

Bryant, Levi R. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011. 326 pp, pb \$23.99. ISBN: 978–1–60785–204–9.

The last few years of Continental philosophy have witnessed the emergence of a movement loosely organized around the idea that we humans have for some time now been too focused on ourselves – so much so that it seems we cannot think past our own heads. Whether under the banner of “speculative realism” or “object-oriented ontology,” philosophers such as Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux, and Graham Harman have begun to challenge what they take to be the dominant assumption in Continental thought since as far back as Kant: that our world can only ever be understood as a world *for us*, full of objects – “fixed, stable and unchanging” things (13) – that only appear as such *to a subject*. Levi Bryant has been an active voice in this movement, most notably co-editing a volume that brings together several of its most prominent figures.¹ In *The Democracy of Objects*, Bryant systematically lays out his own position – what he calls “onticology,” drawing on Martin Heidegger’s distinction between “ontical” inquiries that are concerned with facts about beings and “ontological” inquiry which concerns being as such. Onticology aims generally to reintroduce objects into ontological inquiry, focusing on the ontological status of the production of differences among beings.² *The Democracy of Objects* pursues this aim by weaving together resources that stretch from Aristotelian metaphysics to contemporary systems theory. The breadth of scope evident throughout the book is truly remarkable, as is Bryant’s ability to lead the reader smoothly along from one concept to the next despite the diversity of ideas discussed. What makes this book so engrossing, however, is its bold attempt (an attempt that is, for the most part, successful) to construct a fresh, comprehensive ontology that does justice to all kinds of beings – atoms, rocks, frogs, and planets no less and no more than humans, governments, and gods – in all the ways they exist and coexist.

In order to construct a sketch of the metaphysical system that Bryant proposes, perhaps it is best to begin where the book concludes. Its last chapter presents what Bryant calls “flat ontology” in four interrelated theses: first, no entity (or type of entity) is to be accorded special status as an origin or basic element of all other entities; second, *the* world does not exist (i.e., there is not a “single, harmonious unity” of all objects that is simply given, but rather there is a multiplicity of objects in a multiplicity of relations); third, no sort of relation between objects is to be privileged over other sorts of relation – and here Bryant has in mind specifically the human/world or subject/object relation that has traditionally been taken as fundamental in one or another sense; and finally, entities either exist or they do not, so that all beings are “on equal ontological footing” (246). This ontology is thus “flat” by virtue of the fact that it does not admit of any given hierarchy among entities, in terms of neither their causes nor their relations nor their manners of being. A being is a being, and at the most basic level of ontology what pertains for one pertains for all.

One could sum up what is at stake in this argument by calling it a retrieval of the Aristotelian notion of “substance” after the criticisms leveled against it by the likes of Locke, Hume, and

Kant – a retrieval that includes several modifications, of course. What Bryant primarily wants to retrieve from Aristotle’s metaphysics is the idea of an object as a unique individual that, firstly, is distinct from any and all of its attributes, and, secondly, remains the same as its attributes undergo changes. In order to reformulate this notion of what (and how) objects are, Bryant draws on the work of Roy Bhaskar, who argues that objects must exist independently of their relations with other objects if they are able to produce the effects that scientific inquiry does, in fact, observe (68). Bryant calls this independence of the object (*qua* substance) from its relations (i.e., its attributes) “withdrawal”: objects relate to other objects insofar as they have attributes or qualities, but at the same time they always withdraw from their relations. No object – whether a water molecule, a human, a skyscraper, or a corporation – is reducible to its qualities or relations.

What is it, then, that withdraws? What can we say of it? Bryant offers an explanation in which he substitutes the phrase “virtual proper being” for the term “substance.” An object’s virtual proper being is that from which it derives the capacity to have attributes at all, and to undergo a change in these attributes while remaining the same object. To go along with virtual proper being, Bryant offers the phrase “local manifestations” as a reinterpretation of an object’s qualities, and local manifestations are to be understood actively, as something an object does. In perhaps the clearest example of the many throughout the book, Bryant reflects on the color of a blue mug. He explains that when he looks at the mug under light, it appears blue, but when its surroundings are dark it naturally appears black. In each case, the mug is manifesting itself according to different local conditions (what Bryant later calls “regimes of attraction”): in the light it is “bluing,” but in the darkness it is “blacking.” Yet there is of course no alteration in the substance of the mug. It retains its virtual proper being under a variety of conditions – though importantly not all conditions; it would not be able to remain a mug after being thrown into a river of lava, for instance.

All objects are thus split between their virtual proper being, which withdraws from external relations but constitutes the internal structure of objects, and their local manifestations, the ways in which objects enter into external relations with other objects. Yet it is not only the latter that Bryant understands in terms of activity. Objects, in order to be what they are, must continue to be what they are, and this continuity in being is itself an active process. To put it simply, an object must continually reproduce itself over time in order not to fall apart (232). Different objects can perform their own self-reproductions in a variety of ways: government offices change hands without fundamental changes in the institutions these offices make up; our bodies are continually producing new cells to replace ones that have ceased to function; even the atoms of an inanimate object such as a rock must undergo dynamic changes from moment to moment for the rock not to dissipate. Virtual proper being can thus be understood as the “endo-consistency” resulting from this ongoing process of renewal, and it is within the consideration of this endo-consistency that the scope of Bryant’s account widens from tardigrades and mugs to social systems.

We may be used to thinking of something like the United States not as an object itself but as made up of objects (places, buildings, citizens, etc.), but one of the claims of ontology is that all objects are made up of other objects without being reducible to those objects. Thus, the cells

in my body are as much objects as I am, and large social structures made up of millions of smaller objects existing at various scales (from atoms to human beings to cities) are also objects themselves. We can thus understand the ways in which the United States, for instance, relates both to the objects that form parts of it and to those outside of it as manifestations of the virtual proper being of the state as it works to maintain its endo-consistency. This allows for the development of a political onticology that Bryant hints at in a few examples but, unfortunately, does not develop in detail in this book. We may still heed this astute observation, though: “Social and political thought needs to expand its domain of inquiry, diminish its obsessive focus on content, and increase attention to regimes of attraction and problems of resonance between objects” (227). Despite a perhaps too facile dismissal of structuralist and post-structuralist critique, Bryant’s point that social and political thought must widen its scope to include the ways in which objects of all kinds relate within and contribute to social systems is hard to dispute. To take one example, references to the work of Jared Diamond show how certain major events in world history are more adequately explained in terms not solely of human socio-political attitudes and decisions but also of conditions involving many different kinds of non-human materials (203, 241). Considerations of non-human objects have indeed been lacking in many structuralist approaches to critique, whether that of Lévi-Strauss or that of Althusser, and Bryant offers a convincing argument for giving such objects equal attention.

Within the explication of flat ontology with which the book closes, Bryant offers what appears to be the foundation of an onticological ethics that, I would argue, is richer than the political considerations put forward in the previous chapter. This account emerges as a distinction between what Bryant calls ontologies of transcendence and ontologies of immanence (onticology being an example of the latter). These two ontological approaches are explained largely in terms of the Lacanian graphs of sexuation, according to which different possible relations between subject and other can be mapped with respect to the subject’s desire. Bryant’s ontological interpretation of Lacan’s graph of “masculine” sexuation provides an account of the way that ontologies of transcendence – Bryant’s general name for the kind of metaphysics dominant throughout the history of Western philosophy, which privileges presence and relies on an epistemology of adequation – tend to obscure both the withdrawal of an object and its necessary relations to other objects. His account of the “feminine” side of Lacan’s graph, however, explains the way in which, according to onticology, the proper being of the object and its openness to other objects belong together. According to this scheme, all objects (and, again, this includes human beings and social systems as much as it does rocks and neutrinos) are what they are only by at the same time being open to other objects. The ethical considerations that emerge from onticology would thus have at their core a recognition of otherness – manifest not only between humans but also between humans and various kinds of non-humans, as well as between non-humans without the involvement of humans. Furthermore, this openness to the truly other (to the “strange stranger” as Bryant writes, adopting a phrase from Timothy Morton²) would not simply be an ethical rule to be followed or broken; it is (according to an argument surprisingly

reminiscent of Derrida's meditations on hospitality) an inescapable, ontological feature of the proper being of beings. To be, one might say, is both to be withdrawn and to be open to others.

The stated goal of the book series of which *The Democracy of Objects* is a part is to encourage "original speculative metaphysics" as opposed to "reverence for dusty textual monuments" (ii). In keeping with this sentiment, Bryant posits his onticology as a version of ontological realism in opposition to an attitude dominant in various strains of contemporary philosophy that he characterizes as essentially epistemological and anthropocentric. The fact that a certain dismissiveness sometimes emerges toward positions Bryant does not explore further, as well as a tendency to make vague generalizations about them rather than to refer to specific ideas or figures, is one regrettable minor weakness of the book. Fortunately, these passages are short, rare, and fairly tangential to the main argument. Furthermore, the rigor and insight of Bryant's treatment of the several figures whose work he does explore in detail evinces an attention to detail and complexity that puts any charge of oversimplification out of the question. Indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths is that it is able to incorporate a variety of perspectives, each with its own intricate arguments, into one larger system – all while keeping the overarching account of this system clear and persuasive. In the book's introduction, Bryant refers to himself as "a bricoleur, freely drawing from a variety of disciplines and thinkers whose works are not necessarily consistent with one another" (27). There are indeed significant distinctions to be made among the ideas discussed in the book, but Bryant is successful in constructing a consistent and compelling position of his own with the aid of these diverse tools. He states that his aim is "to synthesize divergent trends within contemporary Continental social, political, cultural, and philosophical thought and broaden the field of inquiry available to these discourses and debates" (247), and *The Democracy of Objects* achieves this goal with the kind of inventiveness that demands considerable attention.

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Notes

1. Bryant, Levi, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, eds. *The Speculative Turn*. Melbourne: re.press, 2011.
2. Cf. Bryant. "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology." *The Speculative Turn*, Levi Bryant et al. eds. *The Speculative Turn* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011). 261–278.
3. Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.