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**Book Review: Form and Object: A Treatise on Things. By Tristan Garcia, trans. Mark Allan Ohm and Jon Cogburn, 'Speculative Realism', ed. Graham Harman. Pp. xxv, 462, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, \$39.95**

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**Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. Mark Allan Ohm and Jon Cogburn, 'Speculative Realism', ed. Graham Harman, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014, ISBN 978-0-74868150-1 (pb), pp. 462 + xxv.**

Marking the context of the project as well as its very timely subject matter, Tristan Garcia observes: 'Our time is perhaps the time of an epidemic of things' (p. 1). Within our globalized, industrialized, commercialized world that trades daily in information and knowledge, we are awash in 'things', though we rarely know the value or merit of the things that we think we 'know'. Garcia's book, a sizable and highly original tome that attempts to assess the value of myriad *things* in our world, also tries to point a way beyond many philosophical impasses that have plagued western thought for centuries.

Seeking a 'flat ontology' that sees a 'system of interchangeable things' all around us, Garcia more or less plays within the field of 'speculative realism' that has tried to conceptualize an 'object oriented' ontology, such as found in Graham Harman's work, who serves as series editor for the volume. The book, however, and as many who are familiar with the movement would know, is not a phenomenological treatise, as Garcia proposes not to think about our access to things, but about *the things themselves*, as 'impossible' as this might seem to some. His is as well not an objective attempt to *present* the things themselves either, but rather it is an attempt to think a subject as *always already* an object, though one still needing to be qualified. What Garcia is after resembles more of a 'relational' ontology, one wherein things are 'attached' to other things and thereby provide understanding only through their relationship to such objects, whatever or wherever such objects might be.

Throughout the study, Garcia aims not to realign classical forms of determining a thing's nature or essence, but rather to 'de-determine' things, to remove their identity as it has been wrongly constituted. In his words, 'The goal of this de-determination is to have at one's disposal a cross-sectional plane of every container and every order which maps the topography of the physical, biological, animal, and human universe; artefacts; artworks; economic networks of production, exchange, and consumption; class, gender, and age differences' (p. 5). In this formulation of his inquiry, we already begin to sense the admittedly purposive encyclopedic character of the book as a whole, as well as the very large scope he seeks to elaborate within the framework of these 'worlds' of things. Indeed, more or less, what he is after is an attempt 'to generate a formal world of de-determined things' (p. 5); in other words, this effort is about determining the 'magnitudes, values, depths, variations, and interests of present objects, accumulated endlessly, and contested by several methodological approaches' (p. 6).

Eschewing dialectical methods, which inevitably reduce a thing to something else, Garcia favors a non-reductive method that respects the singularity of each thing, even if such a thing is deemed by some to be 'dead, past, false, imaginary, nonexistent, or contradictory' (p. 8). Such things are, for Garcia, very much still things within a given world of things in relation with each other—they are just limited in their present intensity. As such, he will make explicit that his viewpoint is not an effort to get to know a thing 'in itself', which does not really exist anyway, but rather to 'represent things that are really in the world without being in themselves' (p. 11). What Garcia means by this is that every thing is traversed by other things, rendering no thing as merely a thing 'in itself', even if contemplated 'to itself'. Everything is something 'in itself' ('what which is') but it is also in a context ('that in which it is'): 'A thing is nothing other than the difference between *that which is in this thing* and *that which this thing is*' (p. 13)—a standard formulation that underpins much of the theoretical framework behind the book.

In this way, he does not wish to transcend the relations of things in this world, to be somehow 'outside' them, which amounts to a sort of 'salvation' or 'redemption' of the thing beyond its thingness. He wishes only to enter into these relations between things and to explore their limits from the inside out. Doing so, he wagers, is the only true way to achieve something like a form of universality precisely by adhering to the absolute particularity of a thing. As he outlines the significance of this turn: 'If one wants to formulate this undertaking in a single equation, it would be this: how do we obtain universality and maintain the sense of relativity at the same time?' (p. 14). To sit in this location between the two, according to his conclusion, we must abandon both 'ecstatic becoming' and 'self-saturated things', finding a way 'beyond' by staying completely 'within' the world of things.

Book I, the first of two, which tries to ‘conceive of things emptied of themselves, without identity and de-determined’ (p. 14-15), begins with a series of almost Wittgensteinian numbered theses (a common occurrence throughout the book). Rather than ask what the matter of the thing is, Garcia is intent on establishing the preferential relationships with things that actually constitutes our constructed worlds: ‘some things always *matter* more than others’ (p. 20). Forming the basis of his argument that every thing, which is always something, must be taken into account, despite its apparent contradictory or illogical nature (e.g. as with a ‘squared circle’), he seeks to demonstrate how every thing can be accounted for within such a schema, even those things we had presumed would be excluded. ‘To not want to be in the world is one way of arriving at the world. To go outside the world is one way of entering into the world’ (p. 74).

It is in this context that he will, briefly, among other things, analyze ‘sanctity’ which appears to remove itself from the system of things, but which is still part of it, much as, later, he will bring the ‘impossible’ into the realm of possibility as it too can be a thing present before thought. Respect for human life, which is actually just a thing like any other thing, becomes that which is based on one’s ‘interest’ in the thing (p. 29), and, as such, value is ascribed to particular things. In the almost idiosyncratic way in which he moves through a variety of densely populated theses, Garcia will thereby determine—and in a way that reiterates one of the central axioms of the book—that every thing is equal, but every thing is also ‘contaminated’ by some other thing (p. 38). This position defines his opposition to the traditional naming of some thing as ‘substance’, which is always concerned with a thing’s autonomy, necessity or existence ‘in and by itself’ (p. 41). Rather than adhere to this formulation, Garcia wants to demonstrate how every thing is also already some other thing in itself, and this is true for both material and immaterial things.

There is no *creatio ex nihilo* for Garcia, but rather only things that precede and, in a sense, flow into other things. Hence, as well, he can claim that no thing is ever whole (p. 52), but is rather part of another thing that moves within it—a point which will lead Garcia, later on, to formulate ‘big things’, more complex things, if you will, that are really just a collection of smaller things. Unity, in this sense, exists only insofar as a thing can be counted as solitary, a state that can be said to ‘make the thing’ a thing (p. 55). As things, we exist in ‘solitude’ within the world and become ‘selves’ only to the extent that we recognize our selves as something that also ‘escapes’ our comprehension. The self as such is a never-ending ‘process’ (p. 62).

Following the philosophical stages of one assertion after another, he will next determine that the world is that which is ‘contemporaneous’ with each thing (p. 75), and which therefore does not ‘exist’ as a thing, but is rather the ‘form of things’ themselves. Since we must account for each thing’s own configuration of the things within its world, its particular relations, there are of course infinite worlds, though we are only ever able to represent the one that is ‘ours’ so to speak. The world takes on no specific quality and certainly does not depend on us or anything else for that matter; there is only the ‘givenness’ of already established relations within the world (p. 81). Moreover, he claims, the world is an exception to the state of things, but it is also one that cannot leave these things. When we attempt to step outside the world, we are really entering into the realm of form, or that which does not really exist and is not an object or a thing, but which is the container in which things relate to each other. It is where the accumulation of many objects takes place.

Another section of this first part takes up the question of being as one wherein being is simply ‘being comprehended’ (p. 105), that is, being *in relation* to other things. In this way, which strikes me as rather Levinasian, relationship takes precedence over being and alterity, a thing’s otherness to itself, provides the hermeneutical key for understanding the ‘nature’ of the thing. By this count, signification is only done through the movement of things in other things, or through relationship (p. 121). In a striking formulation of this complexity of relations that actually describe the thing, whatever thing that is given to us or that we ourselves are: ‘If I give meaning to my life, I find out in what my life has value as something and know in what my life is comprehended, what goes beyond my life, and that my life is: an Idea, an ideal, a familial line, a community, the progress of humanity, the solitude of the world, the thought of death, nature and evolution, a genetic strategy, a work, a God, a nothing’ (p. 122). From this perspective, the ‘tragic’ sense of life that we embody comes to be the standard mode of relating to our world because we simply do not understand these relations as fully as we might like to—we can never fully grasp the complexity of relations within ‘our’ world which is, in turn, permeated by other worlds of things. Inevitably, we are led to develop an ‘interest’, or a ‘primary’ interest, in certain things that we wish to know but cannot ever fully

comprehend. In this context, Garcia defines ‘matter’ as ‘*everything that enters into the thing*’ (p. 137) but whose ‘substance’ it is a pointless exercise to discern. Hence, he discusses as well the limits that we approach between things and the world.

Book II, whose explicit focus is to ‘conceive of things replenishing each other and ordered encyclopedically’ (p. 15), begins with the universe, or the ‘biggest possible thing’ (p. 155), as well as the ‘smallest’ things, both of which are objects of scientific study. Allowing for the existence of a ‘human universe’ in which something like ‘rights’ might be said to exist insofar as humans all recognize themselves as members of this universe, Garcia proceeds to rethink the concept of universality, which is made possible through a formal process of ‘one object’s comprehension by another’ (p. 158). What ensues is, to my mind, a very interesting interpretation of the conflict between universality and relativism, but also of absence and presence (both defined in relation to being and comprehension, as already defined).

A good portion of the book at this point enters into a series of attempts to define his terminology, which is highly inventive. Events are thus determined as the mobilization of objects—‘An object is a thing in another thing. An event is the inclusion of this thing in another thing’ (p. 174)—and time is considered as the growth (or ‘accumulation’) of presents/presence, making present, past and future all simply variations of the presence of things. Living things are thereby the most intense presences, but not the only ones within our world.

This discussion naturally flows into one concerning those other ‘living things’, animals, and their relationship to that most intense of living things (because that is our limited ‘worldview’, you might say): human beings. Garcia interestingly defines ‘species’ as an event of one animal form moving into another (p. 219), a definition that should, by now, not strike us as anything but consistent with his overall ‘worldview’. Included in this fast paced re-defining of philosophical terminology are related rereadings of vegetarianism, speciesism and anti-speciesism, before he engages in a lengthy discussion of what exactly constitutes the human ‘talking animal’. In short, we are that which is ‘between’ other species and our own artificiality—a precise pinpointing that demonstrates the relational way in which all things are defined. As he will put it, ‘Humanity is a representation-producing animal species which more or less coexists with the representations that it produces in the form of artefacts’ (p. 239).

In addition, Garcia will redefine a variety of conceptual terms through a similar progression of thought: representations and presentation, art and rules for art, nature and culture, history and historical consciousness, economics, value and the exchange of gifts, the assessment of values such as the good, the true and the beautiful, a thing’s membership in social classes, gender and domination, the divisions of the ‘ages of life’, and, finally, death. This apparent ragtag assortment of topics actually conforms quite well to the overall scope and trajectory of the study, which unfolds one topic only in relation to another—the very logic of things that the book as a whole tries to articulate.

I have no doubt that many readers of the book—and most likely of this review as well—will wonder what exactly they are to make of such an ambitious project that attempts to (re)think philosophy from the ground up. It is certainly a wholly original undertaking that is intentionally ‘devoid of references or citations from the history of philosophy’ (p. 15). I also believe a good many readers of the work might begin their reading with an initial assessment somewhere along the lines of ‘what is the point of this nonhistorical approach, one that does not immerse itself in ongoing debates that have run along these lines already?’ What I would like to point out, amongst the particular insights I have culled and delineated above, is something that might go missing through a first reading, but which I believe is instrumentally noteworthy: Garcia’s study is an attempt to use an original creative and cohesive framework in order to ‘re-map’ the philosophical coordinates that we have become very accustomed to using, but which, from time to time, we need to be forced to rethink entirely. It is much to his credit, I believe, that he succeeds not only in forcing the reader to *think* in a way they will most likely be unaccustomed to doing, but also in presenting us with a new and provocative way to think about those ‘things’ that do surround us in every conceivable way, from our memories to our neighborhoods, and from satellites to earth worms. I would not be surprised, in fact, if this work were to generate commentary for years to come.

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