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Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics by Graham Harman. Anamnesis series. Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2009. Pp. 258. $25.00 paper.

Graham Harman's *Prince of Networks* is really two books in one. The first part is a lucid exposition of the metaphysics of Bruno Latour; the second part presents Harman's own metaphysical speculations, which are deeply indebted to those of Latour, but which also strike out in new and different directions.

Bruno Latour is well known in the United States, but he is not usually thought of as a philosopher or a metaphysician. Latour is, rather, most familiar as one of the leading figures in *science studies:* the interdisciplinary field that looks at the actual practices of scientists and scientific institutions, and the cultural implications of these practices. Science studies involves the work of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, as well as of cultural theorists and rhetoricians, who are often to be found in literature departments. Latour is also frequently cited as one of the developers of *actor-network theory,* which has had a significant impact in the social sciences and in cultural studies—but which has little in common with the concerns of the philosophy of science as it was practiced in the last century under the influence of such figures as Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. It's surprising, therefore (at least for English-language readers, though not necessarily for French-language ones) to see Latour presented, as he is by Harman, as a

metaphysician, in the company of such figures as Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Whitehead. Indeed, Harman suggests that Latour compares favorably with such figures as Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, and Badiou, those theorists who have entranced American academia over the last several decades. One of the great merits of *Prince of Networks* is that it not only argues for the importance of Latour's thought, but also places Latour himself in an entirely new light.

In the first part of *Prince of Networks,* Harman outlines Latour's metaphysics through a close reading of four of Latour's texts: "Irreductions" (from *The Pasteurization of France,* 1984), *Science in Action* (1987), *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), and *Pandora's Hope* (1999). Harman discovers a cluster of "four metaphysical axioms" that define Latour's philosophy (14–16). In the first place, the world is made up of *actors* or *actants,* discrete and separate individuals. Human beings are actors, but so are bacteria, chairs, grapes, and grains of sand. In the second place, all these actors are *irreducible.* No actor can be entirely explained in the terms of, or by reference to, another. You cannot fully account for the being and doing of a chair, for instance, by referring either to the atoms out of which it is ultimately made or to its use by the person who sits in it. In the third place, any encounter, any interaction between actors, in-

volves a process of *translation.* Each actor mediates (and thereby transforms) other actors and is in its own turn mediated (and thereby transformed) by still other actors: "There is never an immediate visibility of the fact, but only a series of mediations. . . . Truth is *nothing but* a chain of translation without resemblance from one actor to the next" (76). And finally, in the fourth place, change happens as a result of negotiations or battles among actors; and the outcome of these negotiations or battles depends upon the *alliances* that actors are able to make with one another: "For Latour, an object is neither a substance nor an essence, but an actor trying to adjust or inflict its forces, not unlike Nietzsche's cosmic vision of the will to power" (15). After stating these axioms concisely, Harman proceeds to elaborate and develop them, and to explore their ramifications and consequences. The result is to reveal that Latour is actually grappling with many of the major concerns of Western philosophy and offering his own innovative suggestions for resolving them.

In the second part of *Prince of Networks,* Harman steps back from this close reading, in order to offer some criticisms of Latour's metaphysics and to propose his own metaphysical speculations as an alternative. Above all, Harman criticizes Latour for his *relationalism:* "his notion that actors are defined entirely by their relations and alli-

ances." For Latour, actors must be "fully relational in character, with no distinction between object and accident, object and relation, or object and quality . . . to change one's relations is to change one's reality" (104). Harman objects that this dimension of Latour's thought (which he shares with Whitehead) risks dissolving actors into a sort of primordial indistinction and effacing their concrete individuality. Radical relationalism makes it difficult to understand how an actor can change over time. It also risks undermining the very actuality of actors that Latour otherwise wishes to affirm, "by not allowing [an actor] to be real outside the alliances that articulate it" (129). Harman therefore suggests that—contrary to Latour's specific assertions, but in tune with his basic intuitions—actors must be accorded "a reality beyond all relationality"; each actor (or object) must be "in and of itself actual *apart from any relations*" (187). Latour's own insistence upon the actuality and efficacy of actors, nonhuman as well as human, implies that each of these actors is necessarily "self-contained" (144).

Harman's own philosophy elaborates upon, and expands, this basic insight. In the second part of *Prince of Networks,* Harman further develops, with the help of Latour, ideas that he had earlier formulated in his previous books, *Tool-Being* (2002) and *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005). Among other things, Harman remarkably revives, and gives new life to, two old philosophical doctrines that, for most of the last century, have been regarded as old-fashioned, when not forgotten entirely. The first of these doctrines is *substantialism:* the claim that every object is a substance, which is to say that it is something more than the mere sum of its qualities. The second of these forgotten doctrines is *occasionalism:* the claim that objects cannot influence one another directly—as in conventional notions of cause and effect—but require some external mediation in order to do so. Harman suggests that substantialism is the missing term that could resolve many of the problems that remain in Latour's metaphysics. And he credits Latour with the prodigious discovery, for the first time in the history of philosophy, of a *secular occasionalism:* a thought that considers seriously the problem of mediation in any relationship among entities without falling back upon God as the ultimate mediator (102, 115, 228). Ever since Descartes, Western philosophy has called upon God as the ultimate guarantor of the world's coherence; Latour is the first thinker to envision this coherence in entirely immanent and secular terms.

What unites both parts of *Prince of Networks* is Harman's quest, following Latour, to develop what he calls an "object-oriented philosophy." This is a view of the world

that—in contrast to nearly all Western philosophy since Kant, or indeed since Descartes—is not centered upon questions of consciousness, subjectivity, and the epistemological problem of human access to an external world. Rather, object-oriented philosophy affirms a "marvelous plurality of concrete objects" (156), each with its own integrity and its own mysterious depths. The "universe of things" is not a harmonious whole, but a wild anarchy of innumerable objects both withdrawing from and reaching out to one another. And these objects cannot be contained within the fixed categories that we would seek to impose upon them. Object-oriented philosophy is therefore equally opposed to scientific naturalism and to so-called social constructionism. Against the former, it insists that no object is reducible to, or fully explicable in terms of, its ultimate subatomic constituents. Against the latter, it insists that the world is not made by us and for us. Cats, brown dwarf stars, internal combustion engines, and lava flows all have their own stubborn autonomy and inherent activity. Latour has often been viewed, in the United States at least, as a social constructionist, but Harman demonstrates convincingly that this characterization is wrong. Far from reducing the physical world to a human projection, Latour's philosophy orients us, as never before, "toward the richness of things themselves" in all their multifariousness (119).

Prince of Networks marks something of a turning point, I think, in contemporary intellectual discourse. For Harman's reconstruction of Latour's metaphysics, and his presentation of his own metaphysics, both exemplify an important development in recent years: the revival of metaphysical speculation. For most of the twentieth century, "metaphysics" was taboo, or under quarantine. It was generally seen as something bad, something we had to get away from. The goal of overcoming metaphysics was shared by thinkers as otherwise antagonistic to one another as Carnap and Heidegger. And despite the vast differences among them, Wittgenstein, Rorty, and Derrida were united at least by their incessant efforts to undo the bewitchment of metaphysics, even if they all conceded that we would never be able to escape this bewitchment entirely. But it seems that this sort of attitude might finally be giving way. In the twenty-first century, it might be possible, once again, to do metaphysics without a bad conscience. Harman suggests as much, both through his own bold speculations and through what might be thought of as his "outing" of Latour as an unabashed metaphysician. The case of Latour is especially significant in this respect because it demonstrates that full-fledged metaphysical specula-

tion is not incompatible with the most careful, and hardheadedly empirical, examination of local, particular facts in minute detail. Metaphysics, no less than scientific examination, is a way of embracing "the richness of things themselves." It is high time for us to have done with the asceticism and superciliousness of the last century's intellectual climate. Metaphysical speculation, at its best, is a stimulus to thought; *Prince of Networks* is profoundly engaging and challenging even if one does not accept (as I do not) all of its arguments.

In concluding, I should mention that *Prince of Networks* is not just intellectually stimulating, but also a delight to read. Philosophy has never been a matter of mere logical propositions. It has always involved the elucidation of a basic stance towards the world, which means that it has always also involved a kind of literary *style*. A manner of writing is not just an adornment to the underlying ideas; it is rather the case that ideas themselves can emerge only when they are given the proper form of expression. Even the philosophers who are most painful and obnoxious to read—one might mention Kant, Hegel, and (for me at least) Heidegger—have written the way they did because they realized that a new sort of language was required in order to convey their new insights about reality. This is

all the more so, in the case of thinkers who can also be credited as great writers: think of Plato, Hume, Nietzsche, and William James. Graham Harman is, similarly, a philosopher who writes well. His prose style is as seductive as his ideas, and indeed it is impossible to separate the two. *Prince of Networks* is a great adventure of ideas (to use a phrase from Alfred North Whitehead); it is one of those rare books that, in style as in substance, truly invites us to think.

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