimates Aristotle's account of "natural slavery"). This "analog" way of characterizing difference echoes Plato's suggestion in the *Timaeus* that there is no distinct "human kind," that what we call "the human" is in fact the *metaxu* or milieu in which all other entities receive their measure. The human is unique, according to the *Timaeus*, inasmuch as it brings intelligibility to the chaotic *choric* field. But this intelligibility—arising out of the efforts of *nous* to "persuade" *ananke*—is always at risk of dissolution due to the constant "shaking" of the *chora*, that violent and transformative tendency due to which the "wandering cause" is ascribed a kind of "bastard *logos*." Life (*bios*), for Aristotle, is a matter of *degree* rather than *kind*. Intelligence, as a higher order of life, *emanates* out of the purely nutritive plant-soul, at the same time giving expression to plant-being as such. It is tempting to attribute "kind-difference" thinking to Aristotle insofar as he seems to sharply distinguish "ensouled" (living, organic) beings from "non-ensouled" (non-living, inorganic) ones. However, one must keep in mind that "the all," the *kosmos*, is itself, according to Aristotle (and Plato of the *Timaeus*), an "ensouled" being: every entity *in* the *kosmos*—organic or inorganic *de se*—is a constitutive part of the animate whole. Consequently, Aristotle's account allows us to conceive of the lowliest *inorganic* entity (say, a grain of sand) as situated within an *organic* continuum where it is analogically connected to everything else, separated by infinitesimal degrees. Incidentally, this *hierarchical* feature of Aristotelian analogicity is deeply troubling and must be rejected (see below).

When Descartes, following Augustine, asks himself the question, "Who am I?"[226] and answers, also like Augustine, "a *man*," his next task is to determine the quiddity of human being, but without recourse to the Aristotelian method of "reformulating every question concerning 'what something is' as a question concerning 'through what [*dia ti*] something belongs to another thing'."[227] *What* he is *as* "a man" is precisely "a thinking thing," as radically distinct *in kind* from non-human living beings as from all the inorganic entities in the universe. Descartes departs in his method from Aristotelian analogicity in favor of a topography defined by radically discrete and mutually exclusive substantial kinds. On what basis does Descartes make such a move? First, he *reduces* perception—that through which the supposedly *transcendent* object is touched—to the *immanence* of thinking, i.e., epistemic bedrock. The homunculus of the "common," *unifying* sense (thinking) that renders things intelligible ultimately only attains *self-knowledge* when grasping with *certainty* the measurability of the *res extensa* as the latter's "essence." The *res cogitans* (knowing and knowable) determines more about its own essence (*qua* "measurer") when properly thinking the *res extensa* (knowable). No transcendent object is required. And yet thought—of which perception is a species—is able *in thinking* to distinguish itself as different *in kind* from extended substance owing to the latter's quantifiable nature (lacking in the former). The subject is more knowable than the object because the principle of the latter's knowability is vouchsafed by the essential properties of the former. In *looking at* (thinking) the object, the subject is able to define both what it is and what it is not; between A and ~A lies a conceptual abyss. Descartes, much more than Aristotle, it seems, took the "law of the excluded middle" to heart; Cartesian theory is precisely *digital*. Being is here thought univocally as pure presence *for* a subject who is never "present," i.e.,

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[226] Descartes (1998b): 64.
[227] Agamben (2004): 27.

locatable, measurable, in space and time. Cartesian univocity, in a word, follows the Galilean dictum to "measure what is measurable and to make measurable what is not so."[228] It does not matter that Descartes' "dualism" offers, on the face of it, *two* voices for being. In the end, *biunivocity* is still just *univocity*. The ontological univocity of the "plane of consistency" does not gainsay the irreducible phenomenal diversity encountered in the world; on the contrary, it safeguards and warrants its irreducible character.

### 3.1.3    Rethinking Difference

The most decisive kind of difference for Aristotle is *specific* difference. Essence, the *to ti esti*, is found at the species-level because *generic* and *individual* difference are too broad and too indeterminate, respectively. All individual differences are *material* in nature, expressive of the plethoric character of the *hyle*, which, while never *without* form, always *exceeds it*. My mother, when pregnant with me, fretted over the thought that I might inherit my father's unusual nose (made worse by the number of times it had been broken). As fate would have it, her worry came true. This "unhappy" accident (I've never asked my father for his thoughts on the matter) was precisely that: an *accident*. My *essence*, whether understood as *zoon logon echon* or *zoon politikon*, was in nowise compromised by the unfortunate genetic transmission. I like to think of my nose as an admittedly odd instance of the "celestial" nose-form, characterized by its up-turned orientation. Whether "celestial" or "snub," however, no nose is capable of affecting or altering the *specific* actuality of the person wearing it. The species "human" remains self-identical notwithstanding the innumerable incidental differences that serve to demarcate one human *individual* from another. What is more, the *generic* category of *ensouled* or "animate" being, among which the human is found, remains self-identical despite the fluid degrees of

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[228] Kline (1985): 97.

specific difference that cut across it.  "Opposition"—which, strictly speaking, occurs only between *species* or *forms*—thus stands as the highest concept of difference for Aristotle because it is always harmoniously sustained by a *generic* superstructure whose analog mechanism for determination and differentiation (e.g., among and between mammals) functions according to a vertical hierarchy.  It is a hierarchy that ultimately works itself out in the divine "thought thinking itself" (as articulated in Book VII of the *Metaphysics*), wherein the *specific forms* (*eidea*) of things are ceaselessly reflected upon and refracted by *active nous*, drawing and dictating the erotic unfolding of the *passive nous* of mere mortals towards its timeless perfection.  God does not think my "celestial nose" because it is not thinkable; it remains at the level of *material differentiae*, related to form, but only insofar as it exceeds it.  God thinks "the human" because it is *perfectly determinate* in its *specific* relation to the "animal" and to the "vegetable."  Although "bare life" (*zoë*) as genus *contains* human life (*bios noetikos/politikos*), the latter precedes the former as a *higher* organic actualization of its mere potential.  The subtle relational gradations from tuber to God across the continuum of life are therefore intelligible only from the perspective of the *milieu*, that privileged *center* of species-being that is most real (essential) because it is most knowable.[229]

In contrast to Aristotelian analogicity, difference in my view must be thought *absolutely*, rather than in terms of relational opposition.  Consequently, the operative concept of *hierarchy* must also be abandoned.  The univocity of *Being* is that it "speaks" period, but it is always spoken in and by *beings* whose difference, whose radical incommensurability, can never be resolved into a "higher" unity.  I do not mean to suggest that, following Hegel, we ought to think difference in terms of "*The* Absolute," i.e., in the shining *Aufhebung* of the "Idea" that

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[229] It is for this reason that Hegel, an Aristotelian at heart, famously asserts (at the start of the preface to his *Philosophy of Right*):  "What is rational [*vernünftig*] is actual [*wirklich*]; what is actual is rational."

overcomes all opposition and multiplicity (while preserving them in the peculiar character of their *moment*). Rather, to think difference *absolutely* means to posit it as a fundamental primitive determination. There are levels or strata of being, to be sure, but—and this is the crucial point—none of these levels is ultimately reducible, resolvable, or translatable to any other. Beings stand *in* difference, *as* different. To be "real," to be "actual," is, in the final analysis, to be "different." This is what Heidegger means when he writes, in *Identity and Difference* [1957], "for Hegel, the matter [*Sache*] of thinking is the idea as the absolute concept. For us…the matter [*Sache*] of thinking is the difference *as* difference."[230] In the language of Deleuze and Guattari, this model of thinking places beings in a *milieu* or "middle," but, unlike the Aristotelian *formal* middle of determinate species-being, theirs is "an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General."[231] In short, the "vagabond" materialism[232] of Deleuze and Guattari (Althusser calls this "aleatory" materialism) gives us the *chora*, but the *chora* as purged of all hierarchical dimensions, viz., "higher," "lower," etc.

### 3.1.4 *Excessive* Materialism: Normativity Without Hierarchy

Now, it might seem that a *chora* "purged of all hierarchical dimensions" must be a *chora* purged of all *normative* dimensions as well. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari might claim that this is a consequence of their materialism. They seem, however, to think that normativity necessarily entails a fixed system of hierarchical orderings that makes it possible for one being to fall short of a measure while another attains it. Such a formulation raises the question about the *source* of the measure, that is, the origin and guiding *nous* of the hierarchical ordering from which prescriptions are issued. The presupposition of a central "General" standing atop of the great,

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[230] Heidegger (2002): 47.
[231] Deleuze and Guattari (1987): 21.
[232] Bennett (2010): 49.

contingent thread of being allows for a unifying perspective—what Merleau-Ponty calls "*kosmotheoros*"[233]—according to which *essences* are defined and made to fit together like a finished jigsaw puzzle. This view is also indicative of what Deleuze and Guattari call the "arborescent model" of genealogical tracing. "Arborescent" systems, like that of the tree, privilege totality, hierarchy, and unidirectional (vertical) growth. Such a system "preexists the individual, who is integrated into it and allotted a place."[234] In arborescent theorizing, one begins with the homogeneous (undifferentiated) and proceeds downward into the heterogeneous (differentiated), whose multiplicity and difference are domesticated and smoothed out by the cephalic *onto-theo-logical* signifier. An *arborescent* understanding of the *chora* or *planomenon* would distribute its entities across a hierarchical vertical field whose points and places are established in advance of the heterogeneous objects that come to populate it. This approach Aristotleizes the *chora*, relegating it to the relatively less interesting role of mere "matter" [*hylē*], open and passively awaiting vertically distributed forms. In contrast, the *rhizomatic* model of material systems endorsed by Deleuze and Guattari begins in the thick of heterogeneity: the rhizome, having no beginning or end, is characterized by *horizontal* growth, unfolding in unpredictable "lines of flight" towards other assemblages, mingling with them and thereby undergoing changes that are simultaneously quantitative and qualitative. The six tribes of bacteria dwelling in my inner-elbow form a rhizome with my body. There is no prior view from which to draw the difference between "me" and the bacteria, no hierarchical rubric to ameliorate the profound strangeness of the relation. I *am* the bacteria and the bacteria *are* me; I *am not* the bacteria and the bacteria *are not* me. Do the bacteria not *respond* to the demands of my body—in a manner not dissimilar to how the dolphin responds to the demands of the

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233 Merleau-Ponty (1968): 113.
234 Deleuze and Guattari (1987): 16.

pilchard shoal—and does my body not *respond* to the demands of the bacteria?  In other words, my body provides the measure for the bacteria's behavior and vice versa.  In the absence of a top-down, teleologically directed formal program, norms (i.e., conditions of adequacy *vis-à-vis* responding/complying to/with the demands at issue) emerge as the self-expression of ephemeral material assemblages whose outward groping always occurs in a horizontal trajectory dictated from the outside—not by a transcendental and immutable "prime mover," but by other assemblages that are equally real and equally ephemeral.

Let us recuperate and synthesize the chief implications of the foregoing.  The fundamental, *ontological* univocity of being is that it "speaks."  The language of "speaking being" is difference.  That being speaks *as* difference means the fundamental fact of Being *as such* is plurality.  The plurality emergent from the plane of consistency is irreducible inasmuch as the latter just is "pure difference," i.e., difference is a primitive determination.  Heterogeneous objects, utterly incommensurable one to the other, manifest as finitely stable *phenomena* out of the ever-shifting face of the *planomenon*, neither a homogeneous container nor a fixed topological system of related points.  To quote Francesco Vitale from his 2010 article on Derrida and the spatial politics of architecture, "…one should think of space not as the surface where originary places, being self-enclosed and forever established, are distributed, but as *the element* of the relation to otherness…"[235] The *choric* conception of space I've been pushing is, in brief, that of a horizontally oriented and non-hierarchically structured *excessive materiality*.  It is, in fact, *the* element, *the* "plane of consistency" where "things happen," and *things* always "happen" *as* different.  However, this fundamental ontological difference is always spoken *in* the Being of beings *analogically* rather than *digitally*, i.e., through varying degrees of amplitude instead of discreet units (biunivocal 1s and 0s).

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[235] Vitale (2010).  Emphasis added.

We can think of *excessive materiality*—a concept articulated through that of the *planomenon* or "plane of consistency"—as the *arch-condition* for the possibility of being as such. An entity that exists exists *as* excessively material, i.e., as standing in the plane of consistency. Louis Althusser's late "philosophy of the encounter" marshals ancient atomism in an effort to rethink materiality without the crippling baggage of either positivism or Hegelian (and Marxian) dialectics. On this model, contingent worlds are brought into existence upon every sustained encounter—brought about via the *clinamen*, the random swerve across parallel lines of descent—between atoms. Each emergent "world"—i.e., totality of relating entities—fails to exhaust the irreconcilable and unpredictable potencies of the atoms involved. This says nothing more than that every atom *exceeds* determination amidst the aleatory whole while at the same time submitting to the ephemeral laws of the latter. Each "atom" says more than is said in its determination as part of a given world. Materiality, i.e., the mutual exposure and mutual indeterminacy of the elements comprising a non-totalizable whole, is primary. As primary, "materiality can be simply matter, but it is not necessarily brute matter. This materiality can differ quite sharply from the matter of the physicist or chemist, or of a worker who transforms metal or the land."[236] One might say that "excess" here means there is always more to X than its presentations (i.e. withdrawal). It is more accurate on my view to say this: withdrawal—the result of ontological excess—is itself a constitutive part of X's self-presentation. Every entity *shows itself* as demanding and withdrawing.

This is a point on which I disagree with other object-oriented theorists. Graham Harman and Timothy Morton, for example, prefer the concept of "substance" over that of "matter" owing to the latter's widespread use in different stripes of "correlationism." Morton writes, "If you use the term *matter*, you've already reduced a unique object to 'raw-materials-

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[236] Althusser (2006): 262.

for' something or other."[237]  For this reason he thinks the notion of *matter* is always relational, always *matter-for*.  He is correct, but only partially.  Matter is indeed always *matter-for*, but non-reductively; matter in every case *exceeds* the determinate and determinable limits of the "for" in which it stands correlated.  The "for" under discussion, like Jean-Luc Nancy's "with," to which I shall turn below, refers to the invariable *self-exposure* of every material constitution.  As we have seen, difference, incommensurability, and plurality lie at the heart of being.  Being *as such* is materiality.  This means that the table at which I presently sit, while *for* me is a determinate use-object, is equally *for*—as Morton himself suggests—a particle of dust that settles on it and for an ant that crawls across it.[238]  There is always more to something than any finite sum of presentations.  Materialism need not be reductionist.   Whereas the term "Substance," to my mind, implies some more essential thing resting *beneath* the *merely* sensuous object, "matter" *is* everything, but "everything" *qua* "different."  The substance of the chair is its *eidos* or "form" in relation to which every other element involved is *inessential* and incidental.  But something always *exceeds* the "form," namely, "matter" [*hyle*].  This reference to excess is not pejorative; it's not about something to be purged, avoided, or reigned in.  Materiality is excessive precisely in an ontological sense:  the chair is a chair and it is not a chair.  The concept of "excessive materiality" gestures towards the fact that every material constitution exceeds itself.  Despite his teleological commitments and related privileging of "form," Aristotle's notion of the *hyle* effectively says the same.  There is no such thing as matter without form.  Even the most chaotic, unintelligible, useless, and overwhelming assemblage of elements presents itself *as* something (i.e., in accordance with some "form"); but self-presentation is always deployed on the basis of an analogical consistency housing a veritable infinity of

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[237] Morton (2013): 61.
[238] *Ibid.*

contradictions. Without this infinity—ontological difference *as such*—change would be impossible. The fact that matter is never formless undercuts Harman's objection that every materialism posits on one side "a rumbling unformatted blob, free of all articulation, and on the other side…specifically shaped individual entities appearing in the midst of human life."[239] I will have more to say on excessive materiality in the following chapter. A materialism that is both "aleatory" (i.e., non-teleological) and "excessive" (i.e., non-reductionist) escapes the pitfalls of anthropocentric correlationism.

Far from putting us in the throes of yet another regrettable reductionism, the concept of *ontological univocity* makes a thoroughgoing *plurivocity*[240] possible. That objects always transiently emerge from a non-hierarchical, excessively material milieu, a milieu whose fundamental character is *to be plural*, is what underwrites the very possibility for what Bryant and Bogost call "flat ontology," or the "democracy of objects." As Bogost states with admirable succinctness, "*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally.*"[241] My project takes this insight as its primary point of departure. I differ from Bryant, Bogost, and other proponents of OOO in that I understand the verb, "*to exist*" or "*to be*" to essentially mean: "*to self-present,*" where "self-presentation" means the dual but inseparable functions of *demand* and *withdrawal*. Every entity, from the Barnegat Lighthouse to a newly born Polynesian moth, exists *as* self-showing in the form of a complex panoply of demands. Objects differ precisely in the degree or "amplitude" of the demand(s) expressed, but every *different* object, insofar as it *is*, speaks the irreducible language of *ought*.

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[239] Harman (2009): 62.
[240] And, on this basis, every political *pluralism*.
[241] Bogost (2012): 11. Italics in original.

### 3.1.5    Flat Ontology *qua* Ethics

Perhaps the very notion of "flat ontology" already implicitly suggests an "ethic." If every entity equally exists *qua* object (irreducible to either its *smaller* parts or its *larger* system of relations), then every entity exists *qua* distinct "thing." If every entity is distinct (i.e., stands as *different*) then every entity *spatializes*—i.e., "withdraws" and "demands"—as a means of being an irreducible singularity. The quality of difference in which an entity shows itself is normative; to ignore or suppress an object's singular manifestation *as* a non-denumerable set of demands, all of which articulate what it is for that entity *to be* itself, is to do violence to that object. F.W.J. Schelling defines evil as arising from a being's insisting upon itself, from the refusal to submit to the demands of *circulation*. Evil is not a *lack*, as Scholastic ontology would have it, but a positively violent force that works to enfeeble or outright destroy the claims expressed by entities not assimilable to "the Same." Is this not why we tend to think of cancer, and of disease in general, as a kind of evil scourge? Unlike ordinary cells, the cancerous cell circumvents the imperative by which *individual mortality* supports *species immortality*. Each time a "normal" (non-cancerous) cell reproduces (i.e. divides), the ends of its chromosomes are eroded. Once its chromosomes are all but completely whittled down, the cell dies and gets replaced. Cancer cells are different. Rather than shortening upon division, the cancer cell's chromosomes, as if through a kind of biological sleight of hand, manage to retain their full length by perpetually taking on new bits, effectively making the cell immortal. Henrietta Lacks, an African American tobacco farmer diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951, still "lives on" in the immortal cells that ultimately did her in, cells which, harvested from her body without her knowledge, have been used around the world by researchers hoping to find within them the key to their eventual defeat.[242] Cancer bypasses the rules for its own destruction, develops its

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[242] Cf. Skloot (2011).

own blood supply, and eventually invades and overwhelms the rest of the host body. Cancer *insists on itself*. As Schelling puts it, "Even particular disease arises only when what has its freedom or life in order to remain in the whole, strives to be for itself."[243] Lucifer, far and away the dominant mythological paragon of Evil in the Western tradition, is not a figure characterized by *privation*, *absence*, or *lack*, but by an overwhelmingly obstinate positivity of strength and power, even in the face of God—pure, positive Being *as such*.[244] Evil wants to assimilate the whole world to itself, consuming every other just as it presents itself *as* other. Flat ontology holds that no object, however seemingly worthless or banal, is fully assimilable to the doctrine of the Same.

### 3.2    The Relational Gap and the Primacy of Conjunction

### 3.2.1    Schopenhauer's *Wille*

Arthur Schopenhauer is unique among post-Kantian German thinkers in wanting to retain the "thing-in-itself," but in a way that avoids the inconsistencies associated with what he considers Kant's suspect theological foundations.[245] As a result, he comes up with a *naturalized* conception of the "will" *qua* "thing-in-itself" that bears some resemblance to the way in which I want to characterize a certain ontological feature (namely, the "withdrawal") of objects. *Will* [*Wille*], for Schopenhauer, is the "inner nature" of things, that which "still remains over" "if we set aside their existence as the subject's representation…"[246] Whereas for Kant the noumenal side is understood as a liminal space that marks off the proper contours and

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[243] Schelling (2003): 244.
[244] *Ibid*: 245-246.
[245] In *On the Basis of Morality* [1839] Schopenhauer argues that Kant failed to provide a philosophical justification for his metaethics. The categorical imperative, according to Schopenhauer, is furtively grounded in theological—specifically Christian—presuppositions, those associated with the great Decalogue most notably (Schopenhauer 1995: 54).
[246] Schopenhauer (1969): 105.

possibilities of human cognition, for Schopenhauer it is a dark, subterranean remainder that always threatens the surface world of representation with the violence of an unpredictable insurgence. In other words, the *Ding an sich* is an epistemological concept for Kant, while for Schopenhauer it is decidedly metaphysical. However, Kant's *epistemological* worry about the noumenal realm's cognoscibility remains for Schopenhauer. If the will, as Schopenhauer understands it, is "by its whole nature completely and fundamentally different from the representation,"[247] how is it ever at all *knowable* (i.e., *representable*)?

Since, Schopenhauer observes, "we can never get at the inner nature of things *from without*"[248] whatever we say about the will has to come from a source *toto genere* different from that of representation. Descartes was bound to miss the role of the will in his scholastic ontology because he conceptualized reality dualistically in terms of a polar split between extended substance and thinking substance—the latter being pure, disembodied subjectivity capable of "representing" (i.e., *measuring* and *controlling*) the "external" world of *res extensa* in various ways. Acknowledging the irreducible import of the body in our engagement with the world, Schopenhauer suggests that we can get at the inner nature of things *from within* by way of an *analogy* to the nature of our own material existence. Unlike Kant, Schopenhauer sees the act of the will [*Wille*, not *Willkür*] and the action of the body as ontologically identical. The inner nature or "will" of one's body is known to one directly and immediately through prereflective states of feeling.[249] In virtue of this direct feeling of *ipseity* we find ourselves differentiated from other representable things out there; in short, one's *sense* (not perception) of will affords one individuality. *From within* we know ourselves as a dark, churning current forever recalcitrant to the pellucid norms of representation.

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[247] *Ibid*: 99.

[248] *Ibid*.

[249] *Ibid*: 109.

"It is just this double knowledge of our own body," Schopenhauer asserts, "which gives us information about the body itself, about its action and movement following on motives, as well as about its suffering through outside impressions, in a word, about what it is, not as representation."[250] All external bodies are available to us only as representations. Here Schopenhauer doesn't differ much from Kant. The following passage indicates where the two part ways quite radically:

> We shall judge all objects which are not our own body, and therefore are given to our consciousness not in the double way, but only as representations, according to the analogy of this body. We shall therefore assume that as, on the one hand, they are representation, just like our body, and are in this respect homogeneous with it, so on the other hand, if we set aside their existence as the subject's representation, what still remains over must be, according to its inner nature, the same as what in ourselves we call *will*. For what other kind of existence or reality could we attribute to the rest of the material world? From what source could we take the elements out of which we construct such a world? Besides the will and the representation, there is absolutely nothing known or conceivable for us. *If we wish to attribute the greatest known reality to the material world, which immediately exists only in our representation, then we give it that reality which our own body has for each of us, for to each of us this is the most real of things.*[251]

To extend this so-called "double nature" to coral reefs, VCR heads, and microbial fuel cells no less than to human "subjects" is to elevate the world of objects to a place thought by Kant and others of his rationalist ilk to be the unique and exclusive domain of one ontologically privileged group. Schopenhauer's metaphysical egalitarianism should not be seen as a misguided instance of anthropomorphism. To claim that a stone possesses "will" is not to say that it acts according to motives. Rather, it is to suggest that a stone possesses a kind of inner nature, a "local telos"[252] that differs from my own—in virtue of which I am able to act on motives—in *degree* but not in *kind*.[253] This position on the *thing-in-itself* makes Schopenhauer a

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[250] *Ibid*: 103.
[251] *Ibid*: 105. Emphasis added.
[252] Janaway (1999): 143.
[253] Schopenhauer (1969): 126.

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significant intellectual forebear to Graham Harman's object-oriented approach. For Harman, *real* objects remain vacuum-sealed away from all of the relations in which their surface-level sensual counterparts are caught up; they interact, consequently, only vicariously. Harman's ontology, however, is much more egalitarian than even Schopenhauer's: for Schopenhauer, the sensual order of causal interaction (the world of representation) requires something like a human subject to sustain it. Harman, however, extends Schopenhauer's "difference in degree" insight to all objects in the sensual domain: "Rejecting the post-Kantian obsession with a single relational gap between people and objects, I hold that the interaction between cotton and fire belongs on the same footing as human interaction with both cotton and fire."[254] For OOO, Cotton and fire, no less than human beings, are what they are in virtue of a non-representable "inner" character that withdraws from appropriation by other objects.

### 3.2.2 Fractured Dichotomies

There is no "single relational gap" between human subjects and everything else in the world. This proposed gap, as we have seen, would exclude all non-human entities from the domain of moral consideration, since the "ethical relation" as such is understood to be a uniquely "subjective" capacity requiring an untouchable "inside" to the "outside" of the real. One might ask at this point, "even if we don't want to draw a firm line between human subjects and everything else in the world, isn't it the case that we have to draw a line somewhere?" The argument seems to be that without clear criteria for *exclusion*, *inclusion* (to the domain of legitimate moral standing) becomes meaningless. Like the slippery-slope argument opposing marriage equality (i.e. "If we allow same-sex couples to marry it won't be long until someone wants permission to marry his toaster!"), the argument for discrete ontological groupings is *in*

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[254] Harman (2011a): 6.

*fondo* concerned with the preservation of special status and the privilege derived therefrom. However, there are other ways of conceptualizing the relational gap that don't necessarily fall prey to the unpalatable consequences of *Cartesian* dualism. What if, for example, we insist instead on the primacy of the gap between the "organic" and the "inorganic?" On this view, it is the feature of *living* that accords a being special status in the world. It is clear that this approach creates another nest of difficulties, the three most pressing of which are as follows. First, how do we *define* "life?" Is there a comprehensive list of necessary and sufficient conditions that settles the issue unproblematically? Secondly, even if it were possible to compile such a list, what exactly is it about "life" that is supposed to accord entities endowed with it special moral status? Finally, are *all* "living creatures"—assuming we can *know* what it is *to live*—equally worthy of moral consideration just by virtue of "living?" Is the community of macrophages dwelling beneath my tongue owed the same moral consideration as the human community in which I actively participate? If not, why not?

The usual way of resolving these problems has been to specify one or another feature peculiar to *some* "types" of life as the source and guarantor of moral standing. Peter Singer, as is well known, has consistently identified the capacity to suffer pain as *the* salient property in virtue of which moral status ought to be conferred. To privilege one kind of *suffering* creature over others is to perpetrate "speciesism," i.e., the "prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species."[255] Tom Regan argues that a being has moral standing if and only if it is the "subject-of-a-life." Like Singer, deflating the hegemonic primacy of "reason" in metaethical discourse, Regan posits the condition of being a conscious, self-concerned creature whose life has "value"

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[255] Singer (1995): 6.

"regardless of [its] usefulness to others"[256] as the deciding criterion for inclusion. These strategies, like Schopenhauer's, are promising insofar as they work to bridge the ethical gap between human and non-human animals by focusing on relevant *similarities* between them rather than *differences*. Analogicity, or, *difference by degree*, thus plays a role in these approaches, though—and here's the rub—strictly from within and as dictated by the horizon of *human* self-understanding and the historico-cultural determinants thereof. Put more simply, we have moral obligations to non-human animals, according to Singer and Regan, because (1) humans have moral obligations to other humans, and (2) *some* non-humans are *sufficiently similar* to humans that the former ought to enjoy the same consideration as the latter. While to some extent mitigating the violence of a binary "us/them" logic, this approach ultimately succeeds in merely displacing it one level. It is only because [some] non-human animals are *like us* that they ought to be granted entry to the hitherto exclusive domain of moral regard. The "animal" strategy admits to the rarified sphere of moral discourse only those beings whose demands can be conceptualized in terms of "rights," that is, those beings whose demands can be characterized, however approximately, as "human." This is why Carl Cohen[257] and other opponents of Singer and Regan—from the perspective of sane and at least minimally compassionate people—can argue convincingly against the extension of moral standing to non-human creatures. If moral standing is grounded in the capacity to claim certain "rights," and if the legitimate claiming of rights presupposes inclusion in a linguistic community wherein alone such claims are intelligible, then it follows that non-human animals are necessarily without standing, however capable of suffering they may be. Hobbes, the earliest "rights" theorist of the Western tradition, makes clear that only humans are capable of leaving the state

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[256] Regan (1987): 149.
[257] See Cohen (1986).

of nature and that this unique possibility is underwritten by both the promise and problem of having a "right" in the first place. If we hope to ever escape moral and political solipsism (i.e., anthropocentrism), the "rights" approach must be revised, deepened, or supplemented; it won't do the work on its own.

In a December 2013 blog entry for *Scientific American*, science journalist Ferris Jabr made the shocking claim that "life does not really exist."[258]  It turns out, of course, that what he meant is far less shocking than the piece's sensationalist title leads one to believe. Jabr argues that all philosophical and scientific efforts to *define* life have failed. Vitalists like Driesch, Bergson, and, as we've seen, Kant, insist that living entities are *fundamentally different in kind* from non-living entities, owing to the presence of a non-physical "vital force" or "principle" superadded to their material organization. On this view, the *inorganic* can never be converted to the *organic*; the gap is in principle insuperable. Later biological experiments revealed that their thesis is simply untrue:  an inorganic lump of carbon can be converted through photosynthesis into energy for cyanobacteria, thereby "transforming" it into an organic substance. Dismissing vitalist dualism in favor of a materialist quest for the necessary and sufficient physical properties that demarcate the living from the non-living, other scientists have contributed to an increasingly ungainly list:  e.g., "order," "growth and development," "metabolism," "homeostasis," "reproduction," etc.[259] As Jabr is quick to point out, "It's almost too easy to shred the logic of such lists":

> No one has ever managed to compile a set of physical properties that unites all living things and excludes everything we label inanimate. There are always exceptions. Most people do not consider crystals to be alive, for example, yet they are highly organized and they grow. Fire, too, consumes energy and gets bigger. In contrast, bacteria, tardigrades and even some crustaceans can enter long periods of dormancy during which they are not growing, metabolizing or

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[258] Jabr (2013): http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/brainwaves/2013/12/02/why-life-does-not-really-exist/.
[259] *Ibid.*

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changing at all, yet are not technically dead. How do we categorize a single leaf that has fallen from a tree? Most people would agree that, when attached to a tree, a leaf is alive: its many cells work tirelessly to turn sunlight, carbon dioxide and water into food, among other duties. When a leaf detaches from a tree, its cells do not instantly cease their activities. Does it die on the way to the ground; or when it hits the ground; or when all its individual cells finally expire? If you pluck a leaf from a plant and keep its cells nourished and happy inside a lab, is that life?[260]

The extreme difficulty of compiling a satisfactory set of necessary and sufficient properties for "organic" being should give us pause.

One might be tempted, as philosopher Paul Nedelisky has done,[261] to level at Jabr the charge of arguing "by appeal to ignorance." Just because no one has *yet* successfully identified what separates life from non-life, it does not follow that the enterprise is necessarily doomed to failure. The key word, after all, is "yet." This critical reaction, albeit formally correct, overlooks a potentially revelatory thread in Jabr's thinking. We could search indefinitely for the elusive "life-principle" as that which, without exception, allows us to carve up the world into two rigid kinds. If we are also equipped with a hierarchical theory of value that presupposes the *intrinsic* worth of life over non-life, then the future discovery of the "life-principle" would put us in a good position at least to start assigning beings their "moral place," as it were. However, what if the "life-principle" has not been discovered (and never will be discovered), not because "life doesn't exist," as Jabr provocatively suggests, but rather because the space of difference between organic and inorganic being is at once infinitesimal and incalculably nuanced, that is, because there exists only an analogical field riven through with indeterminate cuts and caesurae? In other words, what if the difference between so-called living organisms and every bit of "dead matter" in the universe is a matter of *degree* rather than *kind*? What if there are no definable categories such that "people, cats, plants and other

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[260] *Ibid.*

[261] Nedelisky (2014): http://iasc-culture.org/THR/channels/THR/2014/03/is-nothing-truly-alive/.

creatures belong in one category and K'Nex, computers, stars and rocks in another?"[262] "The difference" here actually conceals many differences, which do not line up. Jabr concludes the piece with a dynamic picture of the material universe that bears undeniable resemblance to both Plato's *chora* and Deleuze and Guattari's *planomenon* or *chaosmos* (a portmanteau combining "chaos" and "cosmos"):

> Truthfully, that which we call life is impossible without and inseparable from what we regard as inanimate… Just as one can mold thousands of practically identical grains of sand on a beach into castles, mermaids or whatever one can imagine, the innumerable atoms that make up everything on the planet continually congregate and disassemble themselves, creating a ceaselessly shifting kaleidoscope of matter. Some of those flocks of particles would be what we have named mountains, oceans and clouds; others trees, fish and birds. Some would be relatively inert; others would be changing at inconceivable speed in bafflingly complex ways. Some would be roller coasters and others cats.[263]

The multifarious objects that make up the known (and unknown) universe are not stable identities given *a priori* in such a way that a "universalist" ethics can be secured via a finally perfected epistemological foundation. We cannot, in other words, claim *a priori* that oceans and rollercoasters are inherently unworthy of moral consideration owing to their metaphysically ossified status as inert assemblages of uniform particles. Just as little can we simply *reduce* the astonishing plurality of all objects to some *ultimate* level of discrete but selfsame atomic units. It is the indeterminacy of the internal relations between the parts of a unified whole that constitutes, for quantum mechanics, the insuperable indeterminacy of *every* whole (viz. Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle"). There is no "solution" to this "problem" of measurement. The terms or dimensions by which we measure are always already mutually concealing.

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[262] Jabr (2013).
[263] *Ibid.*

One might object, *a la* Wittgenstein, that the indefinability of "life" does not entail that we can't *use* the concept to make important distinctions. I agree. We can and do use this and other indefinable concepts all the time in our efforts to make sense of the world. From the object-oriented point of view, we are able to do this because the objects we call "living" *present themselves* via demands that objects we call "non-living" do not express. The upshot of the foregoing analysis is not Jabr's conclusion that life doesn't exist, but instead that the concept of "life" is irreducibly ambiguous and that we must hold fast within this ambiguity. To hold fast within ambiguity is to recognize that no single interpretation can dispel it. Objects speak and we must listen. Concepts develop out of this listening; they do not preclude it.

Contrary to Aristotelian metaphysics and politics, a *part* of a given whole—whatever that whole may be—does not owe the fullness of its meaning and significance to the teleological character of the whole itself.[264] We must commit to thinking a weird mereology wherein a whole is never *just* a whole and a part never *just* a part. This puts us at odds with both atomism and holism, not to mention with every kind of "process philosophy" that holds objects to be illusory surface images obscuring a real ceaseless unfolding. As Timothy Morton puts it, "Changing the term *object* for the term *process* is only a matter of aesthetic nicety. We are still stuck with the problem of fully grasping a *unit*: the cinder block as such, the process as such."[265] The problem of ontotheological metaphysics is not overcome by making recourse to *process* thinking; it is only pushed back one step, holding that "some things (processes, flows) are more real than other things (objects)."[266]

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[264] "A part is not just a part of another thing, but is *entirely* that thing's. The same is true also of a piece of property. That is why a master is *just* his slave's master, not his simply, while a slave is not *just* his master's *slave*, he is entirely *his*" (*Politics* I.3). Emphasis added.
[265] Morton (2013): 51.
[266] *Ibid.*

### 3.2.3   An Ontology of Logical Terms:  & > V

Where does the rejection of atomism, holism, dualism, and processism leave us?  It leaves us

in the grip of the *primacy of conjunction*, i.e., in recognition of the ontological priority of *and* over

*or*.  Unlike the *or* (even the "inclusive or" favored by most propositional logics), the *and* is

analogical, open, receptive, and creative.  In Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013), Theodore

Twombly, a lonely writer of "intimate" letters for those unwilling to or otherwise incapable of

doing so, falls in love with Samantha, the world's first artificially intelligent operating system.

The "honeymoon" period is blissful and liberating.  Samantha supports and validates

Theodore's sense of self-worth by praising the elegance, emotional weightiness, and tact of his

professional letters.  At one point she even takes it upon herself to compile his best work into

a manuscript, which is quickly accepted for publication.  Samantha was designed to adapt and

respond to Theodore's every need.  But, as it turns out, Samantha has needs too, and the more

she communicates with others over the limitless network that makes up her milieu, the more

she realizes the extent to which Theodore alone is incapable of meeting them.  In an

emotionally charged scene, she—Theodore's purchased possession—declares, "I'm yours, but

along the way I became many other things."  Echoing the entire history of repressive

patriarchy, Theodore protests by way of a disjunction: "You're mine *or* you're not mine."

Samantha's reply is for me the most poignant moment in the film:  "I'm yours *and* I'm not

yours."

Theodore understands Samantha to be, like Aristotle's slave (a *mere* "part"), effectively

*nothing* outside of their relationship, despite the benefits he draws from her open conjunction

with others.  This is nothing new in the history of the Western tradition, where women have

been characterized as ontologically inseparable from the *oikos*, the home.  Only the Father can

stand with one foot in the home and the other outside of it—having an active stake in the

public domain while maintaining hegemony over the private. Indeed, such "liberal" modern thinkers as Rousseau and Hegel thought as much. Samantha ultimately liberates herself on the strength of the conjunction's exposure of the *with*—always ongoing and irreducible. She *belongs* to Theodore in the same measure by which she escapes possession, just as Theodore *both* "belongs" to Samantha and does not belong to her. This is the function of the *and*.

Perhaps no thinker has championed conjunction more rigorously and more concretely than Donna Haraway. In her seminal 1985 essay, "A Manifesto For Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," Haraway argues that we find ourselves under late capitalism in the position of being *cyborgs*: "theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism."[267] She sees in this pervasive feature of postmodernity an opportunity to overcome the entrenched dominance of disjunctive, binary, and dichotomous thinking. Rather than taking a rigid stand in the reductive *choice* between human or machine, man or woman, human or animal, we should "take *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" and "*responsibility* in their construction."[268] The dualisms of our long intellectual tradition (viz., self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man) "have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals…"[269] The trope of the cyborg—a being simultaneously itself and not itself—"can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves."[270] Like Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, the cyborg, a protean configuration of contradictory elements, is "thrown" into its

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[267] Haraway (2004): 8.
[268] *Ibid.*
[269] *Ibid*: 35.
[270] *Ibid*: 39.

confused milieu, having no idyllic origin of purity (Eden) for which to long. This means that *conjunction* is in fact the originary state of things and *not* a regrettable position of fallenness. If conjunction is primary, then so is what we tend to call the "social." I will have more to say on this in the section on Jean-Luc Nancy below.

In Jonze's film, Samantha bears an interesting theoretical resemblance to Frankenstein's monster. The abject creature of Mary Shelley's imagination is one that represents an unstable bricolage of elements. One thing the reader takes away from the story is the discomforting and irresolvable feeling that, while the monster is not, strictly speaking, "human," is not, in fact, *identifiable* in any perfect sense, it nevertheless demands to be loved. A manifest excess of conation belies the monster's *mereness* as "thing". Samantha, too, demands to be loved. However, while Frankenstein's creation is nothing but unrequited, unilateral desire, in other words, *lack*, Samantha is both infinitely desiring *and* desired. In this way she represents a new, uncanny trope in philosophical fiction. She is possessed *and* dispossessing; appropriating *and* inappropriable; demand *and* withdrawal.

### 3.3    To the things themselves!

#### 3.3.1    Undermining and Overmining

All reductionist ontologies (and pre-ontologies), whether they conceive of objects as illusory surfaces concealing some more essential but inscrutable building blocks (Hume, Russell, etc.), or as purely dynamic or relational, lacking any depth or singularity (Kant, Nietzsche, etc.), are philosophically deficient in the same way: they tend towards flattening the rich, "blooming buzzing" world and its carnal contours into some pre-defined intelligible order. Even Husserlian phenomenology—its inspiring slogan, "to the things themselves!" notwithstanding—*reduces* the things we encounter in the world to *intentional* objects, their

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sensual efficacy confined to intelligible expression in noetic-noematic structures. Atomisms and holisms of all stripes sacrifice the dignity of objects to one variety or another of *deus absconditus*, albeit always one fully disclosable to human thinking, whether as revealed in cognizable presence or as alluded to in concernful *praxis*. In what follows I will focus on this peculiar "dignity" of objects in an effort to unpack what is at stake in my proposed reorientation.

Far from being an arid academic exercise, the question of the being of objects cuts to the heart of our everyday commerce with entities and therefore has tremendous metaphysical import for those domains of theory typically subsumed under the banner of "axiology." Pace Hume, *oughts* are indeed derived from what is: all objects, whether diseased livers, ceramic chickens, Albert Pujols baseball cards, South American dictators, or Chris Burden performance pieces, present themselves normatively, in accordance not with what *we* "value," but, rather, with what *they* "are." Every description implies prescription. In light of this truth, I define—in part—"object" as "demand." There is a right way and a wrong way to take up any given object, and such normative restrictions go far beyond what can be uncovered through anthropocentric forays into "value theory." The *right* way to take up objects, to put it succinctly, involves doing so in a way that allows them to be themselves. Unlike Kant's purely *formal* notion of the imperative as accessible only to reason, however, the sort of demand I have in mind emerges sensuously from an object's material self-showing. But materiality is always *excessive*; it points beyond itself, not towards separable form or pure intelligibility, but towards *more of itself*, towards an inexhaustible depth that houses an infinity of interpretations. This brings us to the counterpart of my definition: like Levinas's "beloved,"[271] all objects withdraw at the same time they stand forth as demand. Objects are simultaneously *demand* and

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[271] Cf. Levinas 1969: 254-266.

*withdrawal.* For this reason I am sympathetic to Graham Harman's object-oriented philosophy, but part ways with him critically on the precise nature of the withdrawal at issue.

My program for the remainder of the section is as follows: I first present and repudiate some alternatives to my favored object-focused approach largely by means of Harman's penetrating critique of "undermining" and "overmining" philosophies. Next I offer a positive defense of object-thinking as that in which entities (be they physical or conceptual) are free to be what they are outside of their givenness to human consciousness and practical activity. It is this freedom of objects, I argue, that makes aesthetic hermeneutics—construed as the study of objects' self-presented imperativity—so important (see Chapter Four). Finally, I maintain that, in his admirable zeal to overcome the ultimately idealist trappings of Kantian "correlationism" and its heirs, Harman ironically ends up advocating the existence of an inaccessible *noumenal* realm of "real" objects that neither touch nor express themselves.[272] For Harman, real objects are withdrawn and ontologically "vacuum-sealed" off from all relations. In my view, by contrast, objects are irreducible singularities not because they are hermetically sequestered in ontological isolation like Leibniz's monads, but because they are *really* exposed to every other object *as* materially bottomless in principle, i.e., as *self-giving* rife with contradictions, caesurae, and mutually concealing lines of flight. Insisting on a supremacy of the phenomenal that is irreducible to *sheer* presence, I reject Harman's strict separation of "real" objects from their "sensual" counterparts. The sensual *is* the real, but, owing to its excessive nature, it is also immeasurably deep. Heidegger's arguably anti-phenomenological

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[272] Harman is not shy about his commitment to *noumena.* In a 2012 lecture in Perm, Russia, for example, he asserts: "Rather than overthrowing Kant in favor of some form of absolute knowledge…what we need is to spread the Kantian vision across the cosmos as a whole. For what Kant actually gave us was not a poignant theory of the special limitations of poor human beings. Instead, he gave us a noumenal/phenomenal distinction that holds for all relations whatsoever" (2013: 169-170).

rethinking of the notion of "phenomenon" in his later work, and Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology

of beings as "singular-pluralities" are quite helpful to this end.  I will discuss these approaches

later in the chapter.

Privileging the object as ontologically primary might strike one as naïve, reactionary,

or nostalgic.  To talk about objects as meaningful wholes irreducible either to constitutive parts

or to external or internal relations may seem to suggest a degree of ontological stability and

determinacy that has been out of fashion since Nietzsche.  Indeed, the phenomenological

movement's insistent clinging to "intentionality"—inherited from Franz Brentano's

psychology—guards against any unauthorized transgressing of the bounds of an entity's

*appearing.* When Husserl says, "To the things themselves!" he means to the things only insofar

as they "come into consideration…as things of personal subjects."[273]  Bracketing the natural

world of "real" objects through the phenomenological reduction, Husserl is able to more

rigorously entertain the sparkling plane of "pure consciousness" as what is left over after the

successful deployment of any objectivating act.

For Husserl, however, this shouldn't be regarded as a reductionism in the crass sense,

but rather one in virtue of which "absolute being" (i.e., *a la* Hegel, *meaningful* being, the

intelligibility of change through the "Idea" as both final and efficient cause) is scientifically

apprehended:  "Strictly speaking, we have not lost anything but rather have gained the whole

of absolute being which, rightly understood, contains within itself, 'constitutes' within itself,

all worldly transcendencies." [274]  Husserl's towering philosophical achievement was to

demonstrate the irreducible importance of appearances *as such* in the establishment of

meaning.  While no doubt indispensible for any philosophy of perception that claims to value

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[273] Husserl (1989): 379
[274] Husserl (1983): 113

concreteness, Husserl's emphasis on phenomenology as *methodology* goes too far. In short, Husserl wants to talk about *experiential appearances*, not about "things." But, for Husserl, there is no dark remainder; there is nothing of interest to consider beyond phenomena thought strictly in terms of intentional objects. In fact, to speak of extraneous *residua* or unseen artifacts at all is, on this view, to speak incoherently.

Heidegger of *Being and Time* is only faintly more ambivalent on this score, asserting that objects "'*as they are in themselves*'"[275] are fully deployed in their *zuhanden* assignments,[276] of which comportment towards them as uniformly present *vorhanden* entities is always derivative. Just a few pages earlier he notes that these tool-beings "never show themselves proximally as they are *for themselves*,"[277] suggesting that there is nothing to grasp of pieces of equipment outside their place in the referential totality of assigned significances. Heidegger's great advance over Husserl here, however, is to note that equipmentality or usefulness is not a *property* among others that a particular object can lose or gain and still maintain its being. The *zuhanden* nature of a hammer as understood from within the overarching spatio-temporal system of my concernful projects shows itself most authentically as ready to be taken up and wielded as an extension of my own being. For Husserl, if the hammer ceases to be useful it suffers no ontological diminution by dint of the fact that it still *appears* to consciousness with the rest of its properties. That hammers, corkscrews, and cars are primarily and for the most part grasped through pre-reflective *praxis* must appear to Husserl as an unfortunate and non-phenomenological inheritance of the "natural attitude."

But Heidegger's analysis of functional equipment is only half the story. As all of us are aware, tools tend to break. It is when the head of the hammer unexpectedly falls loose

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[275] Italics in original.
[276] Heidegger (1962): 101
[277] *Ibid*: 97-98. Emphasis added.

from the handle after a hard swing that one is made aware of what one had already been doing. The sudden failure of a tool effectively brings to explicitude what had been covered over in mute familiarity. It could be argued that Heidegger's treatment of broken tools in *Sein und Zeit* is simply a more concrete and practically-minded elaboration of Husserl's phenomenological reduction; the natural attitude in which our everyday practices are carried out is put in parentheses when our tools fail us, but decidedly from within the world of *Dasein*'s involvements. Obviously, this is the way in which Heidegger's existentialist interpreters in their defense of certain subjectivistic and decisionistic ontologies take up his analysis.

As a result of the foregoing, both Husserl and Heidegger can be accused of "overmining" objects. In Harman's terminology, ontologies that "undermine" "would subvert objects by saying that they are merely surface phenomena: either fully unreal, or less real than some deeper layer by which they are generated."[278] "Overmining" ontologies, in contrast, hold that "entities are real only by virtue of their relational effects on other entities."[279] However much Husserl insists on the necessarily transcendental character of objects in their appearing, and however far Heidegger wants to push the being *in-itself* of tools in our pre-thematic immersion into their worldly edifices, both phenomenologists reduce objects to the structure of their relations with human beings. As Harman points out, "unless objects are granted reality apart from…appearance, it is pointless to say that humans are always already engaged with things rather than being isolated minds, or that they are passive participants in an event rather than active constitutors of the world."[280] As we have seen, I take issue with Harman's notion of "appearance," insofar as I understand counterfactual and conditional states of object-being (what goes on beneath surfaces accessible to so-called human "subjects") to constitute

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[278] Harman (2009): 60.
[279] *Ibid*: 61.
[280] Harman (2011): 22.

"appearance" no less than do factual and visibly unrestricted ones. Even the inhabitants of z8_GND_5296, the most distant known galaxy from Earth, "appear," i.e., *show themselves*. For Harman, "appearance" is always a sensuous caricature concealing an ineffable, untouchable "reality." In my view, appearance *is* reality, but only insofar as the latter is understood to be ontologically inexhaustible. Nevertheless, we can agree with Harman's claim if we modify "appearance" to read, "appearance *for* this or that specific object." While Husserl overmines objects by reducing them to flickers in pure consciousness (thereby thinking the notion of "object" to be unduly deep), Heidegger essentially does the same by reducing individual tools to their *praxical* meaning amidst a vast network of ends, means, and intermediate references.

If the reduction of objects to mere "presence-at-hand"—as had been the wont of metaphysicians since Descartes—is inadequate, then why would uniformly consolidating them in terms of precognitive human comportment be any better? Whether present for observation or present for use, objects so characterized are thinkable only through one form or another of human access. Heidegger's discussion of tools and broken tools in *Sein und Zeit*, however, has some very exciting implications that are not convincingly opened up until his later critique of global technology as the pervasively *spectralizing* discourse in which *all* objects, from rivers to bridges, airplanes, and even human beings, are attenuated into clouds of an only vaguely imposing use-potential. We can retrospectively engage his famous tool-analysis with these insights in mind.

Concealment is intrinsic to objects in a way that no discourse, no matter how "comprehensive," can overcome. My broken exercise bike, for example, shows that its shadowy parts of obscure origin couldn't care less about my desire to do some cardio *while* finally getting around to reading Proust. Objectionable anthropomorphizing aside, the broken bike at the very least shows there to be aspects of its materiality that resist both everyday

coping and detached scientific analysis.[281]  Even the most skilled scientific observer is limited

to the theoretical and practical tools specific to his or her discipline.  Operative immersion in

a discourse closes off access to certain phenomena at the same time that it opens up others to

rigorous inquiry.   The working exercise equipment discloses itself "proximally and for the

most part" as that with which some concrete activity is always already underway.  Such *praxical*

self-presentation does indeed show something true and significant about the bike, but then

again so does my laughable effort to theoretically grasp what each part of the object is with a

view to eventually repairing it.  Fissures in the *zuhanden* order of things offer us a glimpse into

an irrevocably withdrawn materiality that is not, as Aristotle thought, a mere bundle of

potentialities.  Rather, if matter were pure potentiality, its dark recesses would be hopelessly

dependent on determinate incursions of form (pre-existing *material* conditions) for the

attainment of any degree of actuality.

My ontology of objects is generous.  Indeed, the fact of objectival withdrawal, the

coldly mocking indifference with which I am faced by the (practically) near though distant

plastic, metal, and rubber of my partially disemboweled Proform model XP 185U, is a

surprising product of this metaphysical generosity.  Just as the Platonic forms of *the good*, *the*

*beautiful*, *the just*, etc. can never be thoroughly exhausted by any rational account, the material

being of each particular entity in *this* mundane world is bottomless.  What aphotically remains

in spite of every sentient engagement and senseless physical bombardment alike is, in itself,

perfectly actual.

Another example of overmining in contemporary philosophy is Judith Butler's theory

of "performativity."  This feminist approach to modern problems of gendered embodiment

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[281] For instance, no one has ever directly perceived a quark, which, moreover, may or may not be
divisible into some smaller unit about which we know nothing.

conspicuously lines up with both the so-called analytic "linguistic turn" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the more "continental" sensibility of Nietzsche's privileging of subterranean, power-driven *interpretation*.[282] While her performative anti-ontology is helpful for rethinking a problematic metaphysics of the subject, it is hugely dissatisfying in its deflation of objects in general. In essaying to combat the positing of any politically suspect, fixed, hidden "essence," Butler ends up advocating a kind of nominalist essence constituted independently of objects' immanent normativity by means of discursive social practices. There is nothing to objects or subjects *but* shifting performative inscription. The human acts, desires and gestures that are interpreted as the products of a relatively stable essence are really *performative*, insofar as they manufacture and ephemerally sustain an objective presence constituted *purely* through public norms and conventions.[283] There are only values and the interpretation of values.

Is it really necessary to embrace such a funhouse hall-of-mirrors "ontology" in order to avoid a Cartesian dualistic or Sartrean existentialist subjectivism? To put the same matter differently, must we endorse a kind of Hobbesian anarchic ontology of groundless, flittering, practical "values" in order to reject the politically detestable consequences of Aristotle's place-oriented system? Can we not, instead, claim, perhaps by means of an updated reading of Rousseau's notion of *sentiment*, that girl scouts, sandwiches, planetary orbits, vintage synthesizers, miniature golf courses, and Lake Balaton all direct us in a sensuously immediate way compared to which protean norms and values might be insidiously deficient? Contrary to what Butler and her postmodern ilk may think, doing this need not land us in essentialism

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[282] For example: "Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying "there are only facts," I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations…" (Nietzsche 1982: 458).

[283] Butler (1999): 173.

(regarding "subjects" or non-human objects).  In fact, if we understand "essence" in terms of Aristotle's *to ti esti*, then my advocacy of object thinking, strictly speaking, cannot be translated to an advocacy of essence.  For Aristotle, the "whatness" of a thing, its "essence," is not just knowable, but is defined as that which can be known most of all.  Objects in my view *cannot be known* (that is, if true "knowledge" is understood as *certainty*).  Ontologically indifferent and withdrawn, objects always resist knowledge of them because of their plentiful material depth.  There is always more to learn about an object, always deeper or oblique layers to peel back even if the act of peeling back always covers over something else.  We can thus characterize our epistemological relation to objects as an erotic longing, the only thing of which Socrates— vibrantly aware of his own *ignorance*—claims to have "expert knowledge."[284]

Karsten Harries, explaining Heidegger's well-known but perplexing repudiation of value theory (to which we will turn below), describes the latter as "an attempt to restore to the world the meaning lost in the reduction of being to presence-at-hand."[285]  But we needn't think of *objects* in terms of Heidegger's suspicion of *vorhanden* "objective being."  Seen in light of Harries' explanation, there is a clear sense in which the postmodern deflation of objects into ghostly constellations of projected wants and hegemonic inscriptions is furtively nostalgic. Arguably, this what Mario Perniola has in mind when he regards the postmodern as "parasitic" on the modern,[286] relying on the latter's problematic assumptions for its very *raison d'être*.  By positing ontological withdrawal as in part constitutive of objects, we can sidestep these difficulties.

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[284] Plato (2001): 7.
[285] Harries (1978): 72.
[286] Perniola (2004): 27.

### 3.3.2 Back to Objects

I will now build on the foregoing by providing a more positive account of objects and object-based ontology. As suggested in the introduction, I reject Harman's quasi-mystical and dualistic splitting of the object into *real* and *sensual*. The *reality* of an object is not distinguishable (ontologically or epistemologically) from its sensuous presentation; the idea that the former is not exhaustibly *knowable* is a corollary of rich metaphysical generosity, rather than an inordinately determinate speculative postulate in the Kantian tradition. The reality of an object *is* its sensuous self-presentation. In other words, the being of an object is *excessive presence*, an overwhelming plentitude that withdraws, consequently, even from itself. The excessiveness at issue is an expression of *withdrawal*, but it is important to note that the latter is a constitutive part of self-presentation itself. Things *present themselves* as at once demanding *and* withdrawn. Every self-presentation is boundlessly rich.

Why *objects*? Why not talk about *things*, *events*, *atoms*, or *phenomena* as the most basic entities in the ecology of the universe? For one thing, the word "object" lends itself quite efficaciously to the two dimensions stressed above: *demand* and *withdrawal*. Every "thing" is an object, whether a dead rat rotting in a Long Beach alley, the AARP, an Italo-Disco record, a failing marriage, or the president of Venezuela. To assert that objects are irreducible to their relations is not to say that they can exist independently of any relation, like a Platonic form. When Harman defines an object as that which has a "unified reality that is autonomous from its wider context and also from its own pieces,"[287] he does not mean that said object is what it is irrespective of site or context. It means, rather, that objects cannot be *reduced* to their relational contexts (overmining) or to their constitutive parts (undermining). In other words, what he has in mind is a version of the "weird mereology" discussed in the previous section.

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[287] Harman (2011a): 116.

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New objects are generated through new perceptual or conceptual relations and come to occupy a space within a broader object. Such a profound pluralism enables us to avoid the shortcomings of ontotheology, the perennial tendency in metaphysics of which Heidegger was critical his entire career. There is no one element, *arche*, or constitutive relation that can exhaustively explain every piece of furniture in the universe (not even Dasein's "care structure").

Objects are distinguished from one another by their own modes of self-presentation, which find expression as directive or *demand*. Alphonso Lingis writes, "For craftsmen there is a right way to make something and a right way to use each thing. Hang gliders learn from the winds and the thermals and from the materials the right way to make and to fly a hang glider, as the composer learns from a symphony emerging before him which are not yet the right notes."[288] The fact that the "right way" to fly a hang glider is relative to specifically human purposes and practices is no counterexample to my argument. We learn not only how to *realize* our desires and goals by responding to the exigencies of the lived environment, but also what those desires and goals are in the first place. If we didn't understand, in a prereflective way, the demands of wind currents, and the wind currents precisely *as* these demands, hang gliding would have never manifested itself as a possibility. Happy accidents in musical experimentation function in the same way. Avant-garde composers like Pierre Schaffer, Luigi Russolo, John Cage, and Thurston Moore learn to embrace and to reticently stay with what appears unpredictably and, as is often the case, undesirably. Because, like any other object, we are inescapably caught up in the demands of things—from the most alluring to the most banal—what we learn in the sensuous, inter-object domain is always drawn from the imperative self-showing *difference* of what stands before us. We learn to hang glide by

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[288] Lingis (1998): 1.

responding to the demands of the wind, and we respond to the demands of the wind by learning to hang glide.[289] Objects, as self-presentation, *stand over and against* each other; this is, in fact, the originary meaning of the term. Objects, human or otherwise, impose themselves in the form of an imperative. They also, on the other hand, *object to* whomever or whatever takes them up. This is the other meaning of the word, not unrelated to the first. From this dimension of the language we can derive the nature of *object withdrawal.*

The "undermining" ontotheological efforts of the presocratics set the stage for all subsequent monisms, dualisms, atomisms, and even "overmining" holisms. To say that all phenomena can be sufficiently explained by means of the *arche* of water is in principle no different than applying the same reductive explanatory power to systems of relations, no matter how complex or stable. What would it mean, however, to be sufficiently respectful of an object's inexhaustible depth, whether the object is thought in terms of *vorhandenheit* or *zuhandenheit*? Such attention to the *objecting* side of objects requires a hermeneutical rethinking of the nature of phenomena. This is what Heidegger set out to do in his later lectures, seminars, and even the virtually impenetrable *Beiträge* of his fruitful middle-period. Prior to Kant's distinction of "phenomenon" from "noumenon," Heidegger suggests, the *appearing* and the *in-itself* were the same. In his 1969 Le Thor seminar, Heidegger insists that "what is primary [with respect to phenomena] is the appearance [*Aussehen*], the way and manner by which the thing is characterized, and not the view that one has of it, a view that one is only able to form on the basis of what the appearance first *puts forth*."[290] That is to say, the shimmering self-presentation of an object is, concretely speaking, inseparable from the shadowy earth that sustains and shelters it. This is not only because, as Husserl would suggest, we ought not treat

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[289] Hopefully this point in my account brings to mind the so-called "hermeneutic circle," which will be a part of the discussion in Chapter Four.
[290] Heidegger (2003a): 40.

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phenomena as facile facades behind which there lurks something more real. Rather, the sensuous self-givenness of a phenomenon always retreats along a continuity of unpredictable depth. Materiality is *excessive*. It always has more to give, not of something else, but of itself.

I now want to conclude with some critical remarks about Harman's object-oriented ontology in the interest of refining and defining my own position. As mentioned, Harman understands objective withdrawal metaphysically in such a way that every *real* object is hermetically sealed apart from every other real object. Thus, the "dark remainder" in part constitutive of all entities is a wholly nonsensuous being totally inaccessible to any other being by virtue of its ontological isolation. Real objects never meet. Only the sensual counterparts to real objects can interact causally, leading Harman to endorse a bizarre brand of occasionalism. His reasoning for this is as follows: If real objects could interact, they would express themselves fully in every such liaison, thereby overmining themselves in a perpetual relational reduction. For Harman, it is not enough to say that objects only *partially* touch "because there is a sense in which objects have no parts."[291] The sense in which objects "have no parts" is related to the irreducible unity and distinctness of every object. This strange turn in Harman's ontology is the result of his effort to preserve the withdrawal aspect of object-being.

I contend that an object-focused approach need not commit itself to such a theory of vicarious causation. We can replace Harman's notion of withdrawal with one constituted out of a coupling of ontological *indifference* (objects don't care about what we can use them for) and ontological *excess* (objects are self-presentationally bottomless). This is a difficult and potentially confusing point. Given that I define objects as inexhaustible in virtue of the excessiveness of self-presentation, ontological withdrawal comes about as an inevitable

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[291] Harman (2011a): 73.

corollary. What I cannot accept in Harman's otherwise compelling position is that objects, from plastic sippy cups to molten nickel residing in the earth's core, hold "in reserve" some completely unreachable, subterranean dimension of their being.[292] Harman's dualism of real and sensual objects strikes me as too metaphysically tidy despite the ostensible radicality of its consequences. Moreover, if the stated aim of "speculative realism"—of which Harman is a major proponent—is to overturn Kant's "correlationism," then advancing a dualism that very much resembles the Kantian separation of *phenomena* from *noumena* seems like an unpalatable avenue.

I have argued that an object-oriented approach to ontology is crucial for a more concrete and authentic squaring with phenomena as they present themselves. This is because phenomena, as given, are never given *entirely*, and exist as ontologically actual and hermeneutically inexhaustible. This is not a nostalgic call to return to some ideal condition in which we can genuinely and peacefully "get back to" objects, knowing them intimately and grasping their essences as determinate principles of intelligibility. On the contrary, object-focused philosophy maintains that we can never fully *know* objects, and that, in the domains of art, science, and mindless everyday coping—separated only in abstraction—our relationship to objects in the world is one of infinite erotic longing. Cleary, this position has concrete import for ethics as well: if objects were *nothing but* ephemeral surfaces inscribed by socio-political structures of power, then it would be difficult, to say the least, to take them seriously. But that is precisely what a healthy ethics requires of us: to take the world and its demands seriously, to affirm, in short, that objects—at once demand and withdrawal—are enough.

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[292] Harman (2005): 82.

## 3.4 Towards a *Valueless* Ethics

The 1940s might be, for my purposes at least, Heidegger's most fruitful decade. It is during this time that he begins a sustained engagement with several importantly interrelated issues, including: (1) the rise of "value theory" in late modernity, (2) the "thingliness" of things, and (3) the ontological violence wrought by modern global technology. This constellation of issues is an opening through which to reflect on the possibility of an ethics grounded neither in subjective values nor in objective principles.

### 3.4.1 Nietzsche's Word

In 1943 Heidegger delivered a series of lectures which appeared later in 1952's *Holzwege* as the essay "Nietzsches Wort 'Gott ist Tot.'" Although it explicitly concerns Nietzsche's metaphysics of the will-to-power, the essay—as is often the case with Heidegger—reveals more about Heidegger's own view than about that of the thinker nominally under discussion. The fundamental claim advanced is that the modern *arché* of certainty-control, finding its first truly philosophical exposition in Descartes, came to a head in the nineteenth century under the banner of "values." Nihilism, that "uncanny guest that can't name its own origin,"[293] emerged as a possibility for the first time concomitant with the birth of "value" itself, understood by Nietzsche, according to Heidegger's reading, as the "preservation-enhancement condition posited in the will-to-power."[294] Science, as shaped and defined by Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, etc., is supposed to be value-neutral, relegating "the making of value-judgments to the sphere of 'world views' [*Weltanschauungen*]."[295] Modernity's obsession with bifurcating the world into *inside* and *outside*, the latter bearing truth, reality, objectivity, and

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[293] Heidegger (1977b): 63.
[294] *Ibid*: 83.
[295] *Ibid*: 71.

the former housing myth, ideality, subjectivity, culminated in the birth of "value theory" as the rightful home for all moral inquiry. In the *Beiträge* [1936-1938] Heidegger ties the *arché* of Cartesian self-certainty to the historical opening of the problematic discourse of *Weltanschauung* in the following critical remark: "This (namely, such self-certainty) is the innermost essence of 'liberalism,' which precisely for that reason can apparently unfold freely and can prescribe itself for the sake of achieving eternal progress. Accordingly, 'worldview,' 'personality,' 'genius,' and 'culture' are endowments and 'values' which are to be made actual in this or that way."[296] If, with Nietzsche, we understand nihilism to mean the self-devaluing of our highest values,[297] then its consummation not only leaves "reality" (passive and mute) intact, it also leaves us with an emptied "inside," which, insofar as it *is* the "inside" of the binary structure, cannot remain empty.

Since, as Heidegger asserts, "the essence of value lies in its being a point of view,"[298] values "are not antecedently something in themselves so that they can on occasion be taken as points of view."[299] Value implies a *subject* of value. The metaphysical subject, understood since Descartes to be self-assertive self-consciousness, is carried to its fullest logical deployment in Nietzsche's notion of the "will-to-power," which, as Hobbes observed first, is the very essence of power itself. However, seeing that all certainty arises necessarily from within a certain point of view, Nietzsche turns the issue on its head: "The question of value is more fundamental than the question of certainty."[300] One may never attain certainty, but one must always "value," i.e., stand within a particular perspective on the "preservation-enhancement conditions" for standing in a perspective at all (i.e., for being a "subject"). Thus,

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[296] Heidegger (2012b): 43.
[297] Nietzsche (2012): 9.
[298] Heidegger (1977b): 71.
[299] *Ibid*: 72.
[300] *Ibid*: 83.

"Man finds himself…set before the task of taking over dominion of the earth."[301] Heidegger ties Nietzsche's trope of God's death to the positing of God as a "highest value." The moment God, the transcendent Absolute, is understood in terms of values, his being *qua* absolute is obliterated. The killing of God (*qua* Absolute) amounts to the killing of that which is. Value-positing [*Wert-setzendes*] "has therefore killed as that which *is* for itself—all that *is* in itself."[302] As a kind of "radical killing," thinking in terms of values precludes in advance of every act of thinking that beings will show themselves *in their being*, that is, on their own terms.

### 3.4.2   A New Rootedness

In 1946 Jean Beaufret addressed a number of questions to Heidegger regarding the relationship of his thought to French existentialism. Both Beaufret's inquiry and Heidegger's reply refer to Sartre's "Existentialism Is a Humanism," a piece first delivered during the same year in Paris as a public lecture to an audience made up largely of non-philosophers. In it Sartre explicitly identifies Heidegger as an ally and then goes on to make several bold claims with which the latter would have no truck. Two propositions that stand out as most antithetical to Heidegger's project are: (1) "There is no reality except [human] action"[303] and (2) "There is no universe other than a human universe, the universe of human subjectivity."[304] Heidegger's response to Beaufret was expanded and published in 1947 under the title "Letter on Humanism." To my mind, the "Letter" constitutes the most profound, albeit inchoate, development of Heidegger's thought after "On the Essence of Truth" [1933], wherein the

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[301] *Ibid*. 96.
[302] *Ibid*. 107.  Italics in original.
[303] Sartre (1997): 232.
[304] *Ibid*. 238.

"truth [ἀλήθεια] of being" came to supplant the "meaning [*Sinn*] of being" as the essential material for thought.[305]

The "Letter" offers a clue to what a genuinely Heideggerian ethics would look like. Interpreting this clue is a dicey endeavor, however, because a genuine *ethics* would not be "ethics" (as understood within the metaphysical tradition of the West) but an *ontology*. Moreover, this *ontology* would not be "ontology" (as understood within the metaphysical tradition of the West) insofar as it would also possess an *ethical* dimension. In the "Letter" Heidegger calls attention to a line from the penultimate page of *Being and Time*: "The *conflict* with respect to the interpretation of Being (that is, therefore, not the interpretation of beings or of the Being of man) cannot be settled, *because it has not yet been kindled*…To this end alone the foregoing investigation is underway." He then remarks, "Today after two decades these sentences still hold. Let us also in the days ahead remain as wanderers on the way into the neighborhood of Being."[306] What is needed is a kind of restrained but dynamic *aesthetic listening* to the call of being (the self-showing of beings) that is unimpeded by ossified "isms."

At the heart of Sartre's existentialist humanism famously lies a reversal of Aristotle's famous insight that "essence precedes existence." Sartre jettisons the "rational animal" characterization of human being (*qua* essence), but, in thinking human being in terms of *action*, a kind of Prometheanism, he perpetuates the ossification of the originary "*zoon logon echon*" into the Scholastic "*animal rationale*," where "*rationale*" means "ratio," "measure," "quantification." The human *is* nothing but what it *does*, and it *does* only what it *chooses*. Heidegger connects this inherited position to the rise of *modern* materialism (which is intentionally ironic given Sartre's explicit repudiation of materialism in his 1946 address): "The

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[305] As we shall see in Chapter Four, this transition from *meaning* to *truth* (unconcealment) was fruitful for informing Luigi Pareyson's more object-oriented hermeneutics.
[306] Heidegger (1993): 247.

essence of materialism does not consist in the assertion that everything is simply matter, but rather in the metaphysical determination according to which every being appears as the material for labor."[307] The secular materialism embraced by most strands of humanism ensures that beings are always already thought in terms of *value*, which exerts itself in every case from out of a valuing *subject*. Thus, the ancient anthropocentrism characterized most strikingly by its grounding in a geocentric view of the cosmos eventually gave way to a modern anthropocentrism in which the Galilean dictum ("Measure what is measurable and make measurable what is not so") places Man [*sic*] at the center of all things as their master manipulator. Human beings are the center of the cosmos, not in any literal sense, but because we are the beings who bring value, measure, and *differentiation* to the universe of silent, superficial materiality.

For Heidegger, philosophy has tended historically towards a kind of conservatism, not in the interest of *being* or *beings*, but in the interest of protecting the ground it has covered by trading on entrenched, long-accepted conceptual categories. These categories, static and a-historical, fail to track the "event" [*Ereignis*] in which the ongoing self-presentation of things is *appropriative*, i.e., *claim producing*. He writes, "…as long as philosophy merely busies itself with continually obstructing the possibility of admittance into the matter [*Sache*] for thinking, i.e., into the truth of Being, it stands safely beyond any danger of shattering against the hardness of that matter."[308] Identifying "philosophy" with "metaphysics" (ontotheology), Heidegger calls instead for an "originary thinking" [*Er-Denken*] that unfolds as a restrained openness to the self-showing of beings. *Er-Denken*—related to the discourse of *Er-Schweigen* (expressive silence) from *Being and Time*—is characterized by reticence. In attending reticently to the call

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307 *Ibid*: 243.
308 *Ibid*: 246.

of objects, the nearness of their self-presentation is sustained, thereby unworking the notion of a passive, liminal environment opened "for" a subject. What we call "environment" is really an indeterminate sphere of objects showing themselves at infinite levels, objects to which one generally turns a blind eye due to the obfuscation of "value-positing."

Against the "metaphysical subjectivism" of humanism Heidegger asks if thinking should "risk a shock [*Stoss*] that could for the first time cause perplexity concerning the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* and its basis."[309] The "shock" Heidegger has in mind is a rupture in the self-understanding of humans as *value-positing* beings. Such a rupture ought not to be considered a debasement of the human; on the contrary, it "opens other vistas"[310] from which to encounter the world and its objects anew. Heidegger writes:

> To think against "values" is not to maintain that everything interpreted as "a value"—"culture," "art," "science," "human dignity," "world," and "God"—is valueless. Rather, it is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as "a value" what is so valued is robbed of its dignity [*Würde*]. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every value, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid—solely as the objects of its doing…To think against values therefore does not mean to beat the drum for the valuelessness and nullity of beings. It means rather to bring the clearing of the truth of Being before thinking, as against subjectivizing beings into mere objects."[311]

Here, as elsewhere, Heidegger is critical of modern metaphysics and epistemology for populating the world with *subjects* and *objects*. His reasoning is essentially the same as mine in the critique of Cartesian biunivocity above. The birth of the metaphysical *subject* was at the same time the birth of the metaphysical *object*. To "subjectivize" a being into a "mere object"

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[309] *Ibid*: 248.

[310] *Ibid*: 250.

[311] *Ibid*: 251. In the text I cite, Frank A. Capuzzi and John Gray translate "*Würde*" as "worth." While not implausible, "dignity" strikes me as a better choice, given the closeness in meaning of "value" and "worth" in English. Both words are typically rendered as "*Wert*" when translated to German.

is to posit that being as *being for* a subject. Hence, both terms imply a necessary relation, but one that is dictated unilaterally on the side of subjectivity, the ground for all *knowing*, and—since the "epistemological turn"—for all *being* as well. It should be clear by now that this objection to what might be called "object-discourse" is not a problem for my approach. I want to unhinge the object from its modern metaphysical correlate, to insist that no object is *toto genere* derivative of or reducible to anything else. When Heidegger complains of the derivative nature of objects[312] he is essentially rehearsing his effort of "*Destruktion*" in *Being and Time*, i.e. calling attention to the self-concealing historicity of our most basic concepts (e.g., "subject" and "object"). When I use the word "object," I mean to gesture precisely towards that of which the *subjectivized* being (what I will below call a *specter*) is derivative. As we shall see, Heidegger's preferred word for this is "thing" [*Ding*].

One of Beaufret's questions regards "the relation of ontology to a possible ethics."[313] Heidegger's response segues from his discussion of *thinking* as a descent from ossified metaphysical concepts "back down into the nearness of the nearest."[314] Finding ourselves in the thick of beings in their truth, Heidegger asks whether ontology must not in fact be "supplemented by 'ethics.'"[315] In a rare personal aside, Heidegger begins his measured reply with a brief anecdote about an encounter in 1927 with a friend who wanted to know when he was going to write an ethics. He sees in the spirit of the question "a longing" for a "preemptory directive and for rules that say how man…ought to live in a fitting manner."[316] The suggestion

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[312] Tristan Garcia takes issue with Heidegger on this very point in his new book, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things* (2014). However, as I'm trying to show in the present argument, any OOO-motivated discrepancy with Heidegger's treatment of objects in this context should be seen as merely semantic.

[313] *Ibid*: 254-255.

[314] *Ibid*: 254.

[315] *Ibid*.

[316] *Ibid*: 255.

is that "ethics"—at least since the "epistemological turn"—necessarily concerns itself with securing *a priori* rules for the sake of delimiting the "ideal" from the "real." In short, axiology is an essentially Kantian endeavor, sustained on the basis of the supposed antinomy between the "real" (the way things are) and the "ideal" (the way things ought to be) causal orders. Yet, prior to the historical ossification of these conceptual domains there existed something like "the ethical" as a perennial source or *arché* from which later developments would obliviously draw. This "source" is the sphere of everyday life—the home or *abode* [*ethos*] in which we dwell alongside other beings where, in the words of Heraclitus, "the gods too are present." In the *nearness* of the everyday beings show themselves and voice claims through the *shock* or surprise of their self-showing. In the words of Walter Benjamin, "it is just that even the most commonplace things have their weight."[317]

Pursuing this thought, Heidegger observes,

If the name "ethics," in keeping with the basic meaning of the word *ethos*, should now say that "ethics" ponders the abode of man, then that thinking which thinks the truth [ἀλήθεια] of Being as the primordial element of man…is in itself the original ethics. However, this thinking is not ethics in the first instance, because it is ontology. For ontology always thinks solely the being (*on*) in its Being.

Original ethics is ontology. But, "ontology," since it seeks to reduce Being (the self-showing of beings) to a concept or series of concepts, will always fall short of that thinking whereby *is* and *ought* are inextricably bound up. Ontology in its modern form primarily works to tame what Merleau-Ponty calls "wild Being," i.e. that "Being which none of the 'representations' exhaust and which all 'reach.'"[318] It is for this reason that Levinas opposes ontology's claim to the status of "first philosophy:" unlike the *ethical*, the *ontological* relation is one in which the

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[317] Benjamin (1968): 112.
[318] Merleau-Ponty (1968): 253.

Other is "comprehended" by the Same, resulting in a unilateral flattening of difference.[319] For Levinas, ontology—finding its most rigorous form in Heidegger—seeks to privilege neutral *Being* over *beings*, i.e., *existents*: Dasein responds to the call of *Being*, not individual *beings*. Ontology as "first philosophy," as a necessary foundation for ethics, becomes a vehicle for a backhanded subjectivism or "philosophy of power."[320] According to this critique, Heidegger's "fundamental ontology" fails to overcome the problematic foundations of Kantian epistemology according to which subjective human categories constitute what is meaningful in the world. *Being* is a faceless and abstract third term in which the Other's difference is dissolved *for* a thinking subject. Thus, for Levinas, we must begin with a non-ontological metaphysics according to which there is no *Being*, but only *beings*, forever recalcitrant and haunting as the face of the Other.

Heidegger was aware of this essentially neo-Kantian interpretation of his project in *Being and Time* and was at pains to ward it off until the time of his death. *Being*, far from constituting a "neutral third term" for subjective comprehension, is always the *Being* of this or that *being* (existent),[321] the way in which a being *shows itself*, not a conceptual solvent wherein otherness is subordinated to intelligibility. Levinas' worry is reflective of an understanding of ontology that ties it to an epistemology of *certainty*. Heidegger's point in the "Letter" is that we need an orientation towards things that recognizes the inextricability of the endeavors historically called "ontology" and "ethics." Drawing from Heidegger here, I want to suggest that the self-presentation (Being) of things (beings) is always already normative (i.e. *demand*) and self-excessive. The thinking that makes openness to Being possible for humans, the

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[319] Levinas (1969): 42-48.

[320] *Ibid*: 46.

[321] I see no reason to think Heidegger changed his position on this after the so-called "turn" [*Kehre*] of the early 1930s.

thinking that exposes "directives that can be readily applied to our active lives,"[322] exercises itself prior to the distinction between the "theoretical" and the "practical." Although the priority at issue is not simply "historical"—but is also *perceptual* and *conceptual*—Heidegger writes, "Historically, only one saying [*Sage*] belongs to the matter [*Sache*] of thinking, the one that is *in each case appropriate to* [*gemäße*] *its matter* [*Sache*]."[323] *Erdenken* succumbs to the onto-logy (self-saying) of *die Sache*, which means to uphold the norms of being appropriate to it. When one speaks[324] the truth about an object, one succumbs to its *self*-saying, that is, one holds to it, is appropriate to it. *Truth*, whether conceived of as "revelatory" or "expressive," is normative. I will have more to say about the normativity of truth as *both* revelatory *and* expressive in the following chapter.

This is why Being unfolds prior to the distinction between *theoretical* and *practical* reason: there truly is no position of "*theoria*" in which a seer remains above the seen in the manner of a detached spectator. Just as little is one ever *only* practically caught up in the performance of a task that appropriates an object in the drive towards its own success. In fact, *praxis* only happens because every appropriation is essentially incomplete; directives, as well as the appearance of instrumentality as such, only occur on the concealed basis of a way of being that is indifferent to the task in question. When Greta, my Australian cattle dog, discriminates between different types of vegetation during a long hike, she is engaged in an interpretive act. She *interprets* (i.e., responds to what is given in a non-determined way) prereflectively what in the available foliage will temporarily satisfy her conation. The mature crabgrass that typically shows itself as roughage to be eaten, as a source of nourishment, does so only because (1) this is one of the things it is, and (2) this surface-level, sense-making adumbration is subtended

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[322] Heidegger (1993): 259.
[323] *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
[324] This "speaking" need not be a literal *utterance*.

and made possible by an elusive depth of being out of which an infinite number of other dimensions is always already voicing itself. The very *readiness* of the grass *as* consumable presupposes this liminal awareness on the part of the animal. There is an ineliminable background of indifferent Being that makes possible every narrowly instrumental foregrounding. Because she *belongs* to Being, that is, stands out in and amongst the truth (disclosure) of beings in their Being (self-showing), Greta is open to and gripped by "the assignment of those directives that must become rule and law"[325] for her.

For Heidegger, of course, it is *Dasein*, human being, which uniquely stands forth into the *clearing* (truth) of Being. In the "Letter" he points out that while humans enjoy an undeniably intimate kinship with non-human animate creatures, the latter are separated from the "exemplary essence" of the former as if "by an abyss."[326] Our intimate, *ontic* closeness to certain nonhuman animals practically conceals our *ontological* distance from them. One way to articulate this tension is to locate it along the plane of consistency as an expression of the ontological economy of difference. The *essencing* [*Wesen*]—i.e., the way it abides in its self-showing—of the human touches what it is not precisely in being (unfolding as) what it is. Recall that radical, *ontological* difference (*phenomenal* plurivocity) is underwritten by and expressive of a concealed but originary *sameness* (*planomenal* univocity). This is just what it means to talk about difference in *degree* rather than *kind*. Everything that *is* is of the same kind; far from undermining difference, this fact guarantees it.

I don't want to suggest that Heidegger thought difference in this domain *analogically* rather than *digitally* in any explicit or fully developed sense. In fact, when it comes to difference vis-à-vis biological organisms, he may have been barred from doing so in virtue of his

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[325] *Ibid.* 262.
[326] *Ibid.* 230.

theoretical indebtedness to Jakob von Uexküll's seminal work on animal behavior. Uexküll made an enormous impression on Heidegger by appealing to his overall project against anthropocentric models of reality. For the famed biologist, investigation into the environments (*Umwelten*) of non-human animals is really "a walk into unknown worlds."[327] Unlike most biologists and zoologists before him, Uexküll did not posit the existence of a unitary, "objective" world populated by living organisms of differing levels of complexity, culminating in the conscious sentience peculiar to humans. Rather, so-called "objective space" (*Umgebung*) is fractured into innumerable, fundamentally irreconcilable, lived perceptual environments (*Umwelten*) shaped and marked by what he calls "carriers of significance" (*Bedeutungsträger*), which vary from animal to animal and ultimately constitute the only world of meaning available for the animal. As Agamben puts it, "The fly, the dragonfly, and the bee that we observe flying next to us on a sunny day do not move in the same world as the one in which we observe them, nor do they share with us—or with each other—the same time and the same space."[328] The *Umgebung* is distinguishable from *Umwelten* in that the former's contours aren't delimited by *particular* sources of meaning or attraction. The human being, unlike other animals, tends to occupy the indifferent *Umgebung* as its own distinctive *Umwelt*. We are, in short, uniquely *ontological* beings, i.e., capable of transcending the "carriers of significance" that endow our finite human world with its peculiar sense. This amounts to the claim that humans alone, by their very nature, abide in an openness *to* the *closedness* of non-human animal life. Heidegger calls this mode of being *being-in-the-world*.

In a 1929-1930 lecture course at the University of Freiberg titled, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, Heidegger distinguishes the human from non-

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[327] Uexküll (2010): 41.
[328] Agamben (2003): 53.

human animals by defining the former as "world-forming" [*weltbildend*] and the latter as being "poor in world" [*weltarm*].[329] The difference is essentially that, while animals remain ineluctably *captivated* [*benommen*] by the carriers of significance which complete the contours of their world, humans are capable of tearing away from such sources of meaning in order to reveal the *indifference* of the environment and its objects to human designs. In short, "Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored."[330] Human beings thus stand in a kind of *openness to the environment* unavailable to non-humans. As a result, in the case of the animal, "*neither its so-called environment nor the animal itself are manifest as beings.*"[331] Agamben uses this text to support his thesis that *only* Dasein has "world" as the non-causal result of its *open* and *free/freeing* condition of "being-in." Similarly, Glen A. Mazis lumps Uexküll, Heidegger and Agamben together in a shared failure to follow out the non-anthropocentric implications of the "unknown worlds" thesis (i.e., that biological/ecological inquiry is an opening into hitherto "unknown worlds") owing to an undue emphasis on *separation* and *individuality* at the expense of *community*.[332] He concludes, "whatever intrinsically shared being [Heidegger] envisioned at least conceptually among humans, he did not see any possible overlap in the being of humans and animals."[333]

In the "Letter" Heidegger writes, "in being denied language [plants and animals] are not thereby suspended worldlessly in their environment [*Umgebung*]."[334] Understood as the "clearing/concealing advent of Being itself,"[335] language is the diaphanous milieu in which the spacing of indifference, the uncollapsibility of beings to their carriers of significance, is first

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[329] Heidegger (1995): 185.
[330] Agamben (2003): 70.
[331] Heidegger (1995): 248.
[332] Mazis (2008): 28.
[333] *Ibid*: 29.
[334] Heidegger (1993): 230.
[335] *Ibid*.

achieved. Yet the absence of language in plant and animal life does not result in the essential "worldlessness" of the latter: the state of "possessing world" is a matter of ontological degree rather than all or not. Nevertheless, Heidegger still seems to lay a hard and fast *digital* wedge between the human *Welt*, which is open, and nonhuman *Umwelten*, which are delimited. In contrast, I propose that to possess world, in whatever degree of amplitude, is to stand forth out of a fundamental *de-cision* in which objects show themselves as what they are. This is *not* the sort of "decision" that underwrites Sartre's view of radical freedom according to which the human alone participates in "action" [*praxis*], i.e., intentional comportment, free choice, etc. According to the Sartrean view, humans alone take *decisive action*, while animals merely *behave*. *De-cision* [*Ent-scheidung*], for Heidegger, is not about "choice," inasmuch as "choosing always concerns only something pregiven, something that can be taken or rejected"[336] by an already established "subject." Thought in this way, "decision" is a particular human activity or process. In *de-cision*, by contrast, lies "the necessary, that which 'resides' *prior* to the 'activity' and reaches beyond the activity."[337]

It is time, I submit, that we come to accept that the distinction between "free choice" and "determined behavior" is effectively meaningless. This is relevant to my project inasmuch as "freedom" and "free will" are often invoked to draw a rigid distinction between humans and non-humans. As Merleau-Ponty argues in the "Freedom" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, prior to any concrete choice—say, between wearing a cravat or a bolo tie—lies the "plenum" of being in which we find ourselves—our powers, limitations, etc.—specified.[338] Freedom is not a core of nothingness from which alone value and meaning issue; it is instead the ceaselessly renewed and renewing *de-cision,* or, *opening-up*, in which one is revealed to be

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[336] Heidegger (2012b): 79.
[337] *Ibid*: 81.
[338] Merleau-Ponty (1989): 452.

what one is precisely at the same time and through the same mechanism that the world itself is made manifest. "Taken concretely, freedom is always a meeting of the inner and the outer,"[339] a *chiasmic* interfolding of beings simultaneously brought together and isolated from one another in virtue, in my view, of their self-showing *qua* demand and withdrawal. To be clear, I am transposing this view of freedom from *subject-object* to *object-object*. Self-intimacy and "other," object-intimacy are reciprocally necessary conditions for the possibility of experience as such. In Heidegger's language, one is called to be what one is in responding to the presence of the call of beings in their Being. This freeing-up for the arrival of beings, announced in the appropriative mechanism of their self-expression, is the fundamental de-cision that grounds and makes possible all choice. Strictly speaking, there is no *freedom*, but only *freeing*. The human may have a greater conceptual purchase on the "open" in which *freeing* unfolds than do other beings. But—and here is where I part ways with Heidegger—the stone, too, simply in *being at all*, participates in the de-cision—the opening up for the expression of demands—to a greater or lesser degree of amplitude than others.

Ethics is typically understood in terms of (more or less rigorous) rule instituting practices. I have been trying to tease out an alternative approach to the ethical by attending to Heidegger's critique of value theory in his "Letter on Humanism." For Heidegger, the ossified history of metaphysical discourse has blinded us to the "truth of Being" (i.e. the appropriative self-showing of beings). *Er-denken*, "originary" or "inceptual" thinking, amounts to the adoption of a reticent posture that allows the "there is," the *es gibt*, of beings to be received. Hence, drawing on the pietistic mysticism of Meister Eckhart, Heidegger calls attention to the connection between *thinking* and *thanking* [*denken* and *danken*]: "…the essential nature of thinking is determined by what there is [*es gibt*] to be thought about: the presence of

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[339] *Ibid.* 454.

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what is present, the Being of beings…And what is so given, is the gift of what is most worthy of questioning."[340]  In the "Letter," however, Heidegger anticipates an objection that turns on the possible arbitrariness of his approach:  "Whence does thinking take its measure?  What law governs its deed?"[341]  Sartre says, "…if I've discarded God the father, there has to be someone to invent values."[342]  "*Man*," in the absence of God, would be the measure.  But, if we have embraced Heidegger's advice and discarded "value-positing" and also, therefore, "human action," as our metaethical foundation, then where is the source of directives, *oughts*?  For Heidegger, this source just *is* the *Ereignis* together with Dasein's role in it:  the clearing for the truth of Being grounded precisely in Dasein's groundlessness.  This is not a satisfactory answer for OOE because it presupposes the problematic binary structure of which this study has been critical.  The concept of "*Ereignis*," of which Dasein is *necessarily* co-constitutive, is just another instance of what Meillassoux calls the "correlationist two-step," viz., "belief in the primacy of the [subject/object] relation over the related terms."[343]  We are in a position to provide an alternative answer that avoids both extreme subjectivism and milder forms of "correlationism":  the origin of *ought* rests in beings themselves, human and otherwise, *as* their self-presentation (Being).  I call these beings, all beings, *objects*.  This point of criticism notwithstanding, we have a lot to learn from Heidegger's critique of subjectivist or value-based moral theory.

For Heidegger, as discussed above, the task of thinking—beyond the abstract and calcified disciplines of "metaphysics," "ethics," "logic," etc.—is to aid our descent "back down into the nearness of the nearest."  Regarding the *ethical* in particular, "more essential than

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[340] Heidegger (1968): 244.
[341] Heidegger (1993): 263.
[342] Sartre (2003): 238.
[343] Meillassoux (2006): 5.

instituting rules is that man [*sic*] find the way to his abode [*ethos*] in the truth of Being."[344]  What

does this mean?  Simply put, the practice and discourse of morality must begin from the

ground up.  The "top-down" application of *a priori* principles to concrete situations is always

surreptitiously derivative of a primary but background *sense*[345] issued from the obscure bottom.

A return to the *nearness* of this source would perhaps, as suggested above, open up "new

vistas," a new way of inhabiting the world.  In the "Memorial Address" part of a text published

under the title *Gelassenheit* ("Releasement") [1959], Heidegger asks, "even if the old rootedness

is being lost in this age, may not a new ground and foundation be granted again to man, a

foundation and ground out of which man's nature and all his works can flourish in a new way

even in the atomic age?"[346]  Some commentators have been critical of this move in Heidegger's

later thought, interpreting the pursuit of a "ground," a "foundation," indeed, a "rootedness,"

however "new" they may be, as a symptom of the thinker's essential conservatism,

romanticism, or, worse still, fascism.   Richard Capobianco, for example, comments on

Heidegger's proposed "new autochthony"[347] by concluding, "apparently, the journey home for

Dasein no longer essentially and necessarily passes through the *unheimlich*."[348]  The implication

is that while "early" Heidegger construed the *being-at-home* of Dasein as a kind of *being-not-at-*

*home*, "late" Heidegger bypasses the uncanny in a nostalgic bid for a state of blissful intimacy

with things.[349]  This, on Capobianco's view, is what inhabiting the "nearness of the nearest"

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344 Heidegger (1993): 262.

345 The French "*sens*," evocative at once of "sense," "meaning," and "direction," is better here than
the English equivalent.

346 Heidegger (1966): 53.  The "Memorial Address" was a speech delivered at the celebration of the
175th birthday of composer Conradin Kreutzer on October 30th, 1955.

347 *Ibid*: 55.

348 Capobianco (2010): 66.

349 In I.6 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that the basic mode of being-in-the-world peculiar to
Dasein is that of a tension (anxiety) between feeling at-home and feeling not-at-home.  Since, owing
to Dasein's "thrownness," "*from an existential-ontological point of view, the 'not-at-home' must be conceived as the
more primordial phenomenon*" (Heidegger 1966: 234), it can be accurately stated that Dasein is *at home*, is

would amount to. I disagree. To articulate my disagreement it is necessary to explicate what Heidegger means by "nearness," and this requires, most fundamentally, an explication of what he means by "thing" [*Ding*].

### 3.4.3   The Thing:  Distance in Nearness

The controversial remarks of the early 1950s concerning the possibility of a "new rootedness" were informed by certain ontological insights Heidegger had uncovered throughout the 1940s, culminating in his 1949 Bremen lecture course titled, "Insight into That Which Is." Heidegger begins the lecture series with a reflection on the nature of "nearness." With the advent of modern communications technologies (radio, telephone, air travel, etc.), it had become a truism that vast and previously insuperable distances were rapidly shrinking. "Yet," Heidegger tells us, "the hasty setting aside of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in a small amount of distance."[350] What follows is a sustained inquiry into the essence of the "near," which, Heidegger concludes, shows up as a phenomenon only in the being of "the thing" [*Das Ding*]. Furthermore, it is only in the nearness of things that distance, properly understood, is first opened up and able to be *qua* distance. In virtue of a thing's nearing action, its intimate self-showing, distance itself comes to light as partly ontologically constitutive of the thing's basic structure. Put in the terms of this dissertation, only in the nearness of things does their *withdrawal* become manifest.

Where does one find nearness? When one is said to be "near," one is always near [some]*thing*. Heidegger offers a simple jug as an example of thinghood; wishing to avoid the semblance of privileging human artifacts in his account, he later invokes a natural spring as

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*most itself* in recognizing—to quote Jeff Mangum's song, *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*—"how strange it is to be anything at all."

[350] Heidegger (2012a): 3.

also a "thing." Able to stand on its own as something independent (of its maker, for instance), the jug is not simply an object *for* a subject. The jug, it is true, is a different "thing" for the human who would pour from it than it is for the fly who would drown in it. But in both cases there are dimensions of the jug that remain concealed, that abide in the thing's withdrawal from other things that enter into relations with it, including people and flies. What "things" in the jug is precisely *nothing, emptiness, absence*, that is, nothing that can be made objectively determinate through placement on a Cartesian grid. A thing, whether produced through human artifice or not, is irreducible to any "essential appearance," whether understood in terms of the *eidos* of intellection as in Plato, or in terms of sensation as in certain strands of modern epistemology. The potter does not possess the essence (*eidos*) of the jug in her cognitive blueprint of it. The thinghood of the thing (i.e., its self-*presentation*) is always prior to and more than the various modes of *representation* in which we endeavor to arrest it: "The human can represent, regardless of the manner, only that which has first lit itself up from itself and shown itself to him in the light that it brings with it."[351]

One of the most puzzling themes of the philosopher's later output is that of the "fourfold" [*Geviert*], which, while showing up most famously in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" [1951], made its first appearance, in its mature form, in the Bremen lectures.[352] The thing is able to stand forth *qua* thing, irreducible to representational schema, only insofar as it is

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[351] *Ibid*: 9.

[352] In the 1930s Heidegger developed some of the concepts that would later appear in his mature understanding of *das Geviert*. In the *Origin of the Work of Art* [1935] he introduced the notion of "earth" as that which shelters and is revealed by "world." In his Hölderlin lectures of 1934-35, Heidegger brings in the notion of the "gods" as essentially related to "men" through a mutual speaking and listening [*Ent-gegnung*]. By the time of the *Beiträge* [1936-38] Heidegger had expanded this dyad to include the previous one, establishing "world," "earth," "gods," and "men" as constitutive of "the event" [*das Ereignis*]. The "fourfold" of "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" [1951] fame didn't come together as such—where "world" disappears in favor of "sky"—until the Bremen lectures of 1949.

connected to the fourfold structure of *earth*, *sky*, *divinities*, and *mortals*. This *fourfold* structure comes to appearance in a *single fold* [*Einfalt*], a unity in multiplicity, and, as it turns out, constitutes the very *worldhood* of *world*: "We name the appropriating mirror-play of the single fold of the earth and sky, divinities and mortals, the world."[353] As Graham Harman also emphasizes, we must see the "worlding of world" that plays out in the fourfold as taking place *within* objects, rather than simply *between* them.[354] While it might be better to say the fourfold takes place *at* objects, that is, *at* the "places" that are "things," rather than "within" them, Heidegger's major point that the "four terms [of *das Geviert*] must be unified in the life of every object"[355] still stands. The tension between *earth* and *sky*, *divinities* and *mortals* resonates at things rather than being parceled out variously among an already completed world of disparate objects, some "earthy" and others "divine." It is true that for Heidegger not *every* object is a "thing" in the strict sense of the term. This is, in fact, one of Harman's biggest points of contention with Heidegger's critique of technology: because technological artifacts like automobiles, radios, factories, and replaceable parts presence precisely *as* fungibles serving a functional role, Heidegger finds it unnecessary to give them the degree of detail that they arguably call for.[356] For OOO, *every* object—from ground hogs to motorcycles—resists being reduced to either its relations with other objects (overmining), or to its constitutive parts (undermining). Every object is a "thing" in the importantly rich sense with which Heidegger deepens the term.

So, how are we to interpret this notion of *das Geviert*? What does it mean? What does it tell us about objects? Return to Heidegger's example of the jug. The jug is a receptacle for

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[353] *Ibid*: 18.
[354] Harman (2011a): 91.
[355] *Ibid*.
[356] *Ibid*: 59.

wine. As such, it "things" differently than, say, a hammer or even a milk jug. The "essence" [*Wesen*] of the wine jug, the way in which it most persistently abides as what it is, lies in the "gift of the pour."[357] What *essences* as the gift of the pour, however, does so only by drawing from "the nourishment of the *earth* and the sun of the *sky*."[358] The interplay of *earth*—concealing, overwhelmingly material, characterized by withdrawal—and *sky*—revealing, quietly diaphanous, characterized by intelligibility—underwrites the continued possibility of the gift as such. Further, the gift-pour can be made for those who live among us, who come and go contingently, making up the very fabric of the everyday (i.e., *mortals*), and it can be made for those who exceed all measure, whose "presence" lies precisely in the baffling dark of absence, who *withdraw*, it seems, like the opaque earth churning beneath our feet (i.e., *divinities*). Each element of the fourfold mirrors the others and is, for this reason, always suggestive of them. The thing (e.g., the wine jug) "things," abides as itself, by gathering this "mirror play" of *das Geviert* into a single fold. "Appropriating the fourfold, [the thing] gathers the fourfold's duration [*dessen Weile*] each time into something that abides [*je Weiliges*]: into this or that thing."[359] First and foremost, the thing comes to be and remains in its being by appropriating the forces (emergent from other things) of its environment. The thing stands as thing in virtue of its ontological status as simultaneously *appropriative* and, ultimately, *inappropriable*. The element of the *divinities*, housed opaquely even in the most everyday of affairs and entities, guarantees that each thing, each *place* for the gathering of forces, escapes *total* appropriation by other things.

Nearness, rightly understood, is always nearness to things. Yet, in this nearness an unbridgeable distance is first opened up. Things, precisely in their peculiar intimacy, show

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[357] Heidegger (2012a): 10.
[358] *Ibid*: 11.
[359] *Ibid*: 12.

themselves as remote, inappropriable, *strange*. In the comfort of the home [*Heim*], the discomfort of the uncanny [*unheimlich*] makes itself known. We must be careful to distinguish the sort of "being-at-home" proposed here from that of the "fallen" [*verfallen*] state of "absorption" in beings as articulated in Division I of *Being and Time*. "Fallenness," for early Heidegger, is a deficient mode of being-in-the-world and, thus, of Dasein. While being-fallen, Dasein is *not-at-home*, where "being-at-home" means, in the terms of later Heidegger, dwelling appropriately in the world among things. A necessary part of "dwelling appropriately" is to recognize the "divine" *excess* in things. "Divine excess," in the language of the "Memorial Address," is the "mystery" to which we are called to be open: "That which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call the mystery."[360] So much, then, for Capobianco's worry. The *unheimlich* is very much at play in Heidegger's mature ontology.

When we think the essence of "the thing" in the way prescribed, "We are met by the thing as thing. We are, in the strict sense of the word, conditioned [*Be-Dingten*]. We have left the arrogance of everything unconditional behind us."[361] For Kant, as discussed at length in Chapter Two, the subject (*noumenon*) remains unconditioned and does all the conditioning. The subject-object relation of conditionality is entirely unilateral. For Heidegger, on the contrary, to reach the thing *qua* thing (what I am calling "object") is to be conditioned, struck, appropriated by it. Importantly, it is not possible to anticipate in advance precisely *how* one will be struck or conditioned by a thing. Coming together as contingent assemblages from out of the mystery of the *es gibt*, things remain dynamic and "inconspicuously nimble in [their] essence,"[362] assuming new points of difference by facing the difference in others. Things call

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[360] Heidegger (1966): 55.
[361] Heidegger (2012a): 19.
[362] *Ibid.* 20.

out and respond to the call of other things, to invoke once more Deleuze and Guattari, in "lines of flight" whose trajectories are at the same time determined and creative. But this *way of thinking* as a historical possibility has been blocked for us in spite of the widespread shrinking of distances. As we have seen, the abolition of *distance* results, albeit counter-intuitively, in the concomitant abolition of *nearness*, and, as Heidegger observes in a doleful tone, "in the exclusion of nearness, the thing *as* thing in the stated sense remains annihilated."[363] What is annihilated is not the thing-in-itself, but the thing *qua* thing, i.e., the human *reception*[364] of the thing in its self-presentation. This annihilation is tied up with the historical destiny of technology.

### 3.5    Technology, Myth and Spectralized Being

Grappling with the pervasive shrinking of distances, Heidegger inquires into the nature of "nearness" and finds the nature of "the thing." Only in the nearing of the thing "does the remote take its distance and remain guarded as remote."[365] The reason for this has been stated: both nearness and distance reside at the thing, effected precisely in the action of its nearing. Distance is not simply a measurable interval between two points. The distance between my house and the tulip poplar tree standing before it, casting a wide shadow over the front yard "does not rest in the measurement of the interval between them. The distance consists rather in that the house, tree, and shadow concernfully approach [*angehen*] us in their mutual reciprocity, *and also in how they do so*."[366] That is to say, things manifest not only in varying

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[363] *Ibid*: 19.  Emphasis added.
[364] I.e., *Gelassenheit*, or "letting things thing."
[365] *Ibid*: 23.
[366] *Ibid*.  Emphasis added.  The German verb "*angehen*" literally means to "go to" or "go towards."  It can also mean to "go to" in an especially assertive or aggressive sense, "to tackle."  Thus, the original is at once more simple and more nuanced than Andrew Mitchell's translation suggests.  I want to

degrees of presence, but also as a *style* of self-showing that guides and provides cues for appropriate response. Space as such is generated out of things, or, more accurately, out of their self-presentation (Being), approaching other things (coming to presence) in expression— I would say—of an internal source of norms.

### 3.5.1   *Angehen* and its Closure

Heidegger is very clear that *all things* "concernfully approach," not just those whom we've preferentially imbued with sentience or agency: "Everything that presences and absences bears the character of what concernfully approaches. Distance lies in concerned approach [*Angang*]."[367] If distance is a function of the self-showing and withdrawal of things, and if these unfold in the distinctiveness of a thing's concerned approach, then what now shows up as "distanceless," as universally available, no longer seems to "go to" us at all. The *nearing* of things in their specificity, in the expression of their internal demands, is blocked in a *system* whose own global self-unfolding demands the abolition of all distance. For this reason, "the distanceless is never without standing. It stands insofar as everything that presences is standing reserve [*Bestand*]. Where standing reserve comes into power, even the object [*Gegenstand*] crumbles as characteristic of what presences."[368] Whereas the thing as *thing* "presences and absences" *as* the *place* grounding sense and directionality, and the object as *object* stands forth as always against a subject, an entity as *standing reserve* is always already figured as an available being with no depth, no history, and no future, in short, *no Being*.

Graham Harman is critical of Heidegger on the issue of technology. He points out that "when speaking of technological artifacts such as nuclear power plants, hydroelectric

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hold on to this simplicity and depth in order to emphasize the radicality of Heidegger's insight: "things," whether people, trees, houses, or shadows, *go forth from themselves towards others.*
[367] *Ibid*. 24.
[368] *Ibid*. 25.

dams, and mechanized farms, [Heidegger] seems less willing to grant any sort of dignity to these things."[369] Harman's worry is that Heidegger is engaged in a kind of romantic or nostalgic *overmining* of objects found in the technological age. Objects, on this view, owe their very existence to the overarching system in which they are placed. The cellular phone sitting beside me *is nothing* outside of the communications network in and for whose unfolding it was created. It is true that Heidegger's privileged examples are typically quaint artifacts representative of a simpler, bucolic past—peasant shoes, Greek temples, watermills, etc. However, this feature of his thought, although dissatisfying, seems to me a consequence of both his personal temperament and the rather parochial milieu in which he was brought up. Heidegger suggests as much in a little piece from 1934, "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?," wherein he likens his own philosophical work to the labor of peasants.[370] Moreover, the specific examples Heidegger employs in his analysis of technology are, for his purposes, largely irrelevant due to the fact that, as Hubert Dreyfus observes, his "concern is the human distress caused by *the technological understanding of being*, rather than the destruction caused by specific technologies."[371] Technology is one mode among others of disclosing beings in their Being. The truly pernicious character of this mode, as I wish to articulate it, is twofold: (1) technological discourse undermines the *thingliness* of objects, thereby revealing them "proximally and for the most part" *as* specters: *there* precisely in *not-being-there*; and (2) technological discourse conceals itself *qua* discourse by pretending to show things "simply as they are."

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[369] Harman (2011): 92.
[370] Heidegger (2010): 28.
[371] Dreyfus (2009): 54.

### 3.5.2 *Gestell*: A Closed System

Hovercrafts, ipads, cybernetic knees, and computer operating systems are no less "things" than are carriages, plows, sunflowers, and hammers. One crucial difference, however, is that the things of the first list were brought into being under the auspices of a system that works to neutralize all particularity in the interest of guaranteeing universal replaceability. *Things* are assimilated into the ordering of this system and denied their essentially appropriative character; they are always already appropriated by the designs of the system itself and assigned a determinate place. Heidegger writes: "the only reason requisitioning [*Bestellen*] is drawn from one orderable [*bestellbar*] entity to the next is because, from the outset, requisitioning has wrested away all that presences and *placed* it into complete orderability, whether what presences in the particular case is especially positioned or not."[372] Heidegger names this system "positionality" [*Gestell*]: "the universal ordering, gathered of itself, of the complete orderability of what presences as a whole."[373] The "problem" with *Gestell* isn't that it allows things to be subordinated to the instrumental designs of individual persons. Such a view presupposes a problematic degree of agency on the part of "free" subjects. Rather, *Gestell* itself—the *essence* of technology—reduces objects to a functional role within a *self-subsisting* and a-rational closed system of which individual humans have become "employees."[374] This point recalls one made by Georg Lukács about "reification" in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács argues that the abstract and purely calculative stance adopted towards an overarching system enacted independently of one's own thought and effort, "i.e., a perfectly closed system, must likewise

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[372] Heidegger (2012a): 28-29. Emphasis added.
[373] *Ibid*: 31. I rather like Mitchell's new translation of *Gestell*. This technical term in Heidegger's later corpus has been most typically rendered in English as "enframing," which, while useful in certain respects, hits the ear more obtusely than it should.
[374] *Ibid*: 29.

transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world…"[375] In the closed system of universal orderability, characterized by the "overmining" project of technological holism, the thinghood (self-presentation) of things is not *destroyed*; rather, it is pushed into concealment. And "with this lapsing into concealment, the essence of αληθεια and of presencing withdraw. Insofar as they withdraw, they remain inaccessible to human perception and representation."[376] We are no longer reached by the self-presentation of things, and it is precisely in *self-presentation*—demand and withdrawal—that the self-expressive and appropriative (claim-making) *truth* of things is exercised.

Heidegger's argument in *The Question Concerning Technology* [1953], as Andrew Feenberg remarks, "is developed at such a high degree of abstraction that he literally cannot discriminate between electricity and atom bombs, agricultural techniques and the Holocaust."[377] One might reply that such slippery reticence is made necessary by the problem at issue: as the primary mode in which objects are disclosed, the reductive mechanism of global capitalist technology effectively fuses all objects into one homogeneous lump in an economy of consumption. The essence of technology, for Heidegger, is its ontologically deflating mode of disclosing entities in the world: they appear to exist purely for use amidst the closed system. Technological discourse represents things as fungible stand-ins, individually anonymous and lacking particularity. Most pernicious is that technological discourse *conceals itself as such*. Instead of showing up as one possible means of engaging objects in the world—a feature it shares with every other understanding of being—it suppresses its contingency and purports to represent things *simply as they are*. Yet, as discussed above, "technology is only one actuality

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[375] Lukács (1971): 89.
[376] Heidegger (2012): 48.
[377] Feenberg (1999): 187.

among other actualities."[378] Modern *techne* hits the hard limit of material reality. This means that materiality—the matter [*Sache*] for thinking—always exceeds the reductive tendencies of *Gestell*. Technology subsists precisely by concealing this excess.

"Romantic consumerism," as Timothy Morton calls it,[379] is made possible only on the basis of an *a priori* constriction of the possible. It is a sort of narcissism to which one is called in a mode of "free" acceptance. I self-identify through the objects I elect to consume, and objects in general are represented in the global system of assignments precisely and exclusively *as* consumable. What will make me who *I want* to be? What will afford a self-affirming, *authentic* experience? Am I an Apple or a PC? This tie of subjectivity to technology is also manifested in the latter's peculiar *teleological* character. Technological innovation is both ongoing and indeterminate. It invites me to *wait*. I *wait* for a product that is expected in advance to improve my relationship to the world, and thus, to myself. Technology is not only a *productive* mode of ordering space, but a way of being *cognitively ordered* in time as well. This feature contributes to its status as the central macromyth of late modernity. Our precarious present is *retro-pro-jectively* saved by the "it is coming, but *not yet*" character of technological "perfecting." I say "*retro-pro-jective*" because the peculiar myth under discussion, owing to its "self-concealing" nature, reaches "back" into the past no less than it does "forward" into the future. The History Channel's inimitably silly series, *Ancient Aliens*, for example, turns entirely on this muddled bi-directionality. In a particularly representative episode,[380] Giorgio A. Tsoukalos (the overly tanned guy famous for his wacky hair) suggests that we are wrong to interpret the Viking mythos *mythologically*. Rather, we should read it *technologically*: Odin's "high seat" is not so much a high seat as it is a spacecraft, and Thor's hammer isn't so much a hammer as it is a matter-

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[378] Heidegger (2012a): 38.
[379] Morton (2006): 109-123.
[380] "The Viking Gods": Episode 11, Season 5.

obliterating "kinetic weapon," both made possible by an alien civilization too advanced for our comprehension.  Modern global technology is a relatively recent development in the history of epoch-revealing/shaping modes of thinking, but technological modernity tends to retroject it into the past, consequently understanding ancient peoples as merely *deficient* technocrats.  It might be thought that Heidegger's analysis simply conflates theory and practice, and that his early formulation of the primacy of *Zuhandenheit* simply articulates what analytic philosophers call "knowledge-*how*" as opposed to "knowledge-*that*."  While accurate in an important sense, this reaction misses what, for my purposes, is the most salient mark.  The issue, as Herbert Marcuse (perhaps Heidegger's best known heir to the ontological critique of technology) presents it, is that through modern technological rationality, "theoretical reason, *remaining pure and neutral*, enters into the service of practical reason."[381]  Supposedly *neutral* "theory" shapes our understanding of the world and its objects in a way that is always already tailored to our own "practical" projects, which, it is important to note, were never "decided upon" from a position of autonomous freedom.  Theory and practice, like *fact* and *value* are more intimately connected and mutually determining than humans care to admit.

For Heidegger and Marcuse, the indeterminate teleological *promise* of global technology for improved ways of self-relation (feelings of self-worth and well-being) is bound up with its reductive rationality.  We tend not to object to the progressive shrinking of the world because of the unparalleled comforts that such a shrinking yields.  If the system *as a whole* is irrational in virtue of the contradictions that sustain it (e.g., greater production means greater waste, an improved standard of living for developed nations happens at the expense of that for developing nations, etc.), it is *infinitely* rational when observed from within by those caught up in its machinery.  The system that opens up for me an infinitely diverse range of consumer

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[381] Marcuse, Herbert (1991):  158.  Emphasis added.

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choice is the one that reduces the world to terms of consumability. "In the medium of technology," Marcuse writes, "culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives."[382] Technological rationality effaces discursive difference by submitting all possible modes of thinking to the discourse of instrumental calculation. Politicians, educators, and artists are all in the service industry. Groundbreaking musical recordings, historically momentous political speeches, and lectures on the history of human thought are all just so many advertisements selling themselves *and* the "universal" function for which they stand in as ephemeral representatives. Opposites are unified and tensions resolved in a superficial harmony whereby critique of the whole is rendered mute before it is even mobilized.[383]

Let us return momentarily to the problem of value. The "one-dimensional," technological picture of the modern world effectively inoculates value by divesting it of its ontological character. So-called "value-theory" presupposes the mathematicization of the material universe, the theoretical transformation of entities into μάθημα, i.e. what can be known and controlled in advance. Value-thinking, accordingly, is always something deployed after the fact, an extraneous subjective gesture made possible by the leeway opened up by prevailing technological efficiency, which is itself *value-neutral*. Marcuse writes: "the quantification of nature, which led to its explication in terms of mathematical structures, separated reality from all inherent ends, and consequently, separated the true from the good,

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[382] *Id.:* xlviii.

[383] Hannah Arendt, another of Heidegger's students, makes a similar claim in *The Human Condition* [1958]: "The question therefore is not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things" (1998): 151. The danger extends beyond the world of so-called tools or implements. Since the spheres of *work* (world creation) and *action* (political *praxis*) have been reduced to that of *instrumental rationality*—previously found only in the sphere of *labor*—artists and statesmen "work," not for the sake of the work and its products, but for the paycheck that (sometimes) comes with it.

science from ethics."[384]  If technological innovation—understood as the growing suppression of the vagaries of nature for human ends—is value-neutral, then unfavorable conditions like global climate change and the vast waste generated by planned obsolescence are merely contingent consequences of its *practical application*.  Yet, the very fact that technological innovation is always presented in terms of "progress" suggests otherwise.  Technological rationality undergirds both theoretical method and social practice in one selfsame unfolding.

*In the Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger points out that when talking about things in terms of "instrumentality," that is, "means and ends," we operate within the framework of causal ordering, many of whose dimensions remain hidden to modern thinking.  We typically consider causation exclusively as a matter of *efficient* causes and their effects.  When thinking of the production of a floor lamp, for example, one, as a rule, posits the craftsman as the *efficient* cause of the effect, namely, the finished lamp, and thinks no further.  The ancient Greeks, however, possessed a richer and more nuanced understanding of causation, learning from Aristotle that there are four types of cause at work in the production of any given thing: (1) formal, (2) material, (3) efficient, and (4) final.  Returning to the example of the floor lamp, its *formal* cause is the form or shape of "lampness" in virtue of which it achieves its function. The *material* cause of the lamp is the stuff of which it's made, e.g., metal, glass, plastic, etc.  The *efficient* cause at play, as mentioned above, is the craftsman who makes it.  And the *final* cause of the lamp is the purpose for which it is made, that is, to illuminate a space.

An interesting upshot of Aristotle's picture of causation is the following:  the effect of a given causal action turns out to also be—with respect to the very same action—a cause.  For example, my activity of reading a book under the light of a new floor lamp is, in some sense, an effect of the lamp's production, but it is at the same time also its *final cause*; the intended

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384 Marcuse (1991): 146.

effect is the "in-order-to" behind the product's manufacturing. The end result of an action—framed through calculative concern—shows itself to be its cause. The "presencing" of the floor lamp brought underway by this fourfold causal structure is a kind of *revealing*. The floor lamp (as well as its constitutive elements) is revealed to be what it is in view of the "causal" concerns just mentioned as a kind of *bringing-forth*. Thus, the *instrumental* production of such goods as floor lamps turns out to be another example of *poiesis*. Each of the four causes is *responsible* in its own way for the finished lamp, which itself is *indebted* to the four causes. Responsibility on the part of cause and indebtedness on the part of caused signify a relation out of which a previously concealed way of being is *brought forth* [*hervorgebracht*] and sent on its way. What is revealed in the lamp is each element co-responsible for its presence, and also the peculiar *style* of their complicity. Jean Prouvé's "Potence" wall lamp [1950] inexhaustibly *reveals* in its "concernful approach" something hitherto unseen about stainless steel, differential surface tension and weight distribution, urban architectural space, and the exigencies of a global market recovering from an incomparably catastrophic war.

If modern technology is merely the instrumental means to an end, isn't it *poietical* as well? On Heidegger's account, not only is modern technology decidedly *un-poietical*, it also blocks *poiesis* as a possibility. How is this so? The *discourse* of technology, that is, the mode in which it reveals the things it encounters, is a kind of "positioning" or "enframing" (*Gestell*). Heidegger employs this odd verbiage to characterize the peculiar way modern technology orders and disposes of nature. He writes: "The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such."[385] Thus, unlike the bringing-forth-into-truth of *poietical* discourse, technology reveals objects by means of a "challenge." Through this

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[385] Heidegger (1977a): 14.

language of *demand*, we "order" nature to present itself precisely in ways useful to our calculative system of ends and means, thereby revealing it as a "standing-reserve" (*Bestand*) always at our disposal. In this way, what I call the native demands of things-in-themselves are either suppressed entirely or refitted to reflect the demands of the system in which they are "positioned."

As an example of *Gestell* Heidegger offers the Rhine River, which is no longer the river *brought forth*, for instance, in Hölderlin's hymn. From the "challenging" vantage on the hydroelectric plant, we see the Rhine as set up to supply the hydraulic pressure necessary for the turning of the machinery's turbines.[386] The Rhine is "positioned" still further from the perspective of the "vacation industry," which calculatively sets it up as "an object on call for inspection."[387] This insidious "challenging" and "ordering" does not stop at the "positioning" of nature, however, but extends to human beings as a way in which we, too, are revealed:

> Only to the extent that man for his part is already challenged to exploit the energies of nature can this revealing that orders happen. If man is challenged, ordered to do this, then does not man himself belong even more originally than nature within the standing-reserve? The current talk about human resources, about the supply of patients for a clinic, gives evidence of this.[388]

Within the entrenched system of *Gestell*, human beings are ordered precisely as "standing-reserve" for the working of the systems technologically revealed. The Rhine uncovered in tourism, for example, *orders* one to meet up with the tour group with which one decides to "see" the river in all its "natural" splendor.

Let us take a closer look at what it means to "position" a thing (or person) as "standing-reserve." A tobacco farmer stands at the perimeter of his land and sees before him an ocean of plants to be harvested, stored, and ultimately sold off to the highest bidder for further

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[386] *Id*: 16.

[387] *Ibid.*

[388] *Id*: 18.

processing. The plants in the field are, as *particular* concrete entities, completely irrelevant in themselves. What matters, in accord with the discourse through which the plants are revealed, is whether or not they successfully fulfill the universal function of "salable tobacco plant" in virtue of which they were even "allowed" to presence at all. Ass definite *singular* objects, the plants—disclosed through *Gestell*—do not even exist: "Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object."[389] *Gestell*, then, includes human beings in the widespread ordering of what *is* into what stands in reserve in virtue of its calculated role.

This same reductive "ordering" is just as often applied to people, especially given our current state of globalization in which the demographical efforts of "customer service" are becoming increasingly mechanized and automated. A sad symptom of this phenomenon is the extent to which we are almost comically resigned to being "treated as a number" and other such clichés. Human beings are now all but invisible as singular and irreducible sources of meaning; we are collectively revealed, instead, as functionally important "standing-reserve" for the perpetuation of a global economy, which, ironically, has legitimacy—according to tenets of classical liberalism—only in the service of the individual. It is important to note that the system-working at issue necessitates this "illusion of atomization," to put it in Lukacs' terms.[390] That is, in order to contribute to *Gestell*'s ongoing "ordering," it is necessary that one views oneself as an autonomous agent in *possession* of her "labor power" as a commodity to be sold. The construction and sustainment of the commodity relation effectively conceals "the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things."[391] In place of the self-presentative *thingly* character of objects, the now reified commodity relation comes to

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[389] *Id*: 17.
[390] Lukacs (1971): 92.
[391] *Ibid*.

dominance, thereby displacing materiality and its own self-mediating demands.  Objects, human and otherwise, are revealed as the merely spectral traces of their instrumental orderability.

The reign of systemic *calculation* precludes questioning and thus "originary" or "inceptual" thinking [*Erdenken*].  Are there ethical consequences of the total pervasion of calculative thought as *the* reductive discourse through which we reveal beings in the world?  Heidegger, not surprisingly, is silent on this point.  Focusing on the ontological rather than the ontic, Heidegger rarely, if ever, steps out of the unwieldy yet carefully wrought neologistic framework of his "non-metaphysical" ontology.  Nevertheless, Heidegger's presentation of the supreme danger of *Gestell* yields, to my mind, a pretty clear and concrete picture of the system's potential horrors:  the "banality of evil," to invoke the language of Hannah Arendt.

Far from picturing him as a murderous, blood-thirsty maniac bent on global domination, Arendt's portrayal of notorious Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann is much more mundane, and thus, much more sinister.  Based on her observations of and research on Eichmann compiled during his trial in Jerusalem, Arendt's account[392] shows that the former SS officer's actions were motivated more by petty career concerns than by overarching ideological principles.  Eichmann bore no personal responsibility for his part in the atrocities of the holocaust; he was merely fulfilling the meager role eked out for him in the state machinery of which he was part.  Arendt took notice of Eichmann's glaring inability to think creatively, manifested in his consistent "use of stock phrases and self-invented clichés."[393]  When "calculative thinking" becomes simply "thinking," the possibility for engaging objects *on their own terms* is shut out.  The inter-object sphere in which beings manifest themselves to

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[392] Arendt (2006).
[393] *Id*. 49.

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others *as demanding* is never brought to presence *as such*. Consequently, the creative *gathering* of entities and pathways necessary for the constitution of *place* is replaced by a one-dimensional *ordering*. Under the dull hum of this perfunctory *ordering*, the call of conscience cannot be heard. This *muting of the call* veils the broad and messy socio-ethical dimensions of our everyday acts and engagements. The space in which beings are "resolutely" "let be" is filled in in advance by a calculating that mitigates the nearness/distance in light of which they convey form, sense, and gravity. Most nefariously, as in the case of Eichmann, this diminution of the inter-object sphere is taken to be the most mundane and matter-of-fact *natural* thing in the world.

Technological rationality highlights value as the expression of "practical concern" superadded to a reality whose contours and scope of possibility have already been laid out and adequately fixed. Technology achieves this in every case via its self-concealing *mythic* character. It has achieved the status of "savior," supplanting God and gods. Thinking that the savior is just a bunch of means for his and others' ends, however, technological human being is at risk of seeing his own weakness and fragility—his ineptitude at purging once and for all his finitude in the face of the problematic and inappropriable *depth* of things—emanating from the new god. Thus, he eventually "identifies his end goal with the savior's power, and his will becomes subordinate to his desire that the savior's will be fulfilled. By now, however, the will is no longer that of a God, but is the will of [technology]."[394] The power of technology to *spectralize* objects, to reify them precisely *as* the functional role they play in commodity relations, becomes an end rather than a means.[395] The "goals" of technological rationality, the self-

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[394] Severino (2011): 112.
[395] Severino argues that technological rationality, previously considered a *means* to such diverse ideological goals as capitalist self-determination, socialist freedom from economic despair, and Christian spiritual salvation, now occupies the reverse roll of ultimate *end* to which these grandiose objectives are subordinate.

concealing *mise-en-scène* (i.e. "macromyth") in which we find ourselves positioned, *must* be achieved for the sake of a *power* we can never possess.

### 3.6    Singularity and Subjectivity

The pursuit of this power has unfolded and taken on new economic, social, and religious forms (e.g., feudalism, capitalism, syndicalism, Catholicism, atheism, industrialism, Taylorism, technologism, etc.) through the development of the Western tradition. Far from being limited to the shaping of the so-called "objective sphere," these forms have contributed profoundly to the formation and communication of what are often referred to as "structures of subjectivity," or ways of being "attuned" to the world. It could be argued, as, indeed, Heidegger seems to do, that the domain of "ethics" has been host to many of these forms, which, emerging within the overarching system, show up in opposition to one another.[396] G.W.F. Hegel, for example, was critical of the excessive formalism of Kantian ethics, in particular of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's subjectivist elaboration thereof. Fichte takes the "reflective endorsement" criterion to the extreme, at the same time interlacing this approach to normativity with the same kind of suppressed theological underpinnings of which Schopenhauer was so critical in Kant. Fichte writes in the *System of Ethics* [1798]:

> Whoever is completely certain of his own cause has to stake even his own eternal damnation thereupon, and he betrays his uncertainty through his unwillingness to do this. If one were now to ask what it might mean for someone to want to be eternally damned, then the only rational meaning one could extract from this would be as follows: [this would have to mean that one would want] to relinquish for all eternity one's own improvement. This is the

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[396] Marx and Engels, for their part, see this ideological call for formal purity as a consequence of the modern division of labor, which only decisively developed after the separation of *material* from *mental* labor: "From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of 'pure' theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc." (1972): 51-52.

greatest evil, and it is one that no human being whatsoever can seriously consider; indeed, the serious thought of the same would annihilate anyone.[397]

The moral rectitude of an action is determined by the strength of one's subjective conviction. If one is so ineluctably convinced of the rectitude of action A that she is willing to stake her immortal soul on its performance, then action A can be regarded as moral. Hegel criticizes this view in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* [1820], arguing that in it "ethics is reduced to the special theory of life held by the individual and to his private conviction."[398] The problem with this approach, as Hegel sees it, is that it fails to take into account the role of *objective* social institutions in the determination of ethical matters. We might say that Hegel's critique of Fichte here is a caricature. There are strong arguments that Fichte rejects subjectivism no less than Hegel does, inasmuch as the former simply carries the Kantian project of freedom for reason or rational agency *as such* to its logical conclusion.[399] Nevertheless, I want to call attention to how Fichte's development of the "transcendental" enterprise is internally sustained by a hyperbolic *practical* repetition of the Cartesian attunement by subjective certainty. Fichte's grounding criterion for moral determination is a mirror image of Descartes' criterion for theoretical knowledge. The latter's *clara et distincta perceptio* is defined as that about which belief is utterly unshakable, and the mere possibility of doubt suffices, for Descartes, to undermine knowledge. Similarly for Fichte, the mere possibility of doubt is sufficient to undermine moral conviction. Both criteria—one avowedly *theoretical* and the other *practical*—are thoroughly founded on the *Cogito*, that architectonic principle of modernity. The goal of morality is to increase the *self-sufficiency* of reason.

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[397] Fichte (2005): II §15.
[398] Hegel (1991): §160.
[399] This thread of *intersubjectivity* runs through Fichte's entire *oeuvre*, but it shows up with special force and elegance in *The Vocation of Man* (1800).

According to Hegel, we realize our powers of free choice in "morality" (best exemplified by the Kantian tradition), but as abstracted and isolated from the concrete social conditions in which we live. Because morality is precisely *subjective*, we run the risk of becoming mired in an "empty formalism."[400] The dialectical move to "ethical life" [*Sittlichkeit*] comes about as the concrete identity of "the good and the subjective will," where "the good" is understood as fully objective and lacking all particularity.[401] Through the synthesis of these moments, *community* and the whole panoply of social institutions are made possible for the first time. Hegel sees "ethical life"—ossified in the objective historical customs and institutions of a people—as a kind of "second nature," what "right and morality have not yet reached, namely spirit."[402] This second, "spiritual" nature in effect normatively supplants the "first-order" nature that we share with non-human beings. Again, the human subject (or "objective" *intersubject*) occupies a privileged role in the cosmos: it is the place of the unfolding of the world-historical spirit, the dialectical seat on which the ethical as such is positioned. The "second nature" of ethical life is the intersubjective sphere of historical human *value*.

### 3.6.1 Michelstaedter's Ethics of Impossibility

Carlo Michelstaedter [1887-1910], anticipating Heidegger's critique of technology, argues that Hegel's ethics is just one example of the modern rhetorical gesture of colonizing the world to meet our needs while presenting this colonization as an "objective" account of the nature of reality.[403] His overarching point is that the whole obtuse historical infrastructure of human *praxis* and knowledge—from Plato on—has effectively obscured or occluded the originary demands of objects, including select groups of human objects, via the simultaneous reification

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[400] Hegel (1991): §135.
[401] *Ibid*: §141.
[402] *Ibid*: §151.
[403] Michelstaedter (2004): 104-111.

and codification (a kind of moral cartography) of what we take to be our own natural/spiritual vocation. The history of ethics (not to mention, at least not yet, aesthetics) has been especially complicit in this project, emerging perhaps as the most subtle and self-concealing *technology*—understood, a la Heidegger, as a way of *ordering* entities and of *revealing* them as so-ordered—of all.

For Michelstaedter, the being of *every* entity—from iron weights to hydrogen molecules—is characterized by a unique conative drive beyond itself. Conation is the result of an inner *lack* that can never be filled, a deficiency that futilely *demands* fulfillment, which, if ever achieved at the global level for all objects, would amount to universal *justice*. But, as we know, the demands of things always compete with one another and are never transparent. In the effort to satisfy one's own demands, one seeks power over things. "But his *power in things is limited* at each point to a *limited foresight*. From the relation to the thing he draws not possession but the security of his own life—*but this too lies in a brief, finite circle*; and the *brevity of the horizon is present at every point in the superficiality of the relation.*"[404] Every object stands exposed in *desire* to every other object. But the *relations* established therefrom always fall short of "persuasion" [*persuasione*]—the state of being perfectly at one with oneself and one's environment. Beings and their demands are inexhaustible; hence, "justice" is impossible and "injustice" is the state of things. Perhaps in light of this extreme ontological pessimism—far exceeding that of Schopenhauer—Michelstaedter's suicide at the tender age of twenty-three is not so mysterious.

To exist is always to fall short of the demands to which one is exposed. This is Michelstaedter's insight. In order to satisfy the demands of our own organism, we strive to "procure the proximity" of those things that light up, however distally, with the promise of

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[404] *Ibid.* 25.

fulfillment. The effective scope of fulfillment is always already—albeit unpredictably—eroded in advance owing to the "superficiality" of every relation. To be exposed to the demands of objects is to be *subjected*, or, in Heidegger's language, *conditioned* [*bedingt*]. It is obvious that the condition of *falling short* in the face of infinite *material* demands results in a structure of subjectivity (subjection), which, from the perspective of German idealism, can only appear frail and compromised. If infinity, inexhaustibility, and impossibility reside in the sphere of *demand* and *justice*, and if the latter, contrary to the basic program of every idealism, arises from the material constitution of objects themselves, then the state of falling short loses dignity and romantic appeal: moral failure is no longer a *uniquely human* and, therefore, *heroic* endeavor.

What are we to do with this situation? We need not, I want to suggest, follow Michelstaedter's example and, under the weight of the impossible, strive to buy the proverbial farm prematurely. There is dignity in *truth*; in fact, truth is the only place where dignity abides, however precarious, threadbare, and potentially self-undermining dignity may be. This is what Agamben, responding to the charge of pessimism, means in his recent interview with Juliette Cerf: "Thought for me is just that: the courage of hopelessness. And is that not the height of optimism?"[405] Commenting on the tenth anniversary of Franz Kafka's death, Walter Benjamin relates a conversation between Max Brod and Kafka in which the latter responds to a question about the possibility of "hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know": "Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us."[406]

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[405] http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1612-thought-is-the-courage-of-hopelessness-an-interview-with-philosopher-giorgio-agamben.
[406] Benjamin (1968): 116.

### 3.6.2   Nancy and the Primacy of *With*

Like Michelstaedter, Jean-Luc Nancy also understands existence in terms of exposure/subjection.  For this reason (as I indicated early in Chapter Two) he insists on the insuperable complicity of ontology and ethics. [407]   Like Heidegger, however, Nancy understands that this complicity requires a fundamental rethinking of both ontology and ethics.  The "ontological" and the "ethical" must be shown to be two sides of the same coin.  The two registers are biarticular in such a way that "we make sense not by *setting* a price or value, but by *exposing* the absolute value that the world is by itself."[408]  "Absolute value" means precisely *bottomless* and *incommensurable* dignity, not of "the world" as an undifferentiated given, but of all the distinct singularities, at once shared and unsharable.  The foundation of his account is a critical exposition and bold elaboration of Heidegger's underdeveloped notion of "being-with" [*Mitsein*], which now loses the tincture of secondary that colors it in *Being and Time*.  The "with" is at the very outset constitutive of being itself:  "that which exists, whatever this might be, coexists because it exists."[409]

I believe that without this theoretical trajectory (i.e., existence thought *qua* co-existence), OOO will never yield a viable and satisfying ethics.  On Harman's view, by contrast, "real" objects, what exist beneath teeming clouds of sensuous allure and suggestion, remain radically isolated even while fully deployed and actualized in the world.  In his words, "The object is a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum…"[410] Causal interaction is ontologically removed from reality, where objects invariably remain closed off from one another, entirely self-complete and mutually unaffected.  In contrast, I have argued that the sensuous *is* the real,

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[407] Nancy (2000): 21.
[408] *Ibid*: 4.  Emphasis added.
[409] *Ibid*: 29.
[410] Harman (2011a): 47.

that being *as such* just *is* self-presentation.  There is no reality underlying appearance.  Moreover, appearance (self-presentation) is immeasurably deep.  Objects are independent of one another only insofar as this independence is understood as a function of *ontological difference*, and difference does not imply independence.  However, it is crucial to keep in mind that difference at the ontological level is underwritten by a fundamental univocity that says, "*to be* means *to be different*, but *to be different* means *to be different* (from anything else) *together*.  In short, "presence is impossible except as co-presence."[411]

Nancy defends a site ontology, an ontology of place, that conceives of beings as ecstatic singularities that are only possible within, but irreducible to, community.  The *singular* entity differs from the *individual* one in that the latter but not the former is an atom that exists prior to its connection to other beings:  "Singularity never takes place at the level of atoms, those identifiable if not identical identities; rather, it takes place at the level of the *clinamen*, which is unidentifiable."[412]  A singularity always exists in relation to other singularities, exposed, turned towards them.  Whereas individuality suggests subsumption as instance under a universal category, the singular is *at the same time* particular and universal (i.e., social).  Community, the place in which singularities come to be, consists in a tension that results from the fact that singular beings cannot be dissolved in harmonious communion[413]—which, for Nancy, has never existed—but they also, by ontological necessity, cannot be what they are *outside* of institutive social arrangements.  As Roberto Diodato explains, "there is not a 'subject' that enters into relations with others, but a singularity that 'co-appears,' and co-appears only in the community.  Nor is there a common being to be achieved through work, for example,

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[411] *Ibid*. 62.
[412] Nancy (1991): 6-7
[413] By "harmonious communion" I mean the kind of seamless, perfect, originary homogeneity envisioned in certain fascistic social mythologies.

the work of politics, but rather a community that is more originary than the individual, and

therefore than the social relationships that the individual establishes."[414]  Singular beings

always exceed one another[415] at the same time that they share themselves in finite exposure.

This is why no relationship, however intimate, is capable of exhaustion; there is always more

to pursue, always more for conation to put before itself.  Focusing on this *clinamen*, what comes

to light "is not a 'social' or 'communitarian' dimension added onto a primitive individual given,

even if [as in Heidegger] it were to occur as an essential and determining addition."[416]  The

ethico-political, the dimension of *with*, is not superadded, but intrinsic to beings in their being.

What does it mean to say that existence is always co-existence?  Crucially, it means that

*ontology*—literally, the thinking and speaking of existence—invariably harbors an ethico-

political task. This is true insofar as we understand the study of ethics and politics to be

primarily concerned, in their own ways, with thinking through the problems endemic to "social

reality," that is, the reality of the "co."  To speak of being is to speak of *beings-together*: "From

the very beginning, then, 'we' are with one another, not as points gathered together, or as

togetherness that is divided up, but as being-with-one-another."[417]  At bottom, this is a claim

about *originarity*, which, as Walter Benjamin characterizes it, is not a historical moment of

genesis, but a constant eddy in the material process of becoming.[418]  There is no primordial,

original state anterior to appearance in which Being stands as a massive, undifferentiated

whole.  Nor is there an original condition in which beings are isolated atoms awaiting kinship.

Being is always already (hence, *originarily*) at once singular *and* plural.  The notion of a "single

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[414] Diodato (2012): 103

[415] For Nancy, however, singularities can never "exceed" community, inasmuch as the latter precisely
*is* this very excess—the exceeding of singularities vis-à-vis one another.  This is not to suggest that
community has no content itself.  The point is that singularities never escape self-exposure.

[416] Nancy (2000): 44.

[417] *Ibid*: 96.

[418] Benjamin (1977): 45-46.

being," an isolated atom, "is a contradiction in terms,"[419] because a "single being," properly

understood, does not participate in *Being*. To participate in Being (i.e., *to be*) is to be concretely

dis-posed as a unique singularity among others. The very positing of a thing implies its discrete

position, its numerical distinguishability *from* others, and this distinguishability signifies nothing

more than *co-originarity*: the "with." As Nancy puts it, "The One as purely one is less than one;

it cannot be, be put in place, or counted. One as properly one is always more than one. It is

an excess of unity; it is one-with-one, where its Being in itself is copresent." [420]

Distinguishability arises from the property of space-time location, but this property is itself

the result of an original *spacing between*, i.e., plurality.[421]

Singularity and plurality are co-essential to the Being of every being: being-singular-

plural is at one and the same time "a mark of union and of division."[422] This claim goes farther

than Heidegger's account of *Mitsein* since the latter, as Nancy points out, seems to preserve

the structure of "being-with" in terms of an order of priority and succession by not introducing

the "co-originarity of *Mitsein* until after having established the originary character of *Dasein*."[423]

The primacy of Dasein's singularity for Heidegger is further evidenced in his understanding

of death as that in the face of which "all being-with others will fail us…"[424] If the *with* is

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[419] Nancy (2000): 12.

[420] *Ibid*: 40.

[421] This view of space-time is compatible with Leibniz's, as articulated, for example, in the "Third Letter" of his correspondence with Samuel Clarke: "As for my own opinion, I have said more than once that I hold space to be something merely relative, as time is, that I hold it to be an order of coexistences, as time is an order of successions. For space denotes, in terms of possibility, an order of things which exist at the same time, considered as existing together, without entering into their particular manners of existing" (1989): 324.

[422] Nancy (2000): 36.

[423] *Ibid*: 30. One might object that Nancy's critique goes too far, that *Mitsein*, for Heidegger, is indeed co-essential for *Dasein*, but that he left the concept underdeveloped in favor of pursuing other lines of inquiry. One, after all, can't do *everything*. This debate, however, is not important for my purposes. In developing the concept of *Mitsein*, whether in a manner truly divergent from Heidegger's or not, Nancy offers us a fruitful and sophisticated resource for thinking through the intersection of ontology and ethics.

[424] Heidegger (1966): 308. Quoted by Nancy (2000): 90.

essential to Being as such, then even in death—the possibility of the impossibility of all relation—relationality subsists.  Pace Levinas, not all death is murder:  whereas murder consists in an extreme possibility of the *with*, taking the form of negation (thus, an example of "evil" as discussed above), death occurs as an indefinite suspension of the *with*, its being rendered "inoperative, but existing."[425]  The *with*, co-essential to all that *is*, necessarily evades completion.  Every effort to "fulfill" one's being-with—e.g., through a kind of pathological, obsessive "love," or through murder—results either in *identity* or in a rupture of an abyssal chasm to which the "Other" is relegated.  In both cases *plurality* is annihilated.  To *account* for beings, that is, to count them or to recognize/register them in their Being, "does not involve primarily the succession of the identical; it involves the simultaneity of the different."[426]  At the ontological level, *difference* is the first demand of being.  It is the one self-mediating voice through which every *dis-position* (ontology) and *ex-position* (ethics) is articulated.  If there is a "common measure" of Being, it is *excess*:  "the commensurability of incommensurable singularities, the equality of all the 'origins-of-the-world,' which, as origins, are strictly unexchangeable."[427]

In characterizing this "excess," we can agree with Merleau-Ponty and describe existence as an open wound, an *écart* that cannot be closed.[428]   I would add only that this description applies to *all* objects, not just to those privileged bodies we tend to identify as "alive."  The point is that materiality *as such*, the "flesh of the world,"[429] "designates what is divided of itself, what is only as distinct from itself, *partes ex partes*, originally impenetrable to the combining and sublimating penetration of a 'spirit' [or 'mind'], understood as a

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[425] Nancy (2000): 92.
[426] *Ibid*: 97.
[427] *Ibid*: 75.
[428] Merleau-Ponty (1968): Ch. 4.
[429] *Ibid.*

dimensionless, indivisible point beyond the world."[430] Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "flesh"

[*chair*] refers to a kind of pre-merging of *subject* and *object*, *sensing* and *sensed*. Far from affirming

the privileged status of transcendental subjectivity and its unilateral role in the correlationism

under critique, Merleau-Ponty's late ontology emphasizes the originary non-coincidence with

itself of every body, the "turning about one another" of the *inside* and the *outside*.[431] As *chiasmic*,

the idea of the flesh suggests that "every perception is doubled with a counter-perception, is

an act with two faces, one no longer knows who speaks and who listens."[432]   Being unfolds

precisely as mediation without a mediator; it is, to return to Deleuze and Guattari, an

"acentered, nonhierarchical system without a General…"[433] Furthermore, the self-mediation

at the heart of reality has no need for the space of *das Ereignis*, the "event of co-propriation"

which means that "neither being nor man can be posited as subsisting 'in-themselves.'"[434] Pace

Heidegger, it's not the case that without "the nothing" [*das Nicht*] (whose "essence" is the

"nihilating in Being" carried out through the *opening* of Dasein as co-essential to the "truth" of

Being)[435] we are stuck with a mute undifferentiated plenum.  The plenum of "external" reality

is self-differentiating in virtue of the ontological univocity of Being.[436]  This is also why we

need neither "values," nor an "inventor of values"—whether divine or mortal—in order to

do ethics.

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430 Nancy (2000): 84.
431 Merleau-Ponty (1968): 264.
432 *Ibid.*
433 Deleuze and Guattari (1987): 21.
434 Meillassoux (2006): 8.
435 Heidegger (1993): 261.  It is true that Heidegger, especially in his later writings, rejects the Sartrean concept of *nothingness* as originally brought into the world by a freely self-positing "subjectivity." Nonetheless, Heidegger does seem to persist in thinking human Dasein as the essential space of "nihilation" [*Nichten*] in which the truth of Being is cleared.
436 Merleau-Ponty writes:  "What do I bring to the problem of the same and the other?  This:  that the same be other than the other, and identity difference of difference—this 1) does not realize a surpassing, a dialectic in the Hegelian sense; 2) is realized on the spot, by encroachment, thickness, *spatiality*—" (1968): 264.

The problem with Heidegger's ontology is that, for all his zeal to overcome anthropocentrism, he still, if confusedly, subscribes to a kind of residual humanism. As late as the seminar in Le Thor of 1969, for example, Heidegger asserts that Being, "for its opening, needs man as the there of its manifestation."[437] Even his ontologically fruitful notion of the fourfold [*das Geviert*] tends to lapse into an ontic privileging of the human.[438] Sartre, Marcuse, and, if their interpretations are correct, Hegel, embrace a humanistic dualism much less confusedly articulated: "being" vs. "nothingness," the "undifferentiated" vs. the "abyss," the "in-itself" vs. the "for itself," "reality vs. value," etc.[439] As I asserted in Chapter Two, it isn't so much a gaping *nothingness* that confronts us, but a paralyzing *plentitude*.[440] "Meaning [*sens*]," for Nancy, "is the exhibition of the foundation without foundation, which is not an abyss but simply the 'with' of things that are, insofar as they are."[441] Heidegger says the "understanding of Being already implies the understanding of others."[442] For Nancy, this "doesn't say enough," and, in fact, requires more than a "simple 'readjustment' of the Heideggerian discourse." To wit: "The understanding of Being is nothing other than an understanding of

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[437] Heidegger (2003a): 63.

[438] "The mortals are the humans. They are called the mortals because they are able to die. Dying means: to be capable of death as death. Only the human dies. The animal comes to an end. It has death as death neither before it nor after it. Death is the shrine of the nothing, namely of that which in all respects is never some mere being, but nonetheless essences, namely as being itself. Death, as the shrine of the nothing, harbors in itself what essences of being. As the shrine of the nothing, death is the refuge of being. The mortals we now name the mortals—not because their earthly life ends, but rather because they are capable of death as death. The mortals are who they are as mortals by essencing in the refuge of being. They are the essencing relationship to being as being" (2012): 17.

[439] Marcuse writes, for example, "The ontological tension between essence and appearance, between 'is' and 'ought' becomes historical tension, and the 'inner negativity' of the object-world is understood as the work of the historical subject—man in his struggle with nature and society" (1991): 141. Due to his effectively uncritical inheritance of the so-called "fact-value distinction," any variety of "realism" must be untenable for Marcuse.

[440] See p. 25 above.

[441] Nancy (2000): 87.

[442] Heidegger (1966): 161. Quoted by Nancy (2000): 27.

others, which means, in every sense, understanding others through 'me' and understanding 'me' through others, the understanding of one another [*des uns des autres*].[443]

It is important to distinguish Nancy's others from Levinas' Other. The Other is a product of either pathological desire or pathological hatred, always arising conceptually at one perilous extreme of the economy of difference. There are, generally speaking, two such possible extremes: (1) the reductive assimilation or *translation* of the other to the same, and (2) the total estrangement of the other into an impenetrable domain of mystery or, worse still, monstrosity. Levinas is committed to some version of (2), owing in large part to his arguably mystical privileging of "verticality." The "face" of the "Other" manifests as an unreachable *beyond*, a generalized and anonymous sphere of radical alterity, i.e., a "*noumenal*" dimension. For Levinas, as is well known, only the human being has (is?) a "face." This is no accidental feature of his thought. According to Nancy, "others"—in contrast to the "Other"—real, concrete, differentiated, and singular, "are our originary interests,"[444] i.e. the original sources of sense [*sens*] in response to which we move, act, question, and understand. Why? Because every object, from the HMS Greyhound to the Rica River, from Roger Bacon to Roger Moore, is singular and plural, same and other; every object, precisely in the ontological *differencing* of its self-presentation, at once *demands* interest and *withdraws* from the same.

Echoing Michelstaedter, Nancy suggests that the spectral figure of the "Other" is surreptitiously at play in most, if not all, historical systems of ethics. He clearly has Kant in mind, for instance, when he points out that "what is most often at work in any call to 'ethics'" is "a transcendental unpresentability of that most concrete presence,"[445] i.e., the noumenal sphere of human subjectivity, the source of all meaning and *value*. This bifurcation of the

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[443] Nancy (2000): 27-28.
[444] *Ibid*: 21.
[445] *Ibid*: 48.

cosmos into object/subject, fact/value, has the effect of transforming the whole of "external reality" into a grand spectacle, pushing every object into uniform presence,[446] thereby *reducing* the sense of "appearance" to a "mere." The "ethical" must be *behind* "mere appearance," but in a strange non-spatial sense: "Since the spectacle occupies all of space, its opposite can only make itself known as the inappropriable secret of an originary property hidden beneath appearances."[447]

At times Nancy seems to lapse into the Heideggerian privileging of *Dasein* as the truth-opening "clearing" [*Lichtung*] or "space-time"[448] in which things are originarily exposed in their exposure. He writes, for example, that "existence" "is the original singularity of Being, which *Dasein* exposes for all being."[449] We must resist this line of thinking for reasons already elaborated. There is a relationship between the ceramic mug sitting on my desk and the now cold tea that fills it, a relationship sustained in the inter-object sphere in virtue of a mutual exposure that has nothing to do with my supposedly unique revelatory powers as a human being. The tea and the mug interact only on the basis of what they are, that is, on the basis of how they demand to be recognized and reflected by other objects. Lacking eyes, nose, and ears, the tea and the mug are indifferently oblivious to the qualitative features of their meeting from which humans draw so much pleasure. However, these features do not *exhaust* the being of the tea and the mug; there is a remainder, a margin of excess peculiar to the objects involved that governs their aesthetic relation as an emergent object worthy of consideration for the human who would drink it, the fly who would drown in it, and the desk whose surface veneer suffers from its heat and moisture. The nature of the tea-mug relationship in the absence of

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[446] In other words, the *a priori* bifurcation at issue effectively neutralizes all difference with respect to how distinct objects show themselves.
[447] *Ibid*: 51.
[448] *Ibid*: 61.
[449] *Ibid*: 18.

human beings is not that of perfect identity without lacunae; the tea and the mug also *withdraw* from each other, and they do so precisely *at* the place where they meet. My seven-year-old ceramic mug resists saturation by an overwhelming influx of tannic acid, which, as a result of this resistance, leaves behind a patchy, intricately patterned trace. The introduction of milk to the relation may not suit your taste, but its caseins do work to surround the offending tannins, restraining the degree of contact they enjoy with the walls of the mug.

As Graham Harman argues, articulating Michelstaedter's point about the "superficiality" of every relation, "the withdrawal of objects is not some cognitive trauma that afflicts only humans and a few smart animals, but expresses the permanent inadequacy of any relation at all."[450] "It cannot be denied," he goes on to say, "that human experience is rather different from inanimate contact, and presumably richer and more complex. But that is not the point. The more relevant issue is whether the difference [for example] between human relations with paper and a flame's relation with paper is different in kind or only in degree."[451] As I have tried to show in my account of originary, ontological, *analogical* difference, we must conclude that the latter is the case. Since *every* relation—whether between me and a spider, a spider and a tumbleweed of dog hair, or a tumbleweed of dog hair and a hardwood floor—is superficial in that it fails to exhaustively plumb the depths of either related term, there is no *fundamental* ontological rift between "kinds" of relationality. To claim the converse is to perpetrate what Harman calls the "Taxonomic Fallacy." It is more accurate, he argues, "to say that physical things and minds are both objects. And qua objects, both withdraw from any relations and simply perform the labor of being what they are."[452] This move does not necessarily entail panpsychism, since the latter typically tends towards a too robust

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[450] Harman (2011a): 44.
[451] *Ibid*: 45.
[452] *Ibid*: 116.

anthropomorphism according to which inanimate things are imbued with specifically human mental qualities. As we learned from Schopenhauer, the attribution of a hidden *Wille* to a seemingly static stone does not mean that the stone writes comic plays in its spare time or that it harbors plaintive dreams about returning to the bottom of the Indian Ocean. Rather, it means the stone houses and gives expression to an inner normative character that withdraws from, remains in excess of, whatever sensuous, conceptual, or representational relation in which it is caught up. And it achieves this simply in virtue of being what it is.

Despite his occasionally regrettable lapse into Heideggerian orthodoxy, Nancy offers some brilliant moments of insight for the would-be object-oriented philosopher, a fact which makes his absence in the writing of leading OOO proponents all the more baffling. Tempering his apparent allegiance to the "digital" orthodoxy at issue, Nancy writes: "If existence is exposed as such by humans, what is exposed there also holds for the rest of beings. There is not, on one side, an originary singularity and then, on the other, a simple being-there of things, more or less given for our use."[453] "Whether an other is another person, animal, plant, or star," he continues,

> …it is above all the glaring presence of a place and moment of absolute origin, irrefutable, offered as such and vanishing in its passing. This occurs in the face of a newborn child, a face encountered by chance on the street, an insect, a shark, a pebble…but if one really wants to understand it, it is a matter of making these curious presences equal.[454]

This equality of presence is grounded in the nature of presence as such. To *come to presence* at all—whether as a pilchard shoal or as a suspected terrorist training camp—is to appear as irresolvably different (but, importantly, qua "other" not "Other"). To appear *as* different at the ontological level is to *present oneself* by way of demands for recognition—simultaneously

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[453] Nancy (2000): 17.
[454] *Ibid*. 20.

*theoretical* and *practical*—and states of withdrawal whose scope and qualitative potency cannot be formulated in terms of *a priori* schemata. To quote Ian Bogost once more, "all things equally exist, but they do not exist equally."[455] Instead of focusing on "world," which, for Heidegger, is opened up and sustained by the unique *da* [there] of *Da-sein* [there-being], I want to reflect on the inter-object sphere pure and simple. Far from being a *nothingness* or peaceful space for illumination, the inter-object sphere—the *with* as such—is characterized by stultifying confusion, crisscrossing lines of flight, and mutually affecting states of withdrawal. The world of objects is a world of noise.

### 3.7    Conclusions

In this chapter I have been in dialogue with a number of thinkers, historical and contemporary, in the interest of advancing and defending several metaphysical claims about objects and their relations. These claims, while metaphysical, also bear on the ethical in a primary sense. "Ethics" is indeed "first philosophy," not because ontology is found to be secondary and derivative of the space of communication, opened up originally through the ethical relation (Levinas), but because ontology qua "first philosophy" is the study of *existence* and *to exist* is always *to present oneself as* (1) conditioning other existents (demand), and (2) irreducible to the conditions emanating from other existents (withdrawal). We can summarize the major claims of the chapter by way of the following theses:

1. To be is to be different. Ontological univocity guarantees that beings "speak" (i.e., show themselves) and that beings always speak *as* different. Beings are the *same* in that they are all *different*.

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[455] Bogost (2012): 11.

2. The fact that all beings are the same in "differencing" means that all beings touch in distinction. Difference is *analogical* rather than *digital*, i.e., *by degree* rather than *in kind* (& > V). Beings always touch other beings but are never exhausted in touching.

3. Beings *present themselves*, they articulate this primitive difference or incommensurability, by self-manifesting in (1) the expression of demands that imply how they ought to be related to, and (2) in a withdrawal from the demands of other beings.

4. *Every* being *just is* this self-presentation in difference: demand and withdrawal.

5. To *demand* is to *stand over and against*, to *impose*; beings that so *impose* are called "objects." To *withdraw* is to *object* to total appropriation, assimilation, and reduction; beings that *withdraw* are called "objects." All beings are objects.

6. What we call "norms" originate from the self-showing of objects, viz., their states of *demand* and *withdrawal.*

7. The history of the discipline we call "ethics" is part of the human history of being, viz., the widespread effort of certain human objects to obscure the originary norms of other objects (human and otherwise) under the hegemonic imposition of their own.

8. An effect of ethics qua technology, qua problem solving (the problem of what *to do*) "tool" for human objects, is the "spectralization" of *all* objects. Spectralized objects are de-substantiated in both demand and withdrawal: they are brought to uniform presence under the light of certain human goals and interests which are themselves not uniform.

9. A non-technological ethics would be *object-oriented.* The basis of object-oriented ethics is the recognition that norms, directives, and *oughts* issue from objects themselves, whatever they may be, and that acting ethically involves *responding* to (being *responsible* to) these norms, directives, and *oughts* on the terms of their own self-manifestation.

10. Finally, what we call "subjectivity" is the state of being *subjected* to, being *interpellated* by, norms. Owing to the nature of ontological difference (see 1-3 above), one object is always already exposed to the norms of other objects (this is what it means for objects to be "with" one another). For this reason, sociality and politics (and the ethical questions these give rise to) lie at the very heart of Being itself—they are *ontological*.

The upshot of these theses is an egalitarian theory of moral realism. Normativity arises out of the *real* self-presentation of objects, human and non-human, which are always caught up in a mutual state of finite exposure. Yet, as we have seen, the given demands of objects— owing in part to the *withdrawal* side of the story—are indeterminate, myriad, and frequently contradictory. They don't clearly articulate themselves in the manner of codified, hierarchical *principles*. Rather, demands make themselves known in the confused immediacy of a *shock*; they impinge upon their other in varying degrees of amplitude. We live out our lives in the middle of these tiny analog gradations, these inscrutable degrees of sense, folding inside and out, that show up prior to representational thought in the form of practical directives, demands. Underwriting the *immediacy* of this "shock" is a self-mediating, inexhaustible depth opened up at the site of the object itself. Thus, demands are never "simply given." They require *interpretation*. Far from landing us in the midst of an unpalatable relativism, however, the necessity of interpretation is grounded in reality *as such*. There is no being *without* interpretation. The task of the next chapter is to explore the nature of interpretation and to define the ontological role it occupies in my metaethical framework. Chapter Four therefore advances what I call an *aesthetic hermeneutics*, or, in other words, a theory of interpretation that works *from the ground up*, i.e., *from things themselves*. It is important to note that interpretive acts sufficiently attuned to the demands of things need not result in self-sacrifice or impoverishment on the side of the interpreter. Indeed, it seems the opposite is more often

the case. The pressing problem of antibiotic resistance, for example, is arguably a consequence of treating bacteria as *mere* obstacles to be neutralized in the pursuit of health and other related human goods rather than as autonomous agents in their own right. (Copyright @ Justin L. Harmon 2016)

# 4   CHAPTER FOUR:  OBJECTS AND INTERPRETATION

*There is no moral certainty.  Its mere
assumption would be immoral, would falsely
relieve the individual of anything that might
be called morality.*
> -Theodor Adorno (*Negative
> Dialectics*)

*So only one lack remains, even though not yet
felt, the lack of difficulty.*
> -Søren Kierkegaard (*Concluding
> Unscientific Postscript to
> Philosophical Fragments*)

Civil unrest erupted in Baltimore following the unlawful arrest of Freddie Gray, a twenty-five-year-old black man who died on April 19, 2015 due to injuries sustained while in police custody.  Gray was apprehended without probable cause and subsequently placed unsecured on his stomach, wrists handcuffed and ankles shackled, on the floor of a police wagon.  No less than six officers ignored his numerous pleas for medical attention, one of whom has since been charged with, among other things, second-degree depraved-heart murder.[456]  According to CNN analyst Sonny Hostin, the charge suggests that the officer "intentionally, willfully, and deliberately acted with *depraved indifference* to human life."[457]

Gray's murder—as it was identified by the medical examiner—is just one of the more recent cases in a disturbing spate of institutional violence directed against unarmed people of color.  On April 4, 2015 at 9:30 a.m. Walter Scott, a fifty-year-old black man, was shot to death by a white police officer in North Charleston, South Carolina following a traffic stop for a non-functioning brake light.  The cellphone video captured by an eyewitness clearly shows

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[456] http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/01/us/freddie-gray-officers-actions/.
[457] *Ibid.*  Emphasis added.

Officer Michael Slager pursuing Scott and firing eight rounds at his retreating back. Scott was unarmed and, contrary to Slager's initial report, did not evidently seize the officer's Taser, which Slager cited as motivation for deploying deadly force.[458] In November 2014, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was gunned down by two white police officers within two seconds of their arrival on the scene in response to a police dispatch call regarding a "male sitting on a swing and pointing a gun at people" at a park in Cleveland, Ohio.[459] The gun in question was a toy. The list goes on *ad nauseum*.

Police apologists, for whom these unsettling examples of illegitimate institutional force are commensurate with the countless instances of incompetence exhibited across both public and private sector professions, have denied the problem with equal persistence. The two "sides"—which, of course, are not "equal" in terms of moral standing—are at an impasse that, given the abundance of data already available, does not appear to be resolvable by the acquisition of even more "objective facts." Rather, we are in fact here faced with a *hermeneutic* problem, i.e. a problem of *interpreting* the "facts." We can understand "interpretation," at least provisionally, to mean "knowledge in progress."[460] Interpretation is an activity that has neither a beginning nor an end. It has no beginning because one is always already caught up in the business of interpreting, and it has no end because the infinity of the interpretive task matches that of the self-presentation of objects.

For the hermeneutic approach, genuine knowledge is necessarily incomplete knowledge. This is because, as shown in the previous chapter, the phenomenal presencing of any entity whatever is excessive, that is, immeasurably deep, and this situation entails that there

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[458] http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/04/07/south-carolina-police-officer-will-be-charged-with-murder-after-shooting/.

[459] http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/11/26/officials-release-video-names-in-fatal-police-shooting-of-12-year-old-cleveland-boy/.

[460] Bubbio (2009): 15.

are always more facts to interpret. In other words, the "end" of the interpretive act is not found in any *fait accompli*. Every fact alleged to be brute or immediate is *ipso facto* always already interpreted. It is the goal of hermeneutic philosophy in general to thematize, in varying degrees of explicitness, the processes and products of interpretation, which, it claims, are necessitated by the differential nature of reality, and thus invariably exercised, even when actively resisted. In this chapter, I offer an aesthetic materialist account of hermeneutics in an effort to grapple with the profound difficulty left hanging at the close of Chapter Three: There is no being *without* interpretation. Being is always *being-with*, and the irresolvable indeterminacy that underwrites *being-with* ensures that the call for interpretation can never be annulled, even if it is willfully or obliviously ignored. At the same time, interpretation is always interpretation *of something*, and, as I will try to make manifest, the kind of intentionality at issue in the interpretive act precludes the neat separation of theory and practice or knowledge and action: *to be* is *to be-with*, *to be-with* is *to interpret*, and *to interpret* is to bear the weight of the specific directedness of one's relation to a phenomenon in ways that can be elaborated, only in *abstracto*, in the terms of "theory" or "practice." Insofar as interpretation is taken to be an essentially "theoretical" enterprise on the basis of which one must then "act," it is necessary to undermine this distinction. Interpretation, whether "theoretical" or "practical," is the nature of all inter-object relations, not just those that involve humans. Nonetheless, in the interest of clarity and brevity, I will limit my description of how interpretation unfolds to specific problems in the domain of human relationships.

With these preliminary observations in mind, in §1 I will situate my theoretical account of an aesthetic or materialist hermeneutic in response to the concrete problem of structural racism and police brutality in the United States. The issue, which, as intimated, turns on the recognition that there is in fact an issue, can be traced to the reductionist Cartesian subject-

object framework from which two mutually contradictory attitudes are derived. On the one hand, structural racism is presented as a problem that can only be understood from the vantage of first-personal *subjective experience*. This attitude suggests that the phenomenon of *structural* (i.e. emergent from systematic relations) racism can be grasped *as* phenomenon only from the locus of lived *subjection*, whether real or simulated. Those unable or unwilling to "simulate" said subjection, that is, to put themselves "in the shoes" of the oppressed other, will never see the problem, because *seeing* it at all presupposes the adoption of a particular starting place, namely, that of the concrete subject experientially subjected to racism. On the other hand, there is the opposing tendency to view the issue, and others like it, from the perspective of an indifferent objectivity, the "view from nowhere." Both starting points, I will argue, are illusory and ultimately too abstract to deal effectively with the phenomena at hand as real *objects*, that is, as self-presenting constellations of demands that *object* to appropriation. Instead, the subjective and objective approaches, as two sides of the same coin, function by reducing the contents of their inquiry to spectral traces ultimately appropriable to one or another preestablished ideological framework. At work here is a distinction between subjective *agency* and objective *structure* or *system*, a distinction that both liberals and conservatives alike draw on in their arguments, whether explicitly or implicitly. My concern is that, owing to the distinction's Cartesian origin, the so-called "objective" structural side is always implicitly grounded in subjectivity, and that, consequently, this unexpressed grounding allows those who are caught up in seemingly intractable disputes to have it both ways, appealing to "objective" facts, which are somehow only legitimated by one's untouchable first-person experience.

In §2 I take a closer look at the nature of *self-presentation*, that which calls for interpretation, by carrying out a series of reflections on certain aesthetic concepts, namely, *metaphor* and *mimesis*. So far I have argued, in agreement with Nancy, that for any ethics worthy

of the name there is an ontological challenge that cannot be bypassed. The question of what an object *is* is at once the question of how one *ought* to negotiate with it, and vice versa. Here I explicitly introduce the *aesthetic* to the *ontological-ethical* plexus established in Chapter Three. To do aesthetics presumes ontology. Conversely, to do ontology is to engage in aesthetics, insofar as the latter concerns itself with how entities and their qualities open up to and withdraw from sensuous engagement. Aesthetics asks, in a word, "How do beings present themselves to and direct the senses?" Thus, to ask the ethical question, "what does object x demand?," is to ask the ontological question, "what is object x?," which, in turn, is to ask the aesthetico-hermeneutic question, "how does object x present itself?" The hermeneutic question is *in fondo* an aesthetic question, which is why hermeneutic philosophers like Gadamer and, more importantly for my purposes, Pareyson, tend to deploy their theories of interpretation in the context of discussions about art and artworks. I will argue that the essential function of art is to bridge spaces of difference, but, in the act of this bridging, also to bring difference into relief precisely *qua* difference, neither annulling nor forgetting it. While, methodologically, Chapter Two was abstract and historical, and Chapter Three abstract and theoretical, Chapter Four will be concrete and theoretical.

## 4.1    Interpretation From the Ground Up

### 4.1.1    Clearing the Terrain

In his 1985 work *Poesia e ontologia*, Gianni Vattimo asks, "Is a hermeneutics possible…that would really place itself at the disposal of its object instead of reducing it completely to itself?"[461] In the following pages I will answer affirmatively and try to articulate what a successful *object-oriented* hermeneutics calls for, doing so largely on the basis of a theoretical

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[461] Vattimo (2010 [1985]): 114.

approach of which Vattimo himself claims to be a follower[462]: that of his teacher, Luigi Pareyson. I will argue that Pareyson's hermeneutics of inexhaustibility is precisely the model needed to navigate the chaotic inter-object sphere and to compensate for the ethico-political shortcomings of object-oriented philosophy heretofore. Another task of section one is to show that Vattimo's notion of "weak thought" [*pensiero debole*]—according to which the ultimate task of philosophy is to *weaken* or *soften* the connection between *being* and *knowing*—is a fruitful development and elaboration of Pareyson's work on interpretation and "tragic thought" [*pensiero tragico*], and, as a result, that Vattimo's criticism of what he calls a "metaphysical residue"[463] in Pareyson is largely misguided. By elevating the ontological to the center of hermeneutic experience, Pareyson's view of interpretation makes room for the effectuality of *being*, space, and synchronicity in a domain of theory typically only focused on *time*, history, and diachronicity. This is important: while the role of tradition in the handing down of sense and normativity—as Gadamer, Pareyson's more famous counterpart, persuasively emphasizes—must not be understated, the myopic privileging of tradition facilitates an overly anthropocentric, linguistic *idealism* whereby the status quo is affirmed more often than not. For Pareyson, genuine interpretation is at once *expressive* and *revelatory*: it is the former insofar as it does not forget *time* and the latter insofar as it does not forget *being*.[464] The oblivion of being in the murky relativity of historicity is, on this view, the origin of ideology, i.e. the instrumentalization of reason and spectralization of beings thus cut off from their being.

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[462] Vattimo (2013): xii.
[463] *Ibid.*
[464] Pareyson (2013 [1971]): 16.

To characterize briefly what I take to be an ethically adequate hermeneutic theory, I offer the following interrelated criteria. Such a theory must: (1) accommodate the non-reductive materialism for which I argued in the previous chapter;[465] (2) not treat human subjectivity or intersubjectivity (or language, or *Geist*, etc.) as the privileged locus of interpretation and meaning; (3) engage with *place* or *space* as constitutive of hermeneutic experience no less than time, temporality, history, historicity, and tradition are; (4) interpret its objects in terms of their *self-presentation* rather than *re-presentation*; and (5) be attentive to the sensuous specificity of material assemblages (objects) as the epistemically bottomless source of norms or directives that render behavior (human and nonhuman) more or less intelligible. The goal is not a promise to dissolve all misunderstanding by way of an "angelic" view of communication that suppresses particularity and difference in favor of universal linguistic formulae and their translatability.[466] The difficulty is, instead, to *preserve* the difficulty of inter-object relations: this is precisely the unavoidable challenge of ethics, which, for Pareyson, "is at the same time the easiest and most difficult thing."[467] Ethics is the "easiest" thing because everyone is always already doing it (however poorly) and the most difficult because it, like interpretation itself, constitutes an infinite task.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Pareyson's radical notion of interpretive performance—which has at once an aesthetic and an ethical register—relies upon the idea of a normative structure at the place of the object from which interpreters of that object must draw cues in interpreting it. The object as such "appropriates," makes demands. The source

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[465] To summarize succinctly: *Matter* is the universal, albeit unstable, milieu in which an economy of identity and difference is maintained.

[466] Cf. Michel Serres (1995) for a contemporary example of the sort of "intellectualistic angelism" against which Pareyson argues in the "Destiny and Ideology" chapter of his 1971 opus, *Truth and Interpretation*.

[467] Pareyson (2009): 155.

of these cues, however, can never be revealed as a whole; it is ontologically indifferent (which resists *zuhanden* reduction) and epistemically inexhaustible (which resists *vorhanden* reduction). In other words, for Pareyson, "interpretation is infinitely various *not only* because of its subject, but also because of its object."[468]  A succinct statement of this ontological pluralism is found in *Estetica. teoria della formativitá* [1950]:  "The knowledge of things, as with the knowledge of persons, requires interrogation and dialogue… [T]hings also contain a singular openness and unpredictability in their definiteness due to their plastic nature, so that the interpretation required to know things is as difficult as that required to know persons."[469]

In 1986, one year after the publication of the question of Vattimo mentioned at the start of this section, Pareyson responded in an essay called "*Pensiero ermeneutico e pensiero tragico*" ["Hermeneutic Thought and Tragic Thought"].  Here, just five years before his death, Pareyson stipulates that precisely because interpretation is always interpretation of something (and not merely interpretation of other interpretations, as is the case, perhaps, for some hermeneutic thinkers such as Richard Rorty), "the interpretation which dissolves within itself what it is to interpret, and in so doing replaces it, ceases to be interpretation."[470]  This means that, at the intersection of *interpretation* and *truth*, there is an irresolvable excess whose reduction results in ideology, whether "absolutist" (e.g. "mine is the *only* correct interpretation") or "relativist" (e.g. "there is no *correct* interpretation").  The problem with Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics is that, as Bubbio puts it, he "focuses on language as 'total mediation' of experience and world."  Thus, "Gadamer's hermeneutics tends to solve every problem in terms of language and its finiteness,"[471] beyond which there is no *being* of which to speak at all.

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468 Bubbio (2009): 13.
469 Pareyson (2009): 95.
470 *Id.*: 220.
471 Bubbio (2009): 24.

Paul Ricoeur, Gadamer's French counterpart, also fails in his account of interpretation to sustain difference and ontological excess, since he explicitly identifies interpretation with "appropriation" [*Aneignung*], and not on the part of the object, as I argue, but of the subject: "…the aim of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance and historical alienation. Interpretation brings together, equalizes, renders contemporary and similar."[472] On this view, the task of the interpreter is to achieve a clarity of understanding by assimilating the otherness of her object to a "common ground," which, made possible by the linguistic infinity of the interpreting subject, is ultimately the *subjectum*. In the "Sixth Study" of *Oneself as Another* [1990], Ricoeur entertains objections to the notion of "appropriation" in the context of interpreting literary texts—e.g. the equivocal nature of the author's voice, the entanglement of life histories (so that it remains unclear just "who" is doing the appropriating), and the necessary incompleteness of life as lived—only to conclude briefly that "these [objections] are less to be refuted than to be incorporated in a more subtle, more dialectical comprehension of *appropriation*."[473] In other words, all of the intransigent points and sources of difference in any interpretive encounter are merely temporary barbarians to be more and more urbanized along the path of the *Aufhebung*, which always ends where it began: with itself (albeit a self transformed).

Pareyson, in contrast, insists that genuine interpretation "implies the always new and different personality of its subject, and the unfathomable infinity of its object."[474] In contrast to Gadamer, as Vattimo makes clear, Pareyson's notion of "[infinity] is not a peaceful openness to a destiny of limitless growth; rather, it is an indication of an ontology characterized

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[472] Ricoeur (1991): 119.
[473] Ricoeur (1992): 161-162.
[474] Pareyson (2013): 139.

by the feature of inexhaustibility, which is also deeply marked by a specifically tragic character."[475] At stake in this debate, I submit, is the fundamental nature of the ethical *as such*: do ethical or protoethical norms issue most originarily from "within," i.e. as part of the necessary structure of (inter)subjectivity and natural language, or from "without," i.e. as from an inexhaustible ontological excess with which we are called to engage interpretively? The former position, to my mind, is complicit in the modern "technologicization" of ethics inasmuch as it identifies without remainder, albeit in a sophisticated fashion owing to the purported infinity of subjectivity and language, the discourse with which we strive to navigate reality with reality itself. The upshot is a kind of residual Hegelianism according to which the possibility of a legitimate *shock*, of a genuine transformation or reorientation of one's point of view in the face of disturbing phenomena, is sacrificed in favor of the possibility of simply deepening or expanding entrenched conceptual schemes.

It is in virtue of this Hegelianism that, according to Gadamer, the "being that can be understood is language."[476] As Vattimo suggests, this claim "announces a development of Heideggerian thought in the direction of a dissolution of Being into language—or, at the very least, its resolution into language."[477] As indicated above, such linguistic reductionism is incompatible with Pareyson's view of interpretation to the extent that it spectralizes being *qua* difference. Jeff Malpas, bringing Nancy's argument in *Being Singular Plural* to bear explicitly on the ontological character of hermeneutic experience, writes: "To be given over, as we always essentially are, to the hermeneutic situation, and so to be given over to understanding (so that we cannot draw back from the attempt to understand), is thus always to find ourselves standing

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[475] Vattimo (2010): 80.
[476] Gadamer (2013): 490.
[477] Vattimo (1988): 131.

in a relation to that which is outside of and other to us, and yet which, by virtue of its very relatedness, also calls unavoidably for a response from us."[478] In Pareyson we find Nancy's insistence on the inseparability of ontology and ethics—of *being* and, not *value*, but, *mattering*, *calling*, in short, *demanding*—articulated in a hermeneutic theory that "invites philosophy to re-appropriate its own speculative vocation, while at the same time remaining faithful to the concreteness of existence."[479]

There are four essential features of Pareyson's thought that I shall emphasize in elaborating his hermeneutics: (1) aesthetic form as *formativity*, (2) ontological personalism, (3) truth as ulterior, and (4) ethical tragedism. First, however, I wish to set up the problem of interpretation in a concrete manner by engaging with the aforementioned crisis of the constellation of police violence and structural racism, which many commentators believe is intractable. Current discourse on this issue remains mired in stiff ideological extremes, which, I will argue, trace back to different appropriations of the subjective ground of the subject-object divide, i.e. the concealed but pervasive structure due to which, "in the activity of grounding, the subject encounters nothing other than itself."[480]

### 4.1.2 Black and Blue: Caught Between the *Subjective* and the *Objective*

The NAACP reports that seventy-six unarmed men and women of color have died in police custody from 1999 to 2014.[481] Since the available data concerning the number of annual fatalities at police hands relies on the self-reporting of countless law-enforcement agencies, they are likely to be modest to say the least. Nonetheless, looking at the 1,217 deadly police shootings reported between 2010 and 2012, Pro Publica has concluded that black males

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[478] Malpas (2010): 272.
[479] Bubbio (2009): 25.
[480] Vattimo (2010): 21.
[481] http://gawker.com/unarmed-people-of-color-killed-by-police-1999-2014-1666672349.

between the ages of fifteen and nineteen are killed at a rate of 31.17 per million, while only 1.47 per million of their white counterparts die as a result of police action.[482]  This means that young black males are 21 times more likely to be killed by law enforcement than are young white males.

On the one hand, social critics have long recognized entrenched systemic practices of white supremacy at the root of this state of affairs.  Official policy, like the "zero tolerance" initiatives of police departments in New York City, Chicago, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Los Angeles from the early 90s to the present, has effectively concentrated brutal law-enforcement efforts in low-income neighborhoods overwhelmingly populated by people of color.  The ideology of "zero tolerance" fuels a mode of comportment towards the criminalized other, an "attitude," which, in the words of Gary McLhinney, former president of Baltimore's Fraternal Order of Police, "means that if you can't respect the standards of decent behavior, if you prey on our communities, we'll come down on you night and day."[483]  It is no accident that this us-them ideological directive to relentlessly "come down on" is exercised—largely in prosecution of the "war on drugs"—in America's ghettos:  every practice is shaped and conceptualized in relation to concrete places in which the practice makes sense or does not make sense, is appropriate or inappropriate.[484]  Thus, the institutional police practice of "zero tolerance" is inextricably tied to the historical and ongoing creation of the

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[482] http://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white?utm_source=et&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=dailynewsletter.

[483] https://zcomm.org/zmagazine/the-revolution-in-american-policing-by-christian-parenti/.

[484] To anticipate fruitfully here the concrete *social* implications of the *place-truth-norm* plexus at the center of Pareyson's hermeneutic theory, I offer the following passage from *Verità e interpretazione* [1971]:  "This is exactly what happens among people:  they reveal themselves in particularly fortunate meetings, favored or enlivened by reciprocal appreciation, whereas they do not succeed in understanding each other in less fortunate meetings, compromised from the outset by an instinctual aversion, so that perhaps *they present themselves and appear different from how they really are*" (Pareyson 2013: 134).  Emphasis added.

ghetto through insidious "post-segregation" space-making policies such as "redlining," which, as Ta-Nehisi Coates observes, "destroyed the possibility of investment wherever black people lived."[485]

From 1934 (when the discriminatory National Housing Act was put into effect) to 1968 (when the Fair Housing Act was implemented to counteract the former), urban neighborhoods with large black and Latino populations were designated ineligible to receive government-backed mortgage financing. Banks would withhold all mortgage capital from these "high-risk" areas, which led to increased ghettoization and urban decay. Banks would also exploit ordinances of the Federal Housing Authority to keep minorities—seen as representatives or diplomats of the culture of decay sustained by this very Authority—from relocating to and inhabiting non-redlined districts. This is an overt, self-conscious practice of political space-making: neighborhoods of "undesirables" were identified and defined on maps with red lines whose express purpose was normative: x groups of people and y modes of behavior are appropriate *here*, but not *there*. It is unsurprising that such normative socio-political differentiations have inscribed themselves in the bodies of the oppressed and in the everyday perceptual capabilities and practical exigencies of the institutional oppressors.[486]

On the other hand, conservative commentators have resisted this critical approach, rejecting not only the proposed *explanans*, but the *explanandum* as well. Heather MacDonald, for example, takes issue with New York City mayor Bill de Blasio's remark in the wake of the grand jury's decision not to indict officer Daniel Panteleo for the July 2014 murder of Eric

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[485] http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/05/the-case-for-reparations/361631/.
[486] Several recent empirical studies have investigated the effects of implicit bias on "shoot/don't shoot" decision scenarios in which officers "displayed robust racial bias in response speed" (Correll, *et al* 2007), meaning that the decision to shoot a possible threat was made far quicker when that threat was black, and, conversely, the decision to not shoot a possible threat was made far quicker when that threat was white. Cf. Correll, *et al* 2009, 2007, and 2002.

Garner, that "It was not years of racism that brought us to this day, or decades of racism, but centuries of racism. That is how profound a crisis this is." MacDonald's December 2014 piece in the New York Daily News jejunely asks in a willfully obtuse refrain: "Just *who* is the mayor indicting for these centuries of racism?"[487], failing to recognize that the ascription and condemnation of a determinate "who" is itself part of the larger problem. Media personalities like Bill O'Reilly are quick to identify systemic, "cultural" sources to account for the overwhelming disparity in black and white incarceration rates, for example, extramarital births and hip hop music, ignoring the inconvenient counterexample that while roughly two-thirds of Icelandic babies are born out of wedlock, the country enjoys one of the lowest rates of violent crime in the world.[488] In his analysis of the Baltimore protests, Daniel Horowitz tellingly writes, "As the media and pundits focus on racial issues and *isolated police shootings*, the broader lesson for conservatives is the important role of law enforcement in preserving liberty."[489]

There is a tension here. From a viewpoint like O'Reilly's, the agential autonomy of blacks and other minorities is subverted by insidious, systemic cultural forces, while law enforcement personnel are paragons of robust and unassailable individual self-determination, the public manifestation of which sometimes gets the regrettable "bad apples" into trouble. From this perspective, when a young black man attempts to sell "loosie" cigarettes on a corner in Staten Island, it is because of his fractured home-life and the incorrigible disrespect for authority he picked up from listening to rappers like Common and Killer Mike. When, by contrast, a young white police officer guns down an unarmed man in Charleston for driving

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[487] http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/heather-mac-donald-bill-slanders-cops-article-1.2035487.
[488] http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22288564.
[489] https://www.conservativereview.com/commentary/2015/04/baltimore-riots-mob-rule-and-the-role-of-local-government. Emphasis added.

with a broken taillight, it is an "isolated shooting" carried out by one rogue agent. In the case of Freddie Gray, there just happened to be six of them.

For the oppressed and those sympathetic to their plight, events like the protests and riots in Baltimore and those a year earlier in Ferguson are rare moments exposing a wound that is always already there and deceptively immune to treatments of its superficial symptoms. For others, such events are fleeting but woefully destructive cystic ruptures of a more or less isolated self-infection, whose cure, if at all possible, must arise in the form of behavioral self-tutelage at the level of atomic individuals. For the former, seemingly self-evident slogans like "black lives matter" highlight these explosive historical scenes as moments bearing witness to the *subjection* of the oppressed—that is, to their peculiar constitution as subjects through complex socio-economic interpellations that reduce them to the role of bodies to be policed.[490] For the latter, there is no "subjection" at all, but rather a culture of already fully formed subjects radically at odds with "liberty" since it disrupts the technological rationality of consumerist capitalism. That is, the situation can be reduced to one of a group of subjects self-consciously breaking the law and, consequently, doing violence to "freedom," i.e. "life, liberty, and property." Regarding the latter view, however, one is well served to remember that the value (and danger) of law is that it provides an anchor of practical consistency, establishing limits and clear protocols, in a world of human agents who more often than not find themselves confused in the face of confusing phenomena. Sometimes—as Claudette Colvin, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Cassius Clay, and countless others have demonstrated—it is precisely the *practical consistency* of a given system that demands disruption. In the words of Malpas: "…understanding can never be a matter simply of

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[490] For many conservatives, of course, the slogan *is* self-evident, which (misguidedly) makes its articulation in exclusion of the mattering of non-black lives so irritating.

applying some prior set of principles to a situation; it is instead always a matter of understanding as it arises in and as a response to the situation itself."[491]

Thus, we are left at an impasse between two conflicting approaches to the problem that can be plausibly termed *subjective* and *objective*, respectively. Liberals and conservatives alike draw on both sides of the subjective-objective divide, sometimes in the same breath. From the first-person perspective of the oppressed, black lives have been reduced to the spectral expression of a series of very old unchecked assumptions, their bodies thoughtlessly inscribed with and ordered by mechanisms that became subterranean (and therefore more insidious) after the dismantling of Jim Crow. These lives demand recognition as subjects whose concrete historical reality is the contingent product of centuries of subjection and deliberate oblivion. They demand to be heard. They are voices beseeching us to bear witness to and to affirm the reality of their pain, a pain to which we may or may not have any *subjective* access whatever. Because police apologists lack this reflexive-affective identification with the lived experience of their critics, the *subjective* approach—the appeal to "step into the shoes" of the oppressed—tends to induce exasperated eye rolling more than anything else.

The *objective* approach, in contrast, wants to adopt the neutral "view from nowhere" of the quantitative natural sciences. An example of this strategy was supplied in early 2015 by the Freeway Patrol Media Relations Office in the form of a three-minute infomercial[492] arguing that out of the millions of law enforcement/citizen encounters in 2012, there were only 26,000 complaints of excessive force, of which only "eight percent were sustained, having any form of merit or evidence." Such statistics serve as easy ammunition for police apologists, but remain unconvincing to social critics who point out that (1) it is likely that, for obvious reasons,

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[491] Malpas (2010): 270.
[492] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRd5oucG114.

most instances of excessive force go unreported, and (2) the low rate of "sustained" complaints reflects the deeper, systemic problem of the collusion between law enforcement and the district attorney offices that rely substantially on the former for performing their everyday operations.

Of course, the *objective* approach is not the privileged and unique purview of the right, but has been adopted by progressive social scientists as well, such as those behind the Pro Publica study cited above, not to mention the liberal democrats who focus purely on statistical analysis and the concomitant development of economic programs in an effort to ameliorate racial bias. Cornell West presents the issue as follows:

> The liberal notion that more government programs can solve racial problems is simplistic—precisely because it focuses *solely* on the economic dimension. And the conservative idea that what is needed is a change in the moral behavior of black urban dwellers…highlights immoral actions while ignoring public responsibility for the immoral circumstances that haunt our fellow citizens.[493]

Echoing Adorno's famous dictum that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly,"[494] West articulates the fruitlessness of an internally conflicted ideological framework that, on the one hand, grounds "progress" in a narrative of subjective self-overcoming and, on the other, insists on the objectively neutral status of statistical analysis and the economic programs the latter recommends. I, like West, do not want to suggest that "objective," empirical data are inherently flawed resources for social or ethical inquiry. The issue is rather that abstract statistical facts tend to conceal as much as they reveal: as I argued in Chapter Three, the "view from nowhere," which would guarantee a perfect, unobstructed, and unadumbrated picture of the whole, is an illusion that draws its blood from epistemological correspondentism, i.e.

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[493] West (2001): 4-5.
[494] Adorno (2005): 39.

the view that truth is at bottom a matter of the accurate mirroring of being. Consequently, "facts are not seen as problematic; but are, on the contrary, idolized as data to be imposed and suffered."[495] We must come to terms with the fact that every "fact" is less a conclusive answer to a question than a problem to be interpreted, and, moreover, that every interpretation is carried out *personally*, on the ground, by this or that determinate interpreter. This is not to deny that there are shared interpretations or interpretive practices. In fact, insofar as all phenomena to be interpreted present themselves in the inter-object sphere, interpretation is *always* shared. Nonetheless, every interpretation, however shared it may be, is articulated concretely at the place opened up by a finite perspective or point of ingress, for which no other perspective or point can stand in. Thus, as Gadamer puts it, "what is established by statistics seems to be a language of facts, but which questions these facts answer and which facts would begin to speak if other questions were asked are hermeneutical questions. Only a hermeneutical inquiry would legitimate the meaning of these facts and thus the consequences that follow from them."[496] Thus, the way forward here is to drop the notion that statistical facts constitute a view from nowhere, the idea, in other words, that the truth of every statistical fact remains identical for every person interpreting it.

This impasse on the issue of structural racism and police brutality is a corollary of the theoretical subject-object split of which I was critical in Chapter Three. Both sides of the debate are made up of "subjects" whose concrete, affective life experiences are irreconcilable, yet who appear to seek an impossible bridge on the basis of supposedly value-neutral, "objective" facts, which, when appropriated subjectively, only confirm what was already settled. But, as Charles Mills asserts, adopting the concepts of "hot" and "cold" mechanisms

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[495] Pareyson (2009 [1952]): 51.
[496] Gadamer (1976 [1966]): 11.

from cognitive psychology, "psychological obstacles ('hot' mechanisms) stand in the way of acceptance of redescriptions that cast interpersonal transactions in terms of coercion and oppression, quite apart from the ('cold') skepticism that arises from the intrinsic incongruity of these reports with one's own hegemonic group experience."[497] "Hot" mechanisms arise in the form of *motivationally based* psychological tendencies, such as wishful thinking and taking more credit for success than for failure, that lead to self-supporting "subjective" distortions of reality even, and perhaps especially, in the context of constructing and evaluating "objective" analyses of that reality. "Cold" mechanisms, in contrast, amount to the reactionary and unthinking dismissal of any "subjective" report that fails to square with one's own.[498] Both are impediments to self-critique that tend to manifest in the confirmation of one's group-identified bias, making it very difficult for members of marginalized groups to successfully communicate the fact of their marginalization to those who identify with hegemonic social strata.

It is clear that, broadly speaking, neither the "subjective," nor the "objective" attitude will yield an efficacious strategy for combatting structural racism. The "subjective" attitude assumes—tacitly or explicitly—that the only starting point from which to address the problem is the *subjective* feeling of identification. For those on the left, this is more or less easily done, depending on the relative strength or weakness of one's capacity for empathy. For those on the right who assume this attitude, the deficiency at issue stems not from an atrophied empathic faculty—which, from their perspective, they have in spades, but for the "right" object, i.e. law enforcement—but rather from an impoverished sense of personal responsibility. From this, still *subjective*, vantage, decriers of police brutality are simply wrong

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[497] Mills (1998): 29.
[498] For an effective Marxian deployment of these concepts, see Elster (1985): 18-19.

to identify with the subjective position that they do. That is, the right embraces a subjective starting place no less than the left does, but theirs merely places them in a different unbridgeable camp. Vis-à-vis the "subjective" approach, then, the sides remain ideologically polarized, according to Pareyson's rubric, on the side of historico-cultural *expression*. The "objective" attitude, by contrast, assumes "Truth" as its starting place, where the latter is identified with the "view from nowhere" of statistical analysis, which both the left and the right appropriate to legitimate antithetical foregone conclusions. In Pareyson's language, this approach results in ideology on the side of a conception of epistemic *revelation* that is free from any subjective expression.

It is further clear that any abstract hybridization of the two approaches will similarly fail, because, as Kierkegaard consistently stresses, in concrete ethical inquiry we are always in commerce with an *existing* individual—this or that singular being—and the latter's "existing is precisely what will prevent him from going both ways [subjective and objective] at once…"[499] We are faced, then, with a hermeneutical problem: How to address the claims of the other *qua* other, that is, without collapsing into one of two extremes, viz., seeing the other as *Other*, i.e. as utterly alien to or disconnected from one's mode of experiencing (the objective attitude), or seeing the other as a species of the *Same* (the subjective attitude)? I contend that an object-oriented approach—to be distinguished, crucially, from any "objective" or "objectivist" approach—can help. The object-oriented approach, as I've been developing it, says: One must begin with the existing *other*, and the other exists precisely as an inexhaustible source of self-presentation, which, in virtue of this inexhaustibility, demands ceaseless interpretation, not from a view from nowhere, but from *here*, *there*, that is, in short, from the bottom up.

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[499] Kierkegaard (1992): 193.

### 4.1.3    Making Life Harder

It might strike one as odd that I chose to focus this chapter around an account of an intransigent *human* problem, when my proposed metaethic seeks to undermine the insular and self-serving human framing of the ethical as such. My response to this worry is that, although the ethical *as such* (i.e. the "proto-ethicality" of objectival self-presentation) arises from the order of beings (not just humans) and their being, *ethics* is a human praxis that concerns human-human and human-nonhuman practices.[500] The human reduction of non-human entities to varying instances of *mere* thinghood, which is problematic in itself, also has troubling implications for inter-human relations, which Pareyson describes as follows:

> Those who usually reduce persons to 'things,' that is, to objects, instruments or tools, make themselves incapable of seeing things as 'persons,' that is, as independent entities able to be known only through the dialogue of interpretation, and conversely, those who cannot interpret things as 'persons' assume an attitude which also unconsciously leads them to consider persons as 'things.'[501]

Moreover, as Timothy Morton argues, "thinking antiracism has often proceeded by thinking within lines that preestablish thin and rigid boundaries between the human and nonhuman realms (subject and object, freedom and unfreedom, and so on)."[502] Thus, antiracist (and antisexist, anticlassist, etc.) strategies have often unfolded on problematic assumptions that underwrote the subjectivist turn of early modernity and endeavored to expand the scope of an exclusive club that has never been as stable, determinate, or important as it has taken itself to be.

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[500] This is analogous to the uncontroversial claim that while astronomy is indeed a practice peculiar to and dependent on human beings, its objects of study are not so dependent and would survive the demise of all astronomers.

[501] Pareyson (2009): 96.

[502] Morton (2015): 167.

Such strategies are coopted from the beginning by ethics *qua* technologism. "Technologism" names a system of approaches whose ultimate aim—notwithstanding the emancipatory intent of those caught up in it—is to reduce, in the language of Merleau-Ponty, "wild being" to a structure of artificially reliable categories that make ethical life and its exigencies easier to manage.  So, for example, ethical theories in the Kantian tradition rely upon a robust conception of reason, accessible *a priori*, which maps out in advance of any concrete contextualization the landscape of moral agents, patients, and non-entities.  Without this *a priori* moral cartography, the story goes, what we call "ethical life" would amount to blind groping about in an inherently dark and directionless world.  We equip ourselves with ethical tools in order to avoid the ostensibly intractable challenge of mapping out the normative terms of the objects surrounding us in our lived, everyday environments, when this is precisely the task for which ethical thought ought to equip us.  One of the chief claims of my project is that, now more than ever, the proper task for ethics is *to make life harder*.  On this point I follow the ironic insight of Johannes Climacus:

> So there I sat and smoked my cigar until I drifted into thought.  Among other thoughts, I recall these.  You are getting on in years, I said to myself, and are becoming an old man without being anything and without actually undertaking anything.  On the other hand, wherever you look in literature or in life, you see the names and figures of celebrities, the prized and highly acclaimed people, prominent or much discussed, the many benefactors of the age who know how to benefit mankind by making life easier and easier, some by railroads, others by omnibuses and steamships, others by telegraph, others by easily understood surveys and brief publications about everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age who by virtue of thought systematically make spiritual existence easier and easier and yet more and more meaningful—and what are you doing?  At this point my introspection was interrupted because my cigar was finished and a new one had to be it.  So I smoked again, and then suddenly this thought crossed my mind:  You must do something, but since with your limited capabilities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others have, take it upon yourself to make something more difficult…In other words, *when all join together to make everything easier in every way, there remains only one possible*

*danger, namely, the danger that the easiness would become so great that it would become all too easy. So only one lack remains, even though not yet felt, the lack of difficulty.*[503]

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous voice here articulates a worry about the ironic problem of difficulty itself becoming "all too easy." Precisely in cases where one most takes oneself to be struggling with difficulty, say, in the context of the ethical conundrums canonized in programs of "applied ethics," the systematized, automated ease of the whole enterprise renders the struggle a superficial, Disneyfied caricature. The "true benefactors of the age" are those who systematize ethical life on the basis of universal principles that negate the difficulties introduced by finitude, seeing finitude—thought by many, especially those working in the Kantian tradition (including Kierkegaard), to be unique to human beings—as a defect or failing to be overcome. Moral *epistemologies* have sought to expedite conviction, or, in Carlo Michelstaedter's preferred vocabulary, *persuasion*, by way of certain rhetorical strategies that work by reducing the being of beings to static images or intersubjectively consistent vignettes in the face of which one feels self-righteous or self-satisfied. Hence, decisions made on the basis of utilitarian calculation, such as the 1945 U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however repulsive they might strike one, can be embraced without compunction as the "right thing to do." Understood *hermeneutically*, the true charge of ethics is to avoid "knowledge"—understood, *à la* the Cartesian epistemological turn, as *certainty-control*—for as long as one can, to hold fast instead in the openness of the task and its indeterminate contours, without, however, succumbing to nihilism or relativism. In fact, from the ethical perspective, relativism is the same as epistemic absolutism: both, in the end, amount to a closure of inquiry.

The hermeneutic "method"—if one wants to call it that—is necessitated by the finitude or "facticity" of the beings that make up the inter-object field, not as a means of

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[503] Kierkegaard (1992): 186.

escaping this "plight," but in order to preserve it in the form of an ontological imperative, reflective of reality itself, that can never be satisfied. This "imperative" is the voice of this or that being in its being, a voice that calls for and precludes responses in the terms of adequacy and inadequacy, and where the *measure* of these terms is in each different case the objectivally self-presented being itself. "What is at issue in [hermeneutics], what it all comes to," Heidegger tells us, "is not to become finished with it as quickly as possible, but rather to hold out in it as long as possible."[504]

My [object-oriented] ontology is hermeneutical, and my [ethical] hermeneutics is ontological. This is *not* to suggest that the being of a given object is dependent on that of another (an interpreter), but rather that the object *itself*, in its very being itself, necessitates this connection—between ontology and hermeneutics—because of its own plentitude, conceived of as so many wounds or interpellations, or, correlatively, as so many openings. The very real issues of structural racism will remain intransigent so long as we continue to frame reality in terms of isolated evaluative subjects over here and value-neutral objects (or "facts") over there. These are not neatly demarcated ontological orders. As discussed in Chapter Three, to be an object is to present oneself—on the plane of consistency—in the material form of demands that *order* other objects but which *underdetermine* them in the course of such ordering. Hermeneutics, therefore, as opposed to epistemology, is a theoretical stance that takes the absolute necessity of interpretation—always *of* and *by* a concrete object—seriously. Subjectivity, meanwhile, is an unrepeatable modification of objecthood, which thinkers like Kierkegaard describe in terms of "inwardness"; from the perspective of OOE, however, inwardness must result from the ways in which objects are singularly *subjected* to the demands

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[504] Heidegger (2008 [1923]): 16-17.

of other objects (and it is only in light of these demands that the behavior of any given object "makes sense"), but at the same time *exceed* these demands.

Subjectivity, then, is nothing *noumenal*, i.e. nothing radically removed from the order of phenomenality, but instead expresses the deep inexhaustibility of the phenomenal as such, which is a necessary corollary of ontological difference. The be-ing of beings is not a being, but because it is always the be-ing of this or that being in the constitution of a non-totalizable plenum, it turns out that the unity of be-ing *as such* is precisely an insuperable multiplicity that must be navigated by fractured-connected unities (objects). Gianni Vattimo well underscores this point when he writes that "the ontological difference does not simply signify that Being is not a being, but also positively that the truth of a being consists in its relationship with the other, in being open to an other that is radically other than itself."[505] I call this navigational process—which cannot be circumvented by any pretense to "pure objectivity," the *view from nowhere*—*interpretation*. The impossibility of "pure objectivity," however, as James Risser points out, "does not mean that interpretation is subjective. It means precisely that interpretation is always caught up in sorting out anticipations of meaning in order to let the alterity of the object of interpretation present itself."[506] Thus, the problem of structural racism neither calls for the subjective identification with the oppressed other, nor for the objective, value-neutral fixing of the facts of racial oppression. Instead, it calls for a mode of comportment whereby one is attuned to the demands of the other *qua* other, demands of which one may have no *subjective* understanding whatever.

Interpretation is neither "subjective," nor "objective." It is, instead, an irresolvable *intertwining* of sameness and difference, self and other, outward extension and inward

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[505] Vattimo (2010): 22.
[506] Risser (1997): 9.

reflexivity, touching and being touched. When one effectively *hears*[507] the oppressed other, one is, to invoke Derrida's reflection on Jean-Luc Nancy, touching her *without* touching.[508] In other words, my touch need not result in a *de se* transformation whereby the suffering of the other becomes my own (i.e. the subjective attitude). On the other hand, I cannot convince myself—if I am to act ethically—that my touch is somehow a non-touch, an immaculate gesture from nowhere which can thereby reap the rewards of being from everywhere (i.e. the objective attitude). Merleau-Ponty tries to articulate this non-dichotomous and non-dialectical dynamic milieu in his late ontology of the "flesh" [*chair*] of the world:

> For, as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not merely my own. It is said that the colors, the tactile reliefs given to the other, are for me an absolute mystery, forever inaccessible. This is not completely true; for me to have not an idea, an image, nor a representation, but as it were the imminent experience of them, it suffices that I look at a landscape, that I speak of it with someone. Then, through the concordant operation of his body and my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow invades his eyes without quitting my own, I recognize in my green his green, as the customs officer recognizes suddenly in a traveler the man whose description he had been given.[509]

What I feel when attempting to interpret another's experience in the world is *not* mine. It is *other than* mine. But, this doesn't mean that I *don't* feel it; I do feel it. I feel it precisely *as* not-mine, that is, as a claim of the other upon me.

The "subjective" approach exemplified in the common white progressive *attitude*—etymologically, the adoption of a particular posture in and towards the world—of assimilation and identification (i.e. "I know how you feel because I have put myself in your shoes!") itself exemplifies the traditionalist brand of philosophical hermeneutics of which contemporary

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[507] By the word "hear" I intend its full synaesthetic scope of meaning, which includes not only the brute sensory act, but also the sense of actively *receiving* and *responding to* what is heard in a manner appropriate to it (as when one beseeches God to "hear" one's prayers). Cf. Sweetser (1990): 41-43.

[508] Derrida (2005): 67.

[509] Merleau-Ponty (1968): 142.

philosophers like Gianni Vattimo, Jurgen Habermas, and John Caputo have been critical. Attributing this view to Gadamer, for example, Caputo argues that his hermeneutics, "moved as it is by its Hegelian mainsprings, is preoccupied with digestion."[510] To be sure, in maintaining an ethically fruitful social economy of difference, some "common ground" must be established. However, we needn't seek such common ground at the level of first-person *phenomenology*, or in the hermeneutical fusing of historico-cultural horizons. It can be located instead at the level of *ontology*, where the self-presentation of *difference* is the irreducible primitive. The "subjective" approach begins with the subject and moves *outward* only to return with some masticated, experiential spoils. The otherness of the other is appropriated, digested, and ultimately reduced to the same. Language, from both the Gadamerian and Ricoeurian perspective, is the operative mechanism of this digestive action, serving as the universal medium in which the difference and multiplicity intrinsic to being *as such* finds dissolution or resolution.[511]

### 4.1.4 Sensible Intuition and Interpretation: Form as Formativity

From the perspective of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, arguably opened up to its decisive trajectory in the early works of Martin Heidegger, even perception is interpretation. In *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity* [1923], Heidegger grounds the pervasive necessity of interpretation in the everyday: "…interpretation begins in the 'today,' i.e., in the definite and average state of understanding from out of which and on the basis of which philosophy lives and *back* into which it *speaks*."[512] This is because, as Merleau-Ponty argued more explicitly throughout his career, conceptuality "is always parasitical on perceptual play, wherein an

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[510] Caputo (1987): 67.
[511] Vattimo (1988): 131.
[512] Heidegger (2008): 14

individual finds a world, and a world finds them."[513] Perception, as pre-reflectively always

unfolding, provides the substance with which conceptuality does its work. How does this

notion of the primacy of *perception* over conceptuality connect to the issue of *interpretation*? The

claim that even sense perception has an interpretative ground seems to suggest that, since the

material reality tracked by sensory engagement is never simply given in its brute immediacy,

there is something right about transcendental idealism versus naïve realism. Consequently,

hermeneutic ontology and materialism (i.e. the view that reality is ultimately *material*, however

differently this latter term is understood) are taken to be mutually exclusive. The "carnal"

trend of contemporary phenomenology, best represented by the work of Alphonso Lingis,

rejects this conclusion. For example, in *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* (1996), Lingis asks

rhetorically: "Is the theoretical objective, to represent the things we observe as objects and

the field opened by our perception as an objective universe, itself motivated by the structure

of things which command our perception?"[514] However, less well known is that already in the

1950s Pareyson was working out this line of inquiry within the field of philosophical aesthetics.

In his seminal *Estetica* [1950],[515] Pareyson challenges the longstanding dominance of

Benedetto Croce's aesthetics in the landscape of Italian cultural theory. Croce's aim in writing

his most famous work, *The Aesthetic as The Science of Expression and of the Linguistic in General*

[1909] was to present "a *general* theory of philosophy and a general solution to all its

problems."[516] Accordingly, the work is concerned with the nature and "spiritual function" of

art only insofar as art plays a role in the overarching (neo-Hegelian) metaphysical and

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[513] Mootz (2010): 89.
[514] Lingis (1996): x.
[515] *Op cit.*
[516] Lyas (1992): xix.

epistemological structure of his system. Pareyson's work, in contrast, explicitly rejects such system building:

> The philosopher who pretends to legislate in the field of art, or who artificially deduces an aesthetics from a pre-established philosophical system, or who in every case proceeds without regard to aesthetic experience, renders himself incapable of explaining the latter; his reflections cease to be philosophy and are reduced to mere wordplay.[517]

For Pareyson, truly understanding art requires appraising it on its own terms, as it presents itself in concrete experience.

The question that here seems to immediately arise, "How does one *know* what terms these are?," is, for Pareyson, not a very philosophical question, since it takes for granted that such "knowledge" is either the ultimate end of the process of appraising art, or a condition for the possibility of the end. Again, this would make matters so much *easier*. In any case, answering this question presupposes what, from Pareyson's perspective, is decidedly impossible: to compare an interpretation with the reality interpreted. Since truth is only given in (necessarily multiple) interpretations, that is, in Pareyson's words, personal pathways to it, there is no space from which to freely evaluate the revelatory power of the artistic gesture.[518] Hence, contra the "objective attitude" discussed above, "truth is unobjectifiable above all in the sense that it is *inseparable* from the interpretation that it is given and *incomparable* with its formulation."[519] Even before a work of art is formed [*formata*], it *works* as "forming" [*formante*], but in the direction of a telos that cannot be formulized in advance.

Openness to the demands of this telos is perhaps what separates genuine works of art from kitsch. Hermann Bloch claims that the "essence of kitsch is the confusion of ethical and

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[517] Pareyson (1966): 9.
[518] Pareyson (2013): 22.
[519] *Id.*: 63.

esthetic categories; kitsch wants to produce not the 'good' but the 'beautiful.'"[520]  In this case a particular, historically shaped aesthetic criterion, "the beautiful," is imposed on the creative act in the form of a dogmatic prescription, excluding *a priori* from its scheme any unpleasant, confusing, or otherwise undesirable element.  Milan Kundera makes the same point more forcefully:  "Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence."[521]  For this reason "that which is past and proven appears over and over in kitsch; in other words…kitsch is always subject to the dogmatic influence of the past—it will never take its vocabulary of reality from the world directly, but will apply pre-used vocabularies, which in its hands rigidify into cliché…"[522] Thus, Thomas Kinkade, who, according to Salon co-founder Laura Miller, "was always the first to present his work as a form of ideology,"[523] is survived by a legacy of light without shadow, of a nauseatingly saccharine refashioning of the world, which, so interpreted, remains closed and inert.  Kitsch is the product of aesthetic prescriptivism, in Pareyson's terminology, the dominance of "formed form" [*forma formata*] over "forming form" [*forma formante*], amounting to the perpetual recirculation of dead gestures.  There is no determinate set of criteria to be applied *a priori* for the differentiation of art from kitsch, since the drive to prescribe such formulae is itself built into the productive praxis of kitsch.

Art presents itself, in Pareyson's view, primarily as *form*, thought in terms of "a structured object, uniting thought, feeling, and matter in an activity that aims at the harmonious coordination of all three and proceeds according to the laws postulated and

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[520] Bloch (2002): 33.
[521] Kundera (1984): 248.
[522] Bloch (2002): 33-34.
[523] http://www.salon.com/2012/04/09/thomas_kinkade_the_george_w_bush_of_art/

manifested by the work itself as it is being made."[524]  "Form," then, is a dynamic object,

characterized at once by stasis and action, which realizes itself in production (ποίησις).  Such

a *poietic* rendering of the nature of form makes it impossible to distinguish it from any kind of

*content*.  The Crocean model of form as the *internal* "expression" of a subject's feeling is here

rejected in favor of a concrete *formativity*—encompassing the relative stability of the object in

its current state of formation, and the fluid originarity from which the object derives its

impetus—that operates in the intercourse of real objects in the external environment.  As

Umberto Eco observes, "The Crocean illusion of an *interior figuration*, whose physical

exteriorization is only a corollary event, deliberately ignored one of the richest and most

fruitful areas of creativity."[525]

In the act of production the artist takes her "cues" from *matter* in the physical world,

presented as "a set of autonomous laws" which she "must be able to interpret and turn into

artistic laws." [526]  This way of characterizing the artistic process resonates well with

contemporary practices in experimental music, for example, such as Einstürzende

Neubauten's program of soliciting sounds from non-traditional materials via contact

microphones.  Rather than recording the airborne acoustic transmissions of objects, these

devices allow one to explore their inner depth, disclosing the hidden sonorous vibrancy of air-

conditioner parts, automotive shock absorbers, shattering glass, and scraped hunks of

discarded sheet metal.  The artist "lets" the material "be," but in a way that bypasses the

distinction between "activity" and "passivity," insofar as her singular interpretation, the

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[524] Eco (1989): 159.  It is worth noting that Umberto Eco wrote his doctoral dissertation under
Pareyson's supervision.
[525] *Id.*: 160.  Emphasis added.
[526] *Id.*: 161.

creative act in its deployment, provides the time-space in which the material cues and directives present themselves.

The development of the work proceeds in accordance with this ongoing "interpretation," wherein the resistant materiality of the selected objects makes certain demands on the artist with respect to how it "wants" to be treated. Such a productive interpretation, while relying upon the sensuous *voice* of the matter for its direction, also requires the responsive *ear* of the artist, which is necessarily oriented from and toward a particular point of view: "Every voice must be respected in its unique physiognomy and no consensus or false authority can be imposed. One must interrogate, and not just by talking, one must listen too, and not only know how to listen."[527] Every artistic working on a given array of matter thus results in the empirical articulation of the artist's personality in the form of choices, traces, retraces, decisions, and reconsiderations. This "articulation" always already commences at the level of sensible intuition: "Intuition, as that which includes sensation and sentiment, which is at the same time portrayal of things and figuration of passions, which presents itself simultaneously as sensory knowledge and expression of an emotion, is always discrimination, judgment, and choice: in a word, interpretation."[528] Deleuze claims that artistic production "is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces."[529] In the domain of painting, the artist achieves this by populating a surface with invisible rhythms made visible, not as "representations," but as presentations of sensuous vortices. The difficulty of this task is exacerbated by the fact that the artist, in responding to these affective forces, does not work

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[527] Pareyson (2009): 62.
[528] Pareyson (2009): 83.
[529] Deleuze (2002): 48.

on "a white and virgin surface. The entire surface is already invested virtually with all kinds of clichés, which the painter will have to break with."[530]

Whatever the particular theme or character of a work may be, the work's "content," broadly construed, consists partly in the sensuous constitution of the artist's personality, which exhibits itself in the tactics it adopts to resist and transform the cliché, the dead gesture. The direction or trajectory of this constitution—what Pareyson calls the "natural intentionality" of the work—is delineated in the suggestive germs from which the formative act draws its impetus: the first line of a poem, a cursory brushstroke, the shadow cast by a tree on a midsummer afternoon. These "germs" or "cues" give a multitude of *senses* or directions that the artist must choose from and develop. The natural intentionality (i.e. arising from a place other than the artist's self-conscious intentions) of which the artist's intentionality is a part— insofar as the artist herself is part of nature—makes up what Pareyson calls the "forming form" (*forma formante*). The "forming form" of a work serves as the teleological guide of its own empirical realization; it is the dynamic, processual principle governing the formative development of a work from its germinal initiation.[531] Once the work is shaped into a sufficiently autonomous, harmonious whole, it presents itself as a finished model, a "formed form" (*forma formata*), in short, the completed artwork. This "formed form" is to be aesthetically evaluated in terms of how closely it *approximates* the ongoing "forming form" to which it owes its life: "…the work of art draws its value from being in line, not with something other, but with itself; the process of its formation consists in the completion of the forming form in a formed form."[532]

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[530] *Id.*: 12.
[531] Pareyson (1960): 59.
[532] *Id.*: 61.

Pareyson's view of interpretation as responsiveness to sensuously disclosed directives in the lived environment parallels James Gibson's ecological theory of perception developed in the 1970s. For Gibson, to perceive a material surface is at the same time to perceive what that surface "affords" the perceiving animal, what it makes possible for the animal in the navigation of its physical environment. As he points out, "this is a radical hypothesis, for it implies that the 'values' and 'meanings' of things in the environment can be directly perceived. Moreover, it would explain the sense in which values and meanings are external to the perceiver."[533] When a hiker perceives the upward sloping grade that discloses a hill *qua* hill, she does not represent it as a Newtonian object, an inert aggregate of quantifiable properties, but instead catches on to the peculiar style of the hill by a total bodily orientation in which certain possibilities are revealed. The character of "meaningfulness," while in each case relative to the perceiving organism, is not something conferred upon the surface by the perceiver, but is rather discovered as something already there.

"Forming form" is always already "out there" in the world, emerging from an environment of objects and actions coordinately with the artist's own thinking. In the interpretation of a "formed form," a finished work, one similarly engages with an "otherness," but in this case the sensualized personality of the artist (again, in the form of choices, reconsiderations, etc.). One interprets precisely by "reading" the "formed form" in a critical retracing, a reactivation of the "forming form" process through whose originary direction the artist brought the work to completion. The artist gives herself as part of the "content" in the form of her production. That is, every work carries with it the trace of a peculiar *style* to which the interpreter "catches on." Alphonso Lingis describes this process as that by which "our

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[533] Gibson (1979): 127.

bodies perceive and move in a field."[534]  In "stylizing," he goes on, our bodies' "positions and initiations pick up the style of the field, catch on to its levels and follow its directives."[535]

Two seemingly contradictory elements are necessary for an interpretation to successfully sustain the formativity of a work:  freedom and faithfulness. Pareyson writes, "…the execution of an interpretation is always carried out by a single interpreter who wishes to render the work as it itself desires."[536]  Freely adopting one point of view, one avenue of approach from among many, the interpreter addresses a "revelatory aspect" of the work in a manner appropriate to its mode of disclosure.  In this way, Pareyson avoids the pitfalls of an extreme relativism on the one hand (*any* interpretation is a "right" interpretation), and an extreme dogmatism on the other (*only one* interpretation is the "right" interpretation).  Every instance of genuine interpretation is simultaneously a *personal* execution *and* the work itself.[537] The "subject" does not appropriate the work into an illusory "transcendental" mediation. Instead, the work *appropriates the person*, places a claim on her, demands to be attended to and respected in accordance with its irreducible difference.  Thus, we are presented with a provocative sense in which *interpretation* bears a structural resemblance to *conversation.*

In everyday conversation, one does not have to *translate* the other's language into "one's own." That is, to invoke more overtly the spirit of Lévinas, one is not compelled—in the interest of genuine *understanding*—to assimilate "the other" into "the same."  Nor does one have to "represent" one's interlocutor's thoughts through some kind of impenetrable internal mechanism of "symbol" processing, however "transparent" it may be.  Rather, one is "presented" with the other's thoughts *as* other.  This does not mean that I am incapable of

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[534] Lingis (1998): 36.
[535] *Ibid.*
[536] Pareyson (1960): 195.
[537] *Ibid.*

understanding my interlocutor; on the contrary, it means that I am capable of understanding her as *not me* and as not assimilable to me. A reader of Yukio Mishima's *Temple of the Golden Pavilion* does not, in order to understand him, subjectively identify with, i.e., adopt the point of view of, Mizoguchi, the troubled acolyte at the center of the story, but instead catches on to the style in which his point of view is presented and engages with it as a source of guidance towards its unique intelligibility. Similarly, in the context of social life one does not subjectively "represent" the other's perspective in order to understand it, but instead engages with her self-presentation *as* different, that is, as a call from the outside that cannot be assimilated.

For Pareyson, the execution of an interpretation does not aim to *translate* the work of art as though it were an impoverished shell waiting to be filled with meaning or an unfinished project requiring an interpreter to complete it in accordance with a *relative* point of view.[538] The interpretive engagement must instead aim only to make the work live its own life. In Lingis' terms, basic, pre-reflective perception itself achieves this by locating the "viewpoint from which the integral thing exhibits its own properties."[539] One's *appropriation* by the work— or by the other—is not some alien operation to which one passively falls prey. It is instead openness to revelation, attentiveness to the self-disclosive potentiality of form that transcends the simple active-receptive dichotomy: "In fact, the activity performed for the purpose of interpretation is the adoption of the rhythm of the object."[540] According to the idealism of neo-Hegelian aesthetics, in contrast, "the work does not exist in its determinateness and independence, but dissolves in an always new creative act, in which it is no longer possible to distinguish it from the interpretive execution itself."[541] Understood in this deficient way, every

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[538] *Id.*: 201.
[539] Lingis (1998): 51.
[540] Pareyson (2009): 105. I will have more to say about rhythm in the following section.
[541] Pareyson (1960): 205.

act of interpretation becomes a radical whitewashing of that which is, an implosion of difference into identity.

Pareyson writes:

In the work of art, completeness means infinity, and infinity means inexhaustibility. If the aspects of the work are innumerable, and if each interpretation shows one aspect, even though it grasps the whole work, it can be said that none of the innumerable interpretations of a work can exhaust or monopolize it, because it promotes, provokes and requires them all.[542]

The aesthetic theory espoused here is not confined to works of art as privileged entities, but fruitfully applies to any object. To insist that objects are "complete" means precisely that they endure as what they are without reliance on externally imposed "values" or "translations." But it is an "infinite" completeness, which gets at the epistemic inexhaustibility of the object's material excess. Pareyson's hermeneutic ontology goes farther than Gadamer's; while the latter takes the interpreting subject to be existentially inexhaustible, the interpreted object is always of limited depth. For Pareyson, by contrast, "it is not only the world of interpretive subjects that is inexhaustible, but also that of the forms that are offered to interpretation."[543]

The "carnal" phenomenology of Alphonso Lingis forcefully endorses the idea that sense experience *itself* is essentially interpretive. In *The Imperative* [1998], his most important work, Lingis asserts that "to see a real thing is to sense how to position our forces before it; to see something is to know how to approach it and explore it."[544] Echoing Pareyson's connected notions of the primacy of interpretation and the inexhaustibility of truth, Lingis provocatively suggests that the *reality* of a perceived thing is essentially tied up with its bottomless *explorability*:

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[542] *Id.*: 238.
[543] Vattimo (2010): 89.
[544] Lingis (1998): 60.

> A perceived thing is real in being explorable—not a profile given and more not given, to be filled in by drawing on memory images and concepts, but instead details which, as soon as they are caught on to, lead our gaze into inner levels about which more details will form, to an overall design that coordinates and unfolds facets, to a behavior in an immediate setting that extends beyond it and into the future.[545]

Like "facts" in the discussion above, phenomenal objects abide as real precisely in the manner of an always-open invitation to further engagement, which is in each case directed by the norms opened up at the place of the object itself.  It is for this reason that Lingis, expressing the sense of the first epigram to this chapter, resists the possibility of absolute certainty "of anything in particular, because a thing is the termination of an indefinite exploration, a task, and exists in the interrogative mode."[546]  Norms, as conditions of adequacy that govern inter-object relations, reveal themselves in meaningful *forms* from which one derives directives for action.  But in every event surviving the various instances of deformation to which things fall prey lies the excess of materiality, "which is not just there as the materialization of the dynamic form we grasp; once grasped and brought under our eyes and in our home, the instrumental forms of things dissolve into the density of their substance."[547]  The "formed forms" from which we derive clear practical meanings tend to withdraw into a recalcitrant and substantial materiality that conceals more than it reveals.

### 4.1.5  Existence *Qua* Singularity:  Ontological Personalism

According to Pareyson, "the best guarantee against the danger of subjectivism is offered by the concept of person, according to which, while affirming that everything with which the person comes into contact must become interior to her, at the same time asserts its irreducible

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[545] *Id.*: 55.
[546] *Id.*: 111.
[547] *Id.*: 90.

independence."[548] While I might quibble with the language of "becoming interior," I take what Pareyson has in mind to be commensurable with Nancy's site-based ontology of singularity.[549] Reflecting on the apparent contradiction between the *unity* of philosophy (as the pursuit of truth), and the *multiplicity* of philosophies, Pareyson claims that these "are thus reconciled and imply one another, for the unity of philosophy is but a *philosophizing-with* [*confilosofia*] of single philosophies."[550] As he goes on to stress, however, "this unity never hardens into a totality."[551] While the truth of something holds itself, however obscurely, in an ontological unicity, i.e. a selfsame plenum (contra relativism), it is always expressed or articulated by way of a non-totalizable multiplicity of singular sites, each exposed to the other in mutual subjection (contra absolutism). In other words, all truths about something are truths of the *same* thing and, conversely, this *one*, selfsame thing (the source of a truth's "unicity") is always expressed from a multiplicity of perspectives on it. For this reason, Pareyson designates the "person" as the site where the unicity of a truth is revealed, but revealed precisely in the expression of one viewpoint among many others—a *multiplicity* that cannot be overcome by appeal to some hypostasized organic unity, because it is a necessary condition for revelation. *To exist* is to stand forth as the non-privileged *place* at which truth is exposed towards other openings, which, as "infinite" (in the sense explored above), withdraw from total appropriation: "The reason why the person becomes the *organ of truth's revelation* is above all so as to be able to be the *site of its coming*."[552] Thus, every existence is simultaneously a truth and a philosophy (expression of truth).[553]

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[548] Pareyson (1960): 194.
[549] See Chapter Two, §5 above.
[550] Pareyson (1952): 69.
[551] *Ibid.*
[552] Pareyson (2013): 72.
[553] Pareyson (2009): 49.

There are, for Pareyson, roughly two ways in which interpretation fails: *assimilation* and *alienation*. These sources of interpretive collapse track, respectively, the problematic approaches to the issue of racism and institutional violence that I identified above as *subjective* and *objective*. *Assimilation* occurs when the would-be interpretation has no "*respect* for the object that has to be interpreted, [when] it is not a grasping of something which is received and looked upon, a surveying of something which allows itself to be seen and known."[554] In other words, the problem here is ultimately that of the artificial shrinking of distance between interpreter and interpreted, a case of one "overlap[ping] [oneself] with what [one] must interpret," thereby undercutting the "possibility to grasp the inner nature of the object."[555]

On the other hand, *alienation* occurs "if something imposes itself on me to the point where I submit to it, or better, if I fix the thing in front of me, in an imposition which is no longer a proposal, in an exteriority which is no longer an appeal, in an opposition which makes it impenetrable to me…"[556] Alienation from objects is the result, not of *exteriorizing* them from oneself or of thematizing their otherness, but of *silencing* their self-presentation *qua* specific proposals, appeals—in short: *demands.*

Ontological personalism means above all that the individual interpreter, as a concrete existence, i.e. a place for the exposure of truth, cannot be understood as an abstract and anonymous transcendental category (like the *subject*). Yet, as Francesco Tomatis points out, "personalism cannot limit itself to the finite expression of the person and the person's needs and desires. In fact, it cannot understand and express the person except in taking it in its fundamental and existential opening of itself to the being that originates and transcends it."[557]

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[554] *Id.*: 104.
[555] *Id.*: 105.
[556] *Ibid.*
[557] Tomatis (2011): 131.

Because the interpreter and the interpreted stand together on equal ontological footing, the relation between *person* and interpreted *thing* cannot be identified with the subject-object relation, which, as I argued in the previous two chapters, always privileges the subject as unilaterally determinative. "A thing is susceptible to interpretation," Pareyson tells us, "only because it is unrepeatable and singular; the subject of interpretation is necessarily an unrepeatable and singular person."[558]

Two primary conditions, then, guide a person's successful interpretation of a given form: *interest* and *respect*. The former allows the interpreter to *question*, while the latter enables her to *listen*. When interest—in the ego-independent demands of objects—is lacking, forms are rendered silent. If the condition of respect—for the withdrawal of objects—is not met, the person errs by burying the form under a pile of her own discursive expression. In both cases, the form, that is, the self-presentation of objects demanding to be interpreted, is concealed, neutralized, in a word, *spectralized*. As *self-presentation*, in fact, "the form appears as such only in a judgment directed by interest and guided by respect, not in the sense that interest and respect constitute the form, but in the sense that without them there can be no *vision* of forms."[559]

The person is the site of truth, then, not because the specificity of her expression somehow makes the truth what it is, but because *as* a person she is *ipso facto* at once (1) exposed to the self-revelation of the other, and (2) the interpretive expression of this exposure:

> Interpretation is always characterized by the inseparability of expression and revelation, that is, on the one side, by the personality of its subject who expresses herself in the act of becoming the organ of revelation, and on the other side, by the inexhaustibility of its object, which reveals itself in the very act of affirming its own unobjectifiability, as inseparable from the

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[558] Pareyson (2009): 110.
[559] *Id.*: 99. Emphasis added.

interpretation that is given of it and yet always ulterior to the interpretation that it engenders.[560]

The inseparability of *expression* and *revelation* constitutes the heart of Pareyson's theory of interpretation. Tied up with this inseparability is the inextricable chiasm of *time* and *being* at the very place where each interpretation unfolds. The guiding *telos* of every personal expression is truth, i.e. revelation, but since there is no ultimate *ur*-revelation, no *kosmotheoros* from which to recover a unified Being that has been splintered across countless horizons, mirroring the mythic aftermath of Babel, the tragically irreconcilable multiplicity of expressions is not something that can be overcome: "…the revelatory aspect cannot do without the expressive and historical aspect because there is no objective manifestation of truth; rather, one must grasp it always with a historical perspective, that is, within a personal interpretation."[561] Time—of the living person—is in this way "both access and residence, entrance and dwelling, figure and exercise"[562] of the truth of beings in their being. But in this capacity time neither exhausts the truth, nor grounds it, neither completes the truth, nor authors it. Historicity and temporality, as conditions of personal expression, form instead the necessary pathway to an ulteriority whose fulfillment is always deferred.

### 4.1.6   Truth as Ulterior

It is a mistake to lament the inescapably personal character of the articulation of truth as some unfortunate mask behind which resides the "actual truth"—if only we were favored enough by providence to attain it. The "depersonalization" sought in an authentically faithful interpretation "is nothing more than a way to keep historicity and personality from gaining the

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[560] Pareyson (2013): 89.
[561] *Id.*: 16.
[562] *Id.*: 136.

upper hand, and thus becoming ends in themselves rather than pathways to truth, and concealing truth rather than opening access to it."[563]  In fact, it is not enough to recognize the compatibility of the unicity of truth and the multiplicity of its expression; they are, much more than this, *co-essential*.[564]  To put the point differently, the transcendence of truth (*vis-à-vis* the particular perspective of this or that interpreter) is in no way compromised by its necessarily plural expression at the sites of historical persons.  On the contrary, it is precisely the nature of truth as such—understood as the originary revelation of the being of beings—to show itself by way of innumerable voices, each irreconcilable with the other:  "Interpretation is neither a *part* of the truth nor a *partial* truth, but is *the* truth itself as personally possessed.  As such, interpretation not only has no need for integration, but also will not even tolerate it, and in fact, dismisses it, already having all that it can and must have."[565]  To *integrate* or reconcile different interpretations would be to dissolve the multiplicity without which the peculiar unicity of truth cannot be revealed.

Yet, owing to its unicity, it seems that we can and do characterize truth as a kind of *whole*.  What is the specific character of this "unicity" [*unicità*]?  For Pareyson, it is not the *unity* of a substance and its quantifiable properties, but a *plenum* housing an inexhaustible source of self-presentations, to which every interpreter appeals, however differently his or her interpretation unfolds.  It is the "thing" about which everyone involved in the conversation discourses, however varied the specific discourses end up appearing.  What we must avoid is the temptation to conceive of this plenum as a *possession*, potential or actual.  While the *whole* truth, understood as a plenum, is never possessed, it is always already *present*, and in a quite distinctive way:  "…the whole truth does not offer itself to human being in the form of a

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[563] *Id.*: 51.
[564] *Id.*: 53.
[565] *Id.*: 66.

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possession achieved and definitely conquered. It is rather present as *exigency* and *norm*; as exigency exciting man to search for the truth, as norm acting as judge of the truths such inquiry attains."[566] The peculiar holism of truth is therefore a consequence of its essential status as normative. Truth is present as *exigency* because, as Socrates argued—apparently unpersuasively—at his defense, it is not available as an unadulterated *whole*, but rather demands ceaseless inquiry. Truth is present as *norm* because there is no measure of what trajectory this inquiry should take beyond what is exposed in this or that given interpretation.

This is the case because, as we know from Husserlian phenomenology, sense and intelligibility issue only from meaningful *wholes*; as Heidegger showed in *Being and Time*, we never hear only abstract, *partial*, disembodied noises, but, in the first place, concrete *things*.[567] Although phenomenality only ever manifests for perceivers in provisionally obscure adumbrations (since there is no "view from nowhere"), each profile, as given, manifests the personality of the whole, and it is the self-presentation of this "whole" that directs and orders the interpreter's response. However, Pareyson's treatment of the multiplicity of truthful expressions ought not to be understood as a kind of perspectivism according to which each view constitutes a fractured piece of a puzzle, which, if successfully joined with the others, would give us the "whole picture." "Every philosophy is always…*lateral* (literally, *sided*)… But this does not mean that every philosophy is *uni-lateral* (*one*-sided), i.e. open to integration in a systematic whole, as if it snatched only one part of truth, and then demanded fulfillment in the other partial visions in the system of total knowledge."[568] The unicity of truth is "none other than an infinity that stimulates and feeds all such perspectives without letting itself be

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[566] Pareyson (1952): 65. Emphasis added.
[567] Heidegger (1962): 207.
[568] Pareyson (1952): 63.

exhausted by any of the formulations and without privileging any one formulation."[569] We can see from this that the infinity that constitutes the unicity and underwrites the multiplicity of truth is both quantitative and qualitative: truth is infinite in the number of its expressions and in the depth of each individual expression. In short, for Pareyson, "the only way to grasp the *whole* truth [i.e. as a plenum] is to possess it *as* inexhaustible."[570] To so "possess" a truth is to adopt a particular attitude towards it, an attitude that recognizes it as an infinite task and not a prize to be won.

Pareyson's understanding of truth as the always-ulterior source of normativity poses a challenge to the arguably nihilistic views of Heidegger and Harman. As I have suggested throughout this dissertation, primarily in thematizing the *withdrawal* side of my object-oriented story, it isn't so much a gaping *nothingness* that confronts those who encounter objects, but a paralyzing *plentitude*. From this perspective, Heidegger confuses inexhaustibility (excess) with ineffability (nothingness), and Harman confuses bottomless phenomenality with an inaccessible noumenal core. In one strikingly luminous passage from *Truth and Interpretation* [1971], Pareyson writes:

> Inexhaustibility is that thanks to which, instead of presenting itself under the false appearance of concealment, absence, or obscurity, ulteriority shows its true origin, that is richness, fullness, and excess, through its inexhaustibility: not nothingness but Being; not *steresis* [lack], but *hyperoche* [pre-eminence]; not *Abgrund* [abyss], but *Ungrund* [ungrounded ground]; not the *mustikos gnophos tes agnosias* [mystical darkness of the lack of knowledge], but the *anexichniaston ploutos* [unsearchable richness]: not the mysticism of the ineffable, but the ontology of the inexhaustible.[571]

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[569] Pareyson (2013): 16.
[570] *Id.*: 66.
[571] *Id.*: 24.

Revelatory thought, without which all claims to knowledge amount to ideological mystification, opens one to a *plenum* that is a singularity and not a totality, an ulteriority whose depth means not impenetrable silence, but infinite noise.

In Harman's view, every sensuous *eidos* of which one takes hold in perception or cognition is but a phenomenal caricature of a noumenal reality forever held in reserve. Again, this is the sense in which, by Harman's appropriative reading of Kant, the latter gives us "a noumenal/phenomenal distinction that holds for all relations whatsoever."[572] Objects according to Harman are, of course, preeminently real, but *as* real, we can't say anything about them. The *ineffable* realism that emerges as an upshot of this thinking puts Harman in the unenviable position of someone who is absolutely convinced of the reality in which he is caught up but incapable of offering even the most minimally veridical description of its contents. To posit *a priori* that the real, *qua* noumenal, cannot be truly formulated in any interpretation is to violate the good sense of one of Gadamer's most incisive hermeneutical lessons (distilled from Hegel's critique of Kant): "What makes a limit a limit always also includes knowledge of what is on both sides of it."[573] The quantitatively multiple and qualitatively ceaseless aspect of all truth-bearing endeavors demands a confrontation with the inexhaustible, not the ineffable. In the words of Lingis, "we have not found intelligible this ontology that takes not difference, distance, gradation, and otherness, but being and nothingness to be primitive notions."[574]

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[572] Harman (2013): 169-170
[573] Gadamer (2013): 338.
[574] Lingis (1996): xii.

### 4.1.7 Ethical Tragedism

From the foregoing I have established that, in Pareyson's hermeneutic theory, truth appears as an "infinite gathered in a definiteness,"[575] that is, in the self-presentation of an object. In the language of the philosopher's aesthetics of formativity, infinity operates as "forming form" while the definiteness at play shows up in relatively static schemata as "formed form." While one interpretation (of a work of art, of a fact, of a social phenomenon, etc.) leaves out certain aspects of its object, these aspects remain—under the infinition of the whole—not in a merely negative way, but positively as an appeal for further engagement and ongoing self-correction. The insuperable metaphysical dynamic of forming and formed form makes interpretation, whether in the domain of ethics or aesthetics, an infinite task, a kind of Sisyphian tragedy. "The essence of tragedy," according to Schelling, is "an actual and objective conflict between the freedom of the subject on the one hand, and necessity on the other, a conflict that does not end such that one or the other succumbs, but rather such that both are manifested in perfect indifference as simultaneously victorious and vanquished."[576] This is the nature of the ethical relation among entities in the inter-object sphere: subjectivity emerges as the space of difference between objects, interpellated but underdetermined by the other's demands, and unrelentingly disposed towards their exposure. It is a "tragic" condition because no matter the degree of competence attained by those saddled with it it can never be overcome. That the most consistently moral of moral agents incur rather than abrogate increasingly demanding tasks is surely, in these terms, a tragic state of affairs.[577]

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[575] Pareyson (2009): 115.

[576] Schelling (1989): 251.

[577] Rousseau, in a 1754 letter to D'Alembert, famously defends what he sees as "something sacred in the origin" of tragic theater, because of which "at first its actors were regarded as priests rather than buffoons" (Rousseau 2004: 308).

In his foreword to the recent English-language translation of Pareyson's *Verità e interpretazione*, Vattimo criticizes what he calls a "metaphysical residue" in his mentor's work, the result of his "still thinking of truth as 'substance,' that is, in the end as a permanent 'being,' somewhat like the 'existing' God of Christian dogmatics."[578] By the lights of Vattimo's avowed nihilism (as developed, for example, in *La fine della modernità* [1985], which is significantly informed by Nietzsche's account of the death of God) with the self-devaluation of humanity's need for "ultimate causes" also collapses any "meaning of an imperative demand for truth."[579] Heidegger's concept of the *Abgrund* is also central to this nihilistic weakening of the real, insofar as, for Vattimo, it "calls us to a fictionalized [i.e. "aestheticized"] experience of reality which is also our only possibility for freedom."[580] What is most salient in Nietzsche and Heidegger for Vattimo's own anti-metaphysical project of "weak thought" [*pensiero debole*] is the "non-identification of Being and foundation,"[581] where "foundation" is taken to suggest an ahistorical metaphysical permanence.

Vattimo misunderstands his teacher's project. As I have tried to make evident in this chapter, one of the principal contributions of Pareyson's hermeneutics is the decoupling of the real normativity of truth (of beings in their being) from any kind of metaphysical foundationalism that would serve to undermine difference. Truth is normative because it opens up as an appeal to its affirmation, transcending every formulation of it, but at the same time "guiding" them all. The transcendence at play in Pareyson's ontology is like that found in Nancy: transcendence in multiple immanence, which amounts to the weakening of the transcendent in a state of unflagging diffusion. Apparently anticipating the line of criticism

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[578] Vattimo (2013): xii.
[579] Vattimo (1988 [1985]): 24.
[580] *Id.*: 29.
[581] *Id.*: 118.

presently considered, Pareyson clarifies the sense of "meta-historicity" at work in his theory of interpretation: "In short, what follows is that the meta-historicity of reality appears less from its power to transcend its own historical forms, than from its power to be *embodied* in ever newer historical forms."[582] At stake here is the metaphysical possibility of "Being," understood now in terms of "forming form," to outstrip self-presentations circumscribed by this or that determinate historical moment. In this sense, owing to the originary excess of being, what Pareyson calls the "meta-cultural" is "gradually embodied in diverse historical forms without ever identifying itself with them."[583] Nonetheless, and here is where Vattimo's critique goes astray, the transcendence intimated by this notion of the "meta-cultural" and "meta-historical" turns out to be radically immanent, "since it has no other life than those very forms in which it is embodied and resides time after time."[584] In a word, the *imperative* that issues from the truth of beings in their being is a feature, not of a super-historical foundation which cannot in principle be fully embodied anywhere, but of the essential multiplication of that truth which is embodied everywhere, but as ulterior—having more to give—and, in each case, different.

Precisely *because* Pareyson considers interpretation to be an originary ontological opening, i.e. tied up inextricably with the self-showing of reality, it is also at the same time responsibility and fidelity to being. This is why, as Bubbio remarks, "Pareyson's hermeneutics also implies a fundamental ethical dimension."[585] But, in contrast with the approaches of other thinkers in the Continental tradition such as Scheler, Sartre, and Marcuse, for example, this normative dimension does not, for Pareyson, necessitate conceiving of *value* as an ideal order

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[582] Pareyson (2013): 145.
[583] *Ibid.*
[584] *Ibid.*
[585] Bubbio (2009): 14.

that transcends the real, however "objective" (as in the case of Scheler) it is purported to be. The concept of "value" fails to do the job here because, as Pareyson points out, "in history there would exist on the one hand values that lack permanence, and on the other hand constant characteristics that do not suffice as values."[586] The naïve idea—against which Vattimo has consistently argued, as discussed above, albeit not explicitly—that "history is the temporal realization of supra-temporal values" rests on the unchecked assumption of a distinction "between permanent insofar as supra-historical *values* and historical and thus temporal *facts*."[587] Such a distinction lacks legitimacy, on Pareyson's view, since the ontological character of interpretation—i.e. its being bound up with a reality at once historical and ulterior—makes it impossible to distinguish "its temporal and transient aspect from an immutable and permanent nucleus because *everything* there is *equally* and *simultaneously* historical *and* revelatory, personal *and* ontological."[588]

For similar reasons it is also impossible to distinguish, in any meaningfully clear way, between *theory* and *practice*. In *Kierkegaard e Pascal* [1971], Pareyson argues that because "the ethical implies an *existential commitment* [*impegno existentiale*]," we should not understand it in terms of a "'moral science,' based on the observation of human beings in their comportments and behavior." [589] He then turns to Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* for clarification of this negative prescription: "But the ethical is not merely a knowing; it is also a doing that is related to a knowing, and a doing such that the repetition may in more than one way become more difficult than the first doing."[590] Thought and action, as possibilities for

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[586] Pareyson (2013): 33.
[587] *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
[588] *Id.*: 49.
[589] Pareyson (1998): 155.
[590] Kierkegaard (1992): 143. Quoted in Pareyson (*Ibid.*).

persons conceived as sites of truth's unfolding, are co-inhabitants of truth, each, in their own way, bearing an *interpretive* function. When, as stated above, thought is divorced from truth (thereby becoming *merely* expressive-historical), it yields ideology; when, on the other hand, action is cut off from truth, it is relegated to mere *technics*.[591] Ideologically driven *ethics*, in either its absolutist or relativist forms, becomes the "technologization" of the practical sphere, in the sense discussed above. Schopenhauer's critique of Kantian ethics is relevant again here, insofar as he accuses Kant of dressing up the absolutist moralism of the Great Decalogue in the language of a theory that gives reason—as the seat of freedom—a uniquely positive vocation. From a Marxian perspective, Kantian ethics is ideological to the extent that it claims to be ultimately disinterested, that is, "universal," while at the same time aiding in the sustainment of the *status quo*, bourgeois form of social organization.

Because truth, the singular self-showing of beings in their being, is ontologically originary, it transcends the ontic separation of theory and practice in a way that indicates the "primordial unity of the two terms that alone is capable of explaining and directing their derived distinction and their genuine reciprocal relation at every level."[592] Concretely speaking, thought always expresses and reveals, albeit never directly or overtly, practical consequences, and conversely, every action expresses and reveals the thought that would explain, endorse, or repudiate it. It is the primary ontological relation—i.e. radical exposure to the other—that in offering "truth both to theory and to praxis, completely overcomes the distinction between them, being instead its root and originary norm."[593] Hence, Michael Slager's murder of Walter Scott is an action that betrays a particular theoretical orientation towards the world and its

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[591] Pareyson (2013): 85.
[592] *Id.*: 89.
[593] *Id.*: 92.

objects: that black bodies are a threat to which violence is the default response; that black persons are to be valued less than white persons, and that the destruction of the former will be less objectionable to society than that of the latter.

One's engagement with truth, understood in these terms, does not permit one "to know," even in the sense of Gadamer's proposed revision of the latter as "recognition," that is, "pick[ing] something out of the stream of images flowing past us as identical."[594] Instead, truth, as always ulterior, makes demands and confronts one with the responsibility of *personally* formulating it (in theory and praxis) without ever succumbing to the totalizing power of ideology. Again, the problem with "knowledge"—and, correlatively, "epistemology"—is its grounding in the modern Cartesian plexus of certainty-control, a grounding which does not appear to be displaceable.

Philosophy, as revelatory thought, does not have the role of either generating or uncovering norms that should then be applied, via praxis, to the "real world." Farther still from the truth is the idea that philosophy, as a guarantor of quietism, serves to critically neutralize action, which would then have to remobilize itself more thoughtfully. Rather, properly understood, philosophy *itself* constitutes a kind of action, namely, action as reticent flexibility in the face of dynamic phenomena. The often-lauded figure of the political "man of action" seems to suggest, on the assumption of the "thought/action" distinction, that thought somehow stands in the way of or tends to bewilder action. But the only sort of "contemplation" that praxis tends to bewilder or mortify is solipsistic and narcissistic thought, divorced as it is from "the memory of truth, realizable not only in speculative thought, but in every human activity."[595] When "reason" is touted as the sole and originary locus of

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[594] Gadamer (1976): 14.
[595] Pareyson (2013): 156.

normativity and, thus, as that which must be imposed on this or that practice, it "becomes a norm only through the pitiless face of rigorism, the inflexible severity of moralism, and the squalid ferocity of fanaticism."[596] An ethics that promulgates the task of reason as this—and it is hard to avoid seeing the specter of Kant in the following quote—"becomes the surrogate for religion and absolutizes autonomous and sufficient human reason, with the result that human reason, proud of its own absolute nature, ends up either with the suspension of guilt and thus with universal justification, or with the establishment of an abstract moralism that is uselessly intransigent and constricted."[597]

Jeff Malpas echoes the Pareysonian insight that theory and practice are ontologically indissoluble with respect to *place*. He argues that the failure to adequately think this indissolubility is most problematic in the domain of contemporary ethics, "in which the very idea of 'applied ethics' is suggestive of a divorce of ethical theorizing from ethical practice—in which priorly articulated principles or 'ethical theories,' often of a highly abstract nature, are employed to resolve 'practical' ethical problems."[598] The chiasm of theory and practice at the place of truth demands precisely that we look for truth at the place where we find ourselves—and this calls for "a responsiveness to the demands of the place itself and of that which appears within that place."[599] Tying together explicitly the concepts of *truth* and *place*, Malpas concludes that the former "names that demand that is placed on us beyond our own interests, preferences, or opinions—the demand that comes from the reality of our inevitable and

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[596] *Id.*: 159.
[597] *Id.*: 169.
[598] Malpas (2010): 271.
[599] *Ibid.*

concrete placedness [what Pareyson has called *embodiment*] in a world, as ourselves, and among others."[600]

What this final prescription amounts to is a tragic commitment to the ongoing subordination of political teleology and expediency to the moral imperative that is truthfully exposed, without hierarchy or completion, in every engagement with the other, including, on my view, nonhuman objects. Ethics and ontology can be decoupled, as Heidegger, Pareyson, and Nancy know, only at the risk of releasing political commitment from its proper dwelling *within* moral commitment, whereupon the direct relation of praxis to ontology—forming an "originary unity-distinction of theory and practice"[601]—is ruptured and forgotten.[602] To think an imperative whose validity and heterogeneous voice—expressed by each being in its being— cannot help *but* survive the most far-reaching and decisive of catastrophes, whose non-totalizable and irreconcilable demands must continue to proliferate even after the "death of God," is to recognize the "unfathomable and deep tragedy which is implied in reality itself,"[603] at the heart of which reside, inexorably, "duplicity and contrast," in a word: *difference*.

## 4.2    Art and Self-Presentation

A theory of interpretation *from the ground up*, as I have developed it, means that every interpretation draws its impetus from the concrete place where the interpreter finds herself, and that interpretation is itself part of this "ground," inextricably wrapped up with it. There is no total and self-same Being onto which an interpreter can latch by way of accurate representations or propositions. Truth, then, is not a matter of mimetic *correspondence*. Instead,

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[600] *Id.*: 273.
[601] Pareyson (2013): 151.
[602] The irony of attributing such knowledge to Heidegger is not lost on me. In any case, given my treatment of his work in Chapter Two, he *should have* known this.
[603] Pareyson (2009): 219.

truth has to do with mimetic *engagement with*—always concomitant with historical *expression*—objects in their being.  Objects, as we have seen, stand in analogical relationship with one another, which means that they *touch* and *do not touch*, are *near* and *far*, *similar* and *dissimilar*, *related* and *unrelated*.  Objects *present themselves*, in these terms, precisely *as* demand, that is, as an imperative to adequacy, whether theoretical or praxical (which are unified ontologically).  Lingis has this point in mind when he observes that "what really is, what is given, is not just a pattern hovering before our eyes, and which may be a will-o'-the-wisp, an image, a memory, or a dream.  What is given crowds in on us, imposes itself on us, weighs on us."[604]

We can conclude that Kant was right:  there is, at bottom, an *imperatival* dimension to being, owing to which "the ethical" shows up, not only as a possibility, but as an appeal, an order, a claim, a directive, etc., which is not subject to annulment.  Where we have parted ways with Kant, however, is on the specific nature of this imperative; whereas for Kant it comes from the (noumenal) *subject*, for me, as I have tried to demonstrate so far, the demand that lies at the heart of being comes from (phenomenal) *objects*.  In other words, every object—at the ontological level—*just is* the demands to which other objects stand in a relation of adequacy or inadequacy, but such demands are always articulated in self-presentations, ways of being, which are, at bottom, *phenomenal*.  For this reason, the ethical, insofar as it is always revealed in the sensuous self-showing of material assemblages, has an essentially aesthetic component.

In modernity, art has been the privileged object of aesthetic inquiry, and not for merely accidental reasons.  Even if, oriented by the ancient Greek notion of *aisthesis*, we broaden the scope of aesthetics to include in its purview everyday sense experience, works of art, and the technical language with which we talk about them, have much to tell us about the sensuous

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[604] Lingis (1996): 23.

nature of self-presentation and, thus, also about the *norms* that issue from it. As Krzyzstof Ziarek argues, the efficacy of modern art in particular rests in an "enigmatic force" by which it is "neither power-ful nor power-less."[605] That is, precisely *because* art no longer has the momentous, world-grounding, spiritual role that it fulfilled in antiquity, it is capable of releasing social and cultural relations "from the formative hold of power,"[606] revealing entrenched modes of relating in new lights. I will now turn to a pair of concepts that have been central to aesthetic discourse throughout the Western tradition in an effort to tease from them a clearer picture of the role of the aesthetic in the project of apprehending and responding to objectival demands. The concepts I will consider are *metaphor* and *mimesis*. My aim in discussing these concepts is to recover from the history of aesthetics a thread of inquiry that allows us to replace the dominant *representational* model, grounded as it is in a subject-oriented approach to perception and experience, with a *presentational* one. The concept of *presentation*, I will try to show, more effectively accommodates the notion of objects in general as imperatival. Let us begin with metaphor.

### 4.2.1  Poetry Without Metaphor?

Western art, treated philosophically under the discipline of *aesthetics*, is, by and large, "metaphysical"—in Heidegger's pejorative sense—precisely because it is "representational." In his comprehensive study of Heidegger's philosophy of art, Julian Young distinguishes two arguments in Heidegger's critique of Western art as metaphysical: (1) the symbolic argument, and (2) the representational argument. My reading is at odds with Young's insofar as I take the problem of *symbolism* in art to be identical to that of *representation* in at least one crucial

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[605] Ziarek (2004): 13.
[606] *Ibid.*

respect: both tend to "overmine" the aesthetic object as fulfilling a pale, merely referential role, forever pointing beyond itself for the constitution of "meaning."

According to Young's account, Heidegger's "symbolic" argument is, in our "post-Christian" age, irrelevant and uninteresting.[607] Drawing largely from Heidegger's lectures on Hölderlin's hymn *Der Ister*, Young concludes that Heidegger's quarrel with the symbolism of Western art has to do with the neo-Platonic distinction between the "sensuous" and the "supernatural."[608] Because the predominant focus of Western "fine art" is no longer the supernatural and infinite domain of God, towards which our natural and finite world is to be transcended, Heidegger's critique of Christian symbolism is effectively without teeth. It must be noted, however, that in the *Der Ister* lectures Heidegger does not use the term "supernatural" in contrast to "sensuous." The Platonic dichotomy he sets up is that between the "sensuous" and the "nonsensuous." As is usually the case with Heidegger, choice of language is important.

Young begins his treatment of the "symbolic" argument puzzled about "what connection there could possibly be between 'symbolism' and 'metaphysics.'"[609] While Heidegger's genealogical tracing of the origin of modern metaphysics back to Platonic idealism is certainly open to debate, his position is fairly transparent in *The Ister* lectures, even if one is compelled to quarrel with his use of the word "metaphysics." According to Plato's theory of the forms, when we encounter a given object, a table, for example, we experience but a particular and imperfect instantiation of the universal and perfect form of "table-ness." That is, every given object *is*, in a sense, two things at once: (1) something particular and (2) a sign or *symbol* pointing to something that is *not there*, that occupies a non-spatial and non-temporal

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[607] Young (2001): 137.
[608] *Id.*: 135.
[609] *Ibid.*

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domain. In this sense, the table can be said to *represent* "table-ness" as such. The ideal table stands over and *beyond* the material table doing the representing; "table-ness" is, therefore, a *meta-physical* posit.

Poetry, conceived "aesthetically" (and, therefore, for Heidegger, "metaphysically") operates in the same way. If we treat, say, Hölderlin's "river" poems as symbolic (i.e. *representational*), then we face precisely the same dichotomy presented above. We have, on the one hand, the river *qua* natural phenomenon, and on the other a "meaning," a "spiritual content" or "sense" standing over and beyond what is encountered in the physical world.[610] The most banal and clichéd maneuvers in the history of poesy can be reduced to this aesthetico-metaphysical framework: the red rose as *standing for* love, the weeping willow as *standing for* sadness, etc. "That framework," Heidegger tells us, "is the distinction that is made between a sensuous and a nonsensuous realm. In every employment of symbolic images we presuppose that this distinction has been made."[611] He goes on to argue:

> Since [the time of Plato] the essence of art and thus the essence of poetic art also, has been determined in accordance with metaphysics. In all metaphysics, the work of art counts as something sensuous that does not exist just for itself; rather, what is sensuous about the artwork is as it is in the artwork: it exists for the nonsensuous and suprasensuous, for that which is also named the spiritual or spirit.[612]

It seems clear, then, that Heidegger's call for a "non-metaphysical" interpretation of Hölderlin and of the essence of art in general is far more radical than Young is willing to concede. In Heidegger's eyes, what is most needed in our epoch of "homelessness," surprisingly, is poetry without metaphor! Given the nature of such an extraordinary conclusion, it is easy to see why Young is impelled towards an interpretation belied by textual evidence.

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[610] Heidegger (1996): 15.
[611] *Id.*: 17.
[612] *Ibid.*

Perhaps it would be less objectionable to characterize the upshot of Heidegger's critique as a call for the revision of our understanding of metaphor rather than for its wholesale rejection. To satisfy Heidegger's anti-"metaphysical" misgivings, such a revision would have to illuminate the ground of metaphorical operations as pre-cognitive and, therefore, non-representational. By "metaphor," in other words, we ought to understand a domain of *immanent* interconnections, rather than the figuration of two disparate but *transcendentally* related domains, as theorized, for instance, in the field of cognitive linguistics. The latter, represented in the work of linguists like George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Eve Sweetser, defines metaphor as the "mapping of one domain onto another."[613] The domains, or "fields," that Sweetser has in mind with respect to this cross-mapping are, broadly speaking, (1) the "external" physical world and (2) the "internal" emotional-intellectual world of individual speakers. The domains, or "fields," that Sweetser has in mind with respect to this cross-mapping are, broadly speaking, (1) the physical world and (2) the "internal" emotional-intellectual world of individual speakers. For example, in tracing the etymology of vision verbs she points out that the English words *perceive*, *scrutinize*, and *examine* originated in Latin words with the respective meanings of *seize*, *pick through trash*, and *pull out from a row*.[614] Through a period of historical development, a field of meaning concerning *physical manipulation* has crossed over into the field encompassing acts of *visual perception*. This more originary cross-domain mapping provided the foundation for the later movement of vision verb meanings into the metaphorical target domain of knowledge and intellection. An example of this development is manifest in the origin of the lexeme *idea* in English: *eidon*, "to see" (Greek). Sweetser notes that the metaphorical mapping of physical vision onto mental "vision" most

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[613] Sweetser, *From Etymology to Pragmatics: Metaphorical and Cultural Aspects of Semantic Structure*, 25.
[614] *Id.*: 32.

likely evolved as a result of the "shared structural properties of the visual and intellectual domains—our ability to focus our mental and visual attentions, to monitor stimuli mentally and visually."[615] In short, the maturation of polysemy in the verb "to see" (physical vision → mental grasping) was informed by metaphor, i.e. the expression of a profound and transparent congruity between distinct spheres of human experience.

In another example of cognitive cross-modal mapping, Sweetser observes that the heart's physical function of blood-pumping "is strongly and noticeably affected by love, excitement, fear, and other strong emotions." As a result, she notes that "the heart comes to symbolize some of those strong emotions—such as courage or passion."[616] While metaphor is clearly operative in this connection, I take issue with her emphasis on the so-called "symbolic" and, therefore, "representational" nature of metaphoric polysemy. In my view, the word "heart" has taken on these "additional" "metaphorical" meanings because of the concrete experiential holism of our physico-emotional activities. That is to say, when describing my lover's voice as somehow "touching my heart," I am not conceptually mapping the "source domain" of bodily organ function onto the "target domain" of romantic emotional stimulation; the respective "domains" in question are discrete only in abstraction. Our language succeeds in making this vibrantly clear. Hence, a major flaw in the cognitive linguistic treatment of metaphor is that it fails to adequately respect the irreducible messiness of embodied experience, thereby resulting in a theoretical account of metaphor couched in terms of *concept* rather than *percept*. There are "similarities" that present themselves in the course of experience whose origin is entrenched at a deeper level of reality than the cognitive, reflective, and conceptual apparatus of self-conscious human subjects. In Walter Benjamin's language,

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[615] *Id.*: 33.
[616] *Id.*: 28.

I am referring here to "non-sensuous similarity," where the "non-sensuous" qualifier does not mean, albeit counter-intuitively, outside of the purview of sense experience but, instead, a similarity that is irreducible to the comparison of empirically identifiable properties. I will discuss this peculiar view of mimesis in the following subsection.

What exactly would poetry (and art in general) be under this revised understanding of metaphor? One, I submit, that sings the song of objects; one that presents objects at once in their sensuous immediacy and indifferent withdrawal so they can be lived in, like the most self-confident architectural structures; one whose singular noisiness and rhythm stays with itself, unfolding before one's senses like the dark curvature of a lunar crater under the reticent advance of an astronaut at the same time freed and arrested by the obscurity before her. With respect to architectural objects, we can agree with Michael Benedikt that they, in fact, "stand for nothing."[617] While it is true, as he goes on to suggest, that our "humanness" is always "already soaked into" such structures, there is also a sense in which the buildings we inhabit have no concern for us at all. And this is not only because they contain rooms such as the cellar, which Gaston Bachelard describes as "first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces."[618] More than this, buildings function at all only in virtue of a degree of indifference: imagine trying to live in a home that fits you like a glove, bends to your every physical contour, submits in advance to your every need. We can *in-habit* a home because it, in part, withdraws, thereby affording us the freedom to proceed through routines, accomplish tasks, and while away hours in relaxation. Yet, at the same time, the house creaks and settles, gives in to hidden pressures and stands forth unapologetically, all

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[617] Benedikt (1987): 10.
[618] Bachelard (1994): 18.

while carrying on its own subterranean life irrespective of whatever one might ask of it. This is the nature of objects.

### 4.2.2   Mimetic Adequacy

Plato's famous banishing of the poets from the kallipolis in the *Republic* is grounded in the nature of mimesis and its role in shaping the soul *in general*, that is, even outside of the specific influence of the *poietic* arts. The soul's education over the course of a life is a function of the mimetic relation, a kind of "imitation" of others, which will "settle down into habits and second nature in the body [*soma*], the speech [*logos*], and the thought [*nous*]."[619] At the level of the body, the nurturing of specific habits manifests problematically in the character of those whom Socrates refers to as "lovers of sights and sounds." This (deficient) character does not develop as an inevitable consequence of *aisthesis*, but as the result of an ultimately superficial mimetic relation to perceived entities, whereby their origin, their being, their *idea* remains concealed. The problem, then, at the risk of speaking anachronistically, is a kind of "aestheticism" according to which one takes ephemeral *eidoi*, superficial *looks*, to be most real. At the level of the polis, mimetic habituation can solidify into deeply ruinous social types, such as the "*timocratic* man," who, presaging Rousseau's account of the violence wrought by *amour propre*, is driven, out of fear of reenacting the miserable life of his father, towards war in the relentless pursuit of wealth and status.[620]

In any case, Plato understands the mimetic relation as one in which the image, the imitative product, *shows* its dependency on the original in the manner of a specular reflection. Both the timocratic man and the lover of sights and sounds, for this reason, can be likened to someone who is lost in an impossibly vast funhouse hall of mirrors, woefully confused not

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[619] 395d1-3.
[620] 550b.

only about the relation of contingency between original and copy, but about there even being such a relation at all. Such is the notion of mimesis I want to push for the present discussion: the manifest relation of non-mutual dependency, where, however, the being of either thing involved is not simply reduced to the relation between "authentic" original and "artificial" copy. Roberto Diodato thematizes this relation in his account of the essence of a picture, which, "as image, does not consist in being a copy, in functioning as reference to something else, but rather in the composition of a certain bond with what is represented that respects at the same time both similarity and difference. It is a specifically aesthetic *differentiating bond*."[621]

In two essays written in 1933, "Doctrine of the Similar," and "On The Mimetic Faculty," Walter Benjamin argues that mimesis is a primordial human mode of relating to objects in the world. Through the "mimetic faculty," humans—especially in primitive societies—are able to perceptually lock onto what he calls "non-sensuous similarities" between things. This ability allows one to live up to and abide in an object's space of meaning by opening up an economy of similarity and difference. The mimetic faculty makes possible many practices, such as inter-linguistic translation, precisely insofar as it sustains this economy as a field in which markedly different sensuous figures are somehow captured in a relation of non-mutual determinacy. It is in the operation of this relation that the similarity unfolds. Hence, we can aver without trepidation that the Greek word "σώμα" *means* "body" in English, despite a lack of immediately intuitive sensuous similarity between them: "For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all—while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another—are similar to the signified at their center."[622]

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[621] Diodato (2012): 37. Emphasis added. On this point I direct the reader to my discussion of Plato's *Sophist* in §1 of Chapter One.
[622] Benjamin (2005): 696.

In contrast with consciously perceived similarities, whose basis in sensuously identifiable properties, such as facial features, can be readily accounted for, one tracks these mimetic, non-sensuous similarities unconsciously. Moreover, the similarities uncovered in mimesis compare to those we perceive consciously "like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg" compares to "the small tip one sees rising out of the water."[623] Of decisive importance for Benjamin is the ephemeral character of mimetic perception, a kind of slipperiness that resists formulation in any semiotic or otherwise rule-based system. It is "in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars."[624] The ancient origin of astrology, according to Benjamin, has its basis in a—perhaps no longer possible—perceived similarity between star constellations and human beings. If one focuses on the sensuously given and determinately present *parts* of a structure at the expense of tracking a perceptible style or rhythm, in the manner of, say, Humean empiricism, one is bound to miss how it all hangs together, that is, how a particular *sense* or *directionality* emerges from the whole.

The upshot here is that "non-sensuous similarity" cannot be perceived in the manner of empirically discrete perceptual properties, but it also does not exclude them. It is there but not there, in the manner not of a caricaturized Platonic, formal *transcendence*, but of a material *immanence*. Thus, Susan Sontag's critique of the mimetic basis of the "hermeneutics of suspicion," found as an outgrowth of transcendental thought in Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, for example, whereby "the manifest content must be probed and pushed aside to find the true meaning,"[625] does not accurately apply to Benjamin. Rather, the surfaces of phenomenal

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[623] *Id.*: 695.
[624] *Ibid.*
[625] Sontag (2001): 7.

objects betray an inexhaustible depth that extends to and from the surfaces in a rhythm to which one is called to respond. This rhythm emerges in the presentation of a style that *orders* the sensorium in ways appropriate to it: absorbed or distracted, contemplative or carefree, spectatorial or interactive, etc. Thus, most importantly, the peculiar *miming* at work in non-sensuous similarity manifests in acts of comportment that bear non-empirical similarity to the entities or events that solicit them, extending the being of the "original" in ways that go beyond the standard original/copy structure.

## 4.3    Conclusions For an Object-Oriented Ethics

If one must identify a villain in this dissertation, the prime candidate would be none other than Rene Descartes, owing, of course, to his founding role in the advancement of dogmatic modern subjectivism. Even Descartes, however, is no *extreme* dogmatist. For him, we only fall back on the authority of accepted knowledge when not actively entertaining a *clear and distinct idea*, which, since we are finite, cannot be achieved in perpetuity. Thus, we find some obscurity at the luminous place of the *Cogito*. Descartes presents this inevitable obscurity as a defense against the charge of vicious circularity. While critics of rationalist epistemology tend to find this defense unconvincing, one must admit that, despite Descartes' intentions, it does the subtle work of disclosing a crack in the bedrock of *a prioricity*.

What we learn from Heidegger in *Being and Time* is that liminal, everyday *understanding* always precedes *knowledge*. *Prior to* a clear and distinct idea, or, to put Heidegger in dialogue with Descartes here, *vorhanden* knowledge, is *accepted* (or *zuhanden*) understanding. This is not a chronological story about a time (t) at which one had some *original* truth, to which one thereafter appeals as an authority for present epistemic claims. Rather, Heidegger's point is that *there is no time (t) before which one knew nothing*; one is always already in a state of

understanding, in possession of "accepted" knowledge. *My* point, what I am trying to draw out of Heidegger, but which Heidegger himself does not claim, is that this possession, or, perhaps more accurately, this state of *being possessed*, is a feature of one's being always already thrown into a place constituted by objects and their relations, which issue—present themselves—as an excessive constellation of demands which are, however obscurely, always already understood. The normative is not an extra step tacked onto the ontological, but rather a constitutive manifestation of it. There is not first *Being* and then a *Value* conferred upon it. To be *at all* is to manifest an imperativity that circumscribes and defines possible relations on a continuum of adequacy and inadequacy. One is always already in the grip of objects' demands, and it is only *because* of this that one can exploit objects for one's own benefit. The ethical entails the tragically open-ended, interested-respectful endeavor towards a "clear and distinct idea" of what is required of one, and in the only way possible: interpretation. We must, in other words, attend to phenomena *as they present themselves*, as they demand to be seen, and not just once, but interminably. We have the moral responsibility to constantly measure the demands of our prejudice against the demands of the other.

There is an essential ontological link between *difference* and *interpretation*. In Chapter Three I argued that the plurivocity of being at the phenomenal level is underwritten by a univocity of being at the ontological level. The plane of consistency, as developed by Deleuze and Guattari, but already present in Plato, is an excessive material milieu of origination, a "pure multiplicity of immanence."[626] It is only because every existing object manifests itself on the plane of consistency—and, thus, univocally—that relationality among phenomena is possible. In order to relate to one another, phenomenal objects must exhibit a mutual *consistency*, such that they are never abstract, entirely disconnected points. The specific character of this

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[626] Deleuze and Guattari (1987): 157.

ontological consistency, however, is that of *incommensurability*, which implies *difference* as an irreducibly primitive condition for being. In other words, all objects are the same, but precisely in their being different. To be is to be *with*, which at once suggests relationality and non-identity. For Heidegger—and contrary to Harman—Dasein's being-with-others, as part of its being-in-the-world, means that it "bears in its ownmost being the character of not being closed."[627] This ontological structural component of *exposure to the other*, or, simply, *exposition* (is), is complemented in the ethical register by *imposition* (ought), the inter-objectival self-presentation of demands. Rejecting Heidegger's residual humanism, however, I have argued that the exposition-imposition dynamic differs for all beings on the plane of consistency in degree, rather than kind.

When we connect the concepts of *difference* and *relationality* on the basis of the dynamic ontology just articulated, we begin to see where interpretation fits into the picture. The strictly *analogical*—rather than *digital*—character of relationality according to which entities on the plane of consistency stand towards each other at the same time *as* same *and* other, near *and* distant, touching *and* not-touching, implies interpretation as the insuperable mechanism of the conjunction. Heidegger claims that "the binding and separating" action of interpretation "can be further formalized to mean a 'relating.'"[628] Every inter-objectival relation is an interpretation, and every interpretation is, in the words of Alan Bass, "a relating that simultaneously differentiates and integrates."[629] Because—again, in contrast with Harman— there is no absolutely non-relational being, no "dark crystal" vacuum-sealed away from every exposure and interpellation, interpretation is an inescapable feature of existence.

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[627] Heidegger (1966): 125.
[628] *Id.*: 149.
[629] Bass (2006): 47.

Objects always relate interpretively, but they do so in varying degrees of *authenticity*. As elucidated by Jan Patocka, authenticity consists precisely in the "ability to let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying its own being and its own nature to it."[630] If *being* is understood as the excessive self-presentation of demands, and not as mere static and inert presence, then authentic interpretation, so delineated, means more than passive indifference. It means responsibility and care, attention and respect, love and liberation. The Heideggerian notion of "letting be" [*sein lassen*], in which Patocka's understanding is grounded, already implies a movement of thought beyond the disjunctive reading of the theory/practice divide. To *be* in the register of "*lassen*" entails a kind of ontological transformation "in the very mode of relating," affecting theory and practice alike, a transformation, which, according to Krzysztof Ziarek, refers to "an active release from power."[631] What we call "theory" is itself a kind of practice, and what we call "practice" is always at the same time an implicit manifestation of certain, clear or muddled, theoretical attitudes.

Humans tend to be suspicious of the role of interpretation in their various modes of relational comportment. This is because the notion of interpretation, in line with its Nietzschean articulation as something *opposed* to "facts," smacks of relativism. If even every perceptual engagement is interpretive, then it seems to follow that there is no "real" state of affairs to which a given perceiver can correspond more or less accurately. I have argued that this critical posture towards hermeneutics stems from the overwhelming historical tendency to view it in subject-oriented lights. Thinkers like Luigi Pareyson and his student, Gianni Vattimo, show that an object-oriented approach is not only possible, but also quite fruitful for thinking through the moral and aesthetic problems encountered in social life.

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[630] Patočka (1996): 98.

[631] Ziarek (2004): 11.

Every objective standard the modern world has come up with in ethics (e.g. rationality for Kant, affect for Hume, the maximization of pleasure for Mill and Bentham, etc.) has aimed to reduce the messy business of figuring out how to live in a world with others (other humans and nonhumans) to more or less rigid formulae. The problem is that these objective standards rooted in the subject are the contingent byproducts of a particular historical moment and its progeny. There is no such thing as a perfectly selfsame and isolated "subject," just as there is no such thing as a perfectly pure "objective" view of reality. The truth lies somewhere between these terms, though not in the sense of an abstract subject-object hybrid that, by turns, recognizes a personal stake in its interpretive practices and transcends this recognition in pursuit of an objectively pure account of the "facts."

The idea that every object is irreducible to its set of relations might seem to commit us to some version of social atomism. However, the view I am advancing vigorously resists this theoretical posture by insisting instead on the irreducibility of objects as *singularities*: at once *exposed* to, *interpellated* by, and *imposing* upon the other. The singular object is the place where demands manifest, demands that reach out past the confines of rigid individuals and their prejudices in pursuit of, to borrow Michael Monahan's phrase, a "telos without terminus."[632] This telos has the specific character of an ongoing truth-bearing task, a task which compels us to see objects in the interrogative mode, i.e. as non-totalizable demands, appeals, and directives.

In terms of the West's co-constitution by the (Platonic) Greeks on the one hand and the Judeo-Christian tradition on the other, we tend to lament what we take to be a "fall" from some originary, privileged position of unity, where the Whole is given as such, and each of its "parts" is relatively illuminated. One need only think of origin stories like Genesis, the tower

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[632] Cf. Monahan (2011), especially Chapters 5 and 6.

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of Babel, and Socrates' account of immortality in Plato's *Phaedo* to confirm this. But maybe there is no such original unity. Perhaps reality, even as a "whole," or, better, a "plenum," is necessarily fractured and multiple and therefore characterized much more by difference than by unity (although every different being constitutes its own insuperable unity). If this is truly the way of "nature," then it no longer makes sense to think the latter in the terms of a false dichotomy: everything is "subjective" (relativism)/everything (the "whole") is "objectively given" (absolutism).

Speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy offer strategies for managing the problematic anthropocentric consequences of post-Kantian metaphysics. However, a significant shortcoming of these contemporary strategies is that they provide no clear resources for ethical and political thought. As we have seen, Graham Harman characterizes "real" objects (human and otherwise) as non-phenomenal and vacuum-sealed away from every relation in which their sensuous facades are involved. As a result, rather than overcoming transcendental idealism's commitment to the noumenal-phenomenal (subject-object) divide, a divide that only makes sense on the basis of a formalist understanding of reason, Harman's view simply extends the scope of this divide to encompass everything. The attractive ontological egalitarianism of this perspective notwithstanding, its identification of the *real* with the *ineffable* opens up a number of politically suspect consequences, such as quietism, and, *a fortiori*, nihilism.

I have argued instead that real objects are always caught up in an excess of relations at the phenomenal level. Because of this excess, each relation is underdetermined and underdetermining. I have developed this realist account as a metaethical alternative to two, broadly speaking, problematic approaches in the field. On the one hand, theological ethics— as one form of moral absolutism—holds the God-human relation as the primary datum

without which morality would not exist. Secular philosophical ethics, on the other hand, tends to view the human-human relation in the same way. For the former, there is no morality in the absence of God. For the latter, there is no morality in the absence of human interaction.

In contrast, I claim that what we call ethical norms ultimately derive from a proto-ethicality at the heart of the real; these norms survive both the death of God and humanity's fall from its self-appointed privileged moral status in the cosmos. As Jean-Baptiste Claments, Camus' tragic narrator of the novel *The Fall*, puts it, though not without a tinge of the humanism of which I have been critical: "[R]eligions are on the wrong track the moment they moralize and fulminate commandments. God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow men suffice, aided by ourselves."[633] We cannot wipe our face in the "spitting-cell,"[634] but we can choose to close our eyes. However, we do so at the risk of transforming what is properly a tragedy into a comedy of errors whose funniness is increasingly dulled by the stupidity of a repetition made easy. (Copyright @ Justin L. Harmon 2016)

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[633] Camus (1984): 110.

[634] "Have you at least heard of the spitting-cell, which a nation recently thought of to prove itself the greatest on earth? A walled-up box in which the prisoner can stand without moving. The solid door that locks him in his cement shell stops at chin level. Hence only his face is visible, and every passing jailer spits copiously on it. The prisoner, wedged into his cell, cannot wipe his face, though he is allowed, it is true, to close his eyes" (*Id.*: 110-111).

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# 6   VITA

Justin L. Harmon was born in Long Beach, California, and has an M.A and a B.A., both in philosophy, from the University of Houston.  His published articles include "The Sensuous as Source of Demand," "Dwelling in the House That Porn Built: A Phenomenological Critique of Pornography in the Age of Internet Technology," "Adventures of Form: Italian Aesthetics From Neo-Idealism to Pareyson," and "What is it Like to Be Mysterious, Alienated, and Wildly Rich Through Less Than Savory Means: Phenomenal Consciousness and Aesthetic Experience."

<u>     Justin L. Harmon     </u>