

Interview with Graham Harman

1) The words ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ are ancient words, almost as old as the history of Western philosophy itself. Yet these are empty concepts if they are not contextualized: one has to specify the classes of objects to which these words refer. So, can you explain on what basis you use different approaches depending on the class of objects under consideration?

“Realism” obviously has different senses in philosophy, politics, mathematics, the art of the novel, and in other areas. But we all more or less know what it means in philosophy—the commitment to a world existing independently from the mind.

That’s only a rough approximation, of course. One of the chief merits of Lee Braver’s candidly anti-realist masterpiece *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Realism* is that Braver carefully distinguishes between six possible meanings of realism and their six possible anti-realist counterparts (R1-R6 and A1-A6, respectively). This gives Braver a neat technical shorthand that allows him to say things like “Philosopher X combines R1 realism of the external world with A3 and A5 antirealist positions on related issues,” and so forth.

However, Braver neglects a key *seventh* realist thesis that in my review of the book I called R7, with a counterpart antirealist A7. Thesis R7 would run as follows: “the hu-

man-world relation is no different in kind from any other relation.” And this to me is the key. A good example of an R7 philosopher would be Alfred North Whitehead, who does not treat the human-world relation as different in ontological kind from that of raindrops and a wooden roof. There is at best a difference in degree between these kinds of relations. With Kant, however, it is quite different. Even if we might read Kant as an R1 realist who believes very strongly in the independence of the thing-in-itself from the mind (which is how I read him) he still definitely counts as an A7 philosopher for whom the human-world relation is special, since it mediates all our talk of all other relations. Whitehead lets us talk straight-away about raindrops striking wood, whereas Kant would say even this talk is mediated by the twelve categories of the understanding as well as space and time, none of them necessarily applicable beyond the realm of appearance.

The fact that the human-world relation is not special also has consequences for the scope of our knowledge. I see all relation as a matter of translation. There is no possible direct access to reality that gives us that reality in the flesh, without relation or mediation. This holds for human knowledge, animal awareness, plant life, and even inanimate collision. The human mind has no especial entanglement in error and no special capacity for direct contact with the real. This is the point where I seem to disagree with my colleagues Maurizio Ferraris and Markus Gabriel, not to mention Quentin Meillassoux, all of whom seem to hold that realism

also marks an end to the relativity of perspectives. For me, by contrast, realism entails the very opposite: the *impossibility* of ever gaining direct knowledge of the world. In analytic philosophy, I believe Nancy Cartwright has said something similar: that she's an ontological realist but a theory anti-realist, or something along those lines. That's more or less my position as well.

2) Relativism has often been treated as an extreme and necessary outcome of antirealism. Is that so? And, if not, what is the difference between relativism and antirealism?

Allow me to approach this question from the opposite end instead: anti-relativism has often been treated as a necessary consequence of realism! Many people are moved to pursue a realist ontology precisely because what they worry about most is relativism. Personally, I'm a lot more worried by idealism than by relativism. A certain plurality of perspectives is inevitable. Indeed, realism requires this if we allow that the real can never be equalled or exhausted by any particular perspective.

One of my most observant readers, Joseph Goodson of Michigan, has noted the following difference between my position and postmodern relativism. The relativists are all hung up on the incommensurability of perspectives *with each other*, while for me this is uninteresting, and the real problem is the incommensurability of any perspective *with the real*. It's less a matter of the conflict

between perspectives than the internal conflict *within* a perspective to measure up to a real that eludes it.

3) Relativism is particularly hard to refute in ethics. What can be the consequences of adopting a realist perspective, from this point of view?

One frequent assumption about realist ethics is that it would require the same objective rules to be followed by everyone, rules somehow grounded in the nature of reality itself— an "ought" grounded in an "is." This follows the same assumption found elsewhere in philosophy: namely, that realism does not just mean the existence of a world outside the mind, but also the ability of the mind to *know* it.

But this is a counter-philosophical attitude from the start. Philosophy is *philosophia*, or love of wisdom rather than wisdom itself. Note that Socrates is never able to give us a definition of friendship, justice, virtue, or love, however much he searches for one. Socrates is not a knower, and we do not escape sophistry through knowledge claims.

So in a sense, I conclude the opposite of what your question might have suspected. For me, a realist ethics entails the *failure* of objective rules of behavior. Any ethical rule can be no more than a rough approximation of the reality it attempts to address. Such approximation is necessary for social existence— we can't necessarily affirm a wildcat

planet of ethical freelancers who invent their own standards at every moment. Nonetheless, each of us has broken basic ethical rules at various times (not too brazenly, one hopes) precisely because ethics often requires this. It is easy to imagine moments when stating a cold, hard truth would amount to needless cruelty, for instance. For any ethical rule, we can probably dream up an exceptional situation that would strongly encourage its violation.

In fact, this to me is the key fact of ethics: everyone seems to be allowed certain ethical exceptions on a fairly constant basis. There is my colleague who regularly speaks of dirty jokes in class streams, and this in culturally conservative Egypt. If you or I were to do it, we would quickly be terminated, since there would no doubt be a certain ugly edge to it. But my colleague is able to pull off the “crazy uncle” persona that allows him to get away with this pretty regularly despite a number of close calls. Women generally get away with certain sorts of things that men generally do not, and certainly vice versa. It is by no means the case that we treat everyone the same. And while this may sometimes be the result of “hypocrisy” or a “double standard,” the most interesting cases are those in which it may be a double standard but not mere hypocrisy. Though the surface value of two actions may be equivalent, their underlying character may be completely different in the two cases, based on who carries them out.

4) Why is it that new realism is essentially continental? Is it true that, as Quentin Meillassoux put it, “in analytic philosophy there is so much realism that they can’t be amazed by the capacity of realism”? And, if it is true, what distinguishes analytic realism from continental realism?

In the first place, Meillassoux’s statement is basically correct. Realism has always been a live option for analytic philosophy, whereas in the continental tradition one has always risked becoming a laughingstock even by *posing the question* of realism vs. antirealism. Thanks to the phenomenological tradition (which I love for other reasons, unlike Meillassoux) we have been trained to treat the problem of realism as a pseudo-problem. After all, thought is “always already outside itself in intending an object.” However, we can also intend hallucinatory or otherwise delusional objects, which does not make them “real” in any defensible sense of the term.

Husserl is a full-blown idealist, though also an object-oriented realist—the first to merit that description in the history of philosophy. There were other philosophers such as Kasimir Twardowski (Husserl’s true predecessor in the Brentano School) who insisted on a doubling, with an object outside the mind and a content inside the mind. We are quick to see that Husserl got rid of the “outside the mind” part but rarely notice that he *preserved* Twardowski’s dualism, while ingeniously imploding both terms into the phenomenal realm. The British Empiricist tradition disdained objects

cist tradition disdained objects and analyzed them away as “bundles of qualities,” but for Husserl the object remains somewhat constant, robust enough to withstand numerous changes in qualities. The object comes first, and its adumbrations swirl atop its surface. Rather than objects being bundles of qualities, it is qualities that become the slaves of objects—consider Merleau-Ponty’s remarks about how the black of a pen’s ink and the black of an executioner’s hood are utterly different even if they are exactly the same in objective hue. The object bends its qualities to do its bidding.

But we need more than Husserl, who remains an idealist. This is why I cannot remain a phenomenologist. I’ve tried to read Heidegger as a realist through the tool-analysis, though there are problems with considering Heidegger a realist in the bona fide sense. First, it’s all about the Dasein-Sein correlate for him. Like Kant, in whose cold shadow he works, Heidegger places the human-world relation in a position of superiority to all others; any discussion of object-object relations would make sense, for Heidegger as for Kant, only if we consider how it is mediated by the categories or horizon of human reality. And this is not yet realism. Second, there is the problem that Heidegger’s “real” (much like Lacan’s, or that of Parmenides or the early Levinas) is generally treated as a lump-real not articulated into parts until we encounter it. We see this in the early Heidegger with his frequent misunderstanding of the being/beings duality not just as absence/presence (which is

justified) but also as one/many (which is not).

As for realism in analytic philosophy, it tends to involve too much science-worship for my tastes. Consider Kripke’s brilliant *Naming and Necessity*, a book I adore until it turns out that what is rigidly designated by the word “gold” is its number of protons! Moreover, “Nixon” turns out to be a man produced by two specific parents, which I don’t believe is even true in terms of genetics (though extremely unlikely, the same Nixon DNA might have been generated by two totally different parents than the ones he had). There’s the lingering notion in most analytic realism that some privileged layer explains the reality that can’t quite be found in mid- or large-sized entities, accompanied by the parallel notion that the natural sciences are doing such a good job with that privileged ultimate layer that we simply ought to limp along like servants and explain why Master Science is so successful. Continental philosophy has the opposite problem of excessive *contempt* for the natural sciences (we are only now beginning to pull out of this prejudice). But given the remarkable prestige of the sciences these days and the widespread contempt for the humanities, there is little intellectual thrust to be gained by ratifying the present-day worship of natural science. (I’m speaking here of intellectual circles, of course, since I’m well aware of the ongoing stream of news stories about how science knowledge in the general public is at an all-time low, etc. etc.)

5) What is, in your opinion, the (possible or yet-to-come) relationship between speculative realism and aesthetics, understood both as a theory of perception – à la Baumgarten – and as a philosophy of art?

The original four Speculative Realists as a whole were just ranked in October 2013 as the #81 most powerful force in the contemporary art (see http://artreview.com/power_100/).

For my own part, I've written one article entitled "Aesthetics as First Philosophy," and another called "The Third Table" that proposes the arts as a model for the next four centuries of philosophies, much as the natural sciences or deductive geometry were taken as models during the past four centuries.

For me, philosophy is all about the tensions between two types of objects (the real and the sensual) and their two types of qualities (also the real and the sensual). This leads to four basic tensions in the cosmos that I have identified in *The Quadruple Object* and elsewhere as time, space, essence, and eidos. I've also tried to show that aesthetics results from just such a tension, again placing aesthetics at the center of philosophy.

Even Meillassoux, who rates mathematics rather than aesthetics as the highest discipline, has written a brilliant book on Mallarmé. I do think Meillassoux will have problems extending the marvelous use of his mathematical method (707 as Mallarmé's secret number) into other authors, painters, and musicians.

The one type of Speculative Realism that is bound to have difficulty with aesthetics is the nihilistic, science-worshipping kind of Speculative Realism. In a sense, aesthetics is the very opposite of an angry scream against the futility of existence, and thus any philosophy that asserts such futility is to display a deft touch in the unlikely event that it ever turns to Wordsworth, Cézanne, or Schönberg.