

21st century materialism

A century has passed since the 1909 publication of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, a text in which Lenin responded to the supposed “disappearance of matter” in physical theory by attempting to clarify the stakes of philosophical materialism. He did so by interrogating the consequences of contemporary positions on elementary philosophical questions: Is being prior to thought? Can we establish the adequacy of thought and sensation to material objects independent of thought and sensation? Is it possible to reduce the operations of thinking to material processes? Is “matter” a philosophical scientific concept? What is the relation between philosophical materialism and political praxis? These questions continue to agitate contemporary thought, but they are no longer the “same” questions: their significance has been transformed by a century of political, scientific, and philosophical interventions. This symposium is dedicated to reassessing their stakes for 21st century philosophy and politics. Dialectical. Historical. Transcendental. Non-Philosophical. “materialism” continues to demand that we take a position. What is it?

Introduction: Null Traces, Real Effects

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Nathan Brown

‘21st century materialism’: but if philosophy has no history, and if it has no object?

How could we approach, under the condition of Althusser’s well-known theses, the contemporary condition of materialism? ‘As philosophy has no object, nothing can happen in it. The nothing of its history simply repeats the nothing of its object.’ Nothing can happen. Nothing repeats. These are themselves theses concerning the situation of philosophical materialism. What ‘happens’ in philosophy is a perpetual conflict between opposing tendencies—materialism and idealism—and this conflict amounts to nothing insofar as it endlessly recurs. Philosophy is the ‘garrulous theatre’ of an ‘eternal null inversion’ through which the relation between matter and mind is rearranged. But if there is thus no history of philosophy, there is nevertheless a history *in* philosophy: ‘a history of the displacement of the indefinite repetition of a null trace whose effects are real.’

For Althusser, what is perpetually displaced is the line of demarcation *between* materialism and idealism, an antagonism that constitutes and exhausts the philosophical field. And in the mid-twentieth century conjuncture that he analyzed, what he called partisanship in philosophy, or ‘the class struggle in theory,’ consisted in butressing materialist philosophy against the hegemonic power of idealism, by which the former was ‘massively dominated.’ Today the balance of power between these two positions has itself undergone an inversion. In the present conjuncture, it might seem that idealism is so massively dominated by materialism that the philosophical field has virtually collapsed into one of its two constitutive tendencies, such that the null trace which carves out a history *in* philosophy has come to displace itself entirely within the internal articulation of materialist positions. For how many novel projects in continental philosophy openly declare their ‘idealist’ orientation? Even a figure like Badiou, who does not hesitate to affirm his allegiance to a more or less orthodox Platonism, carries

out his program under the name of ‘the materialist dialectic,’ and—perhaps more telling—the enemy against which he positions his enterprise is not some imposing contemporary renovation of idealism but rather ‘democratic materialism.’ Even theorists of so-called ‘immaterial labor’ lay claim to a materialist orientation. Today what Althusser called ‘the emptiness of a distance taken’ by the materialist philosopher might seem to mark not so much a *distance from* idealism as the *emptiness of* the latter’s oppositional place.

From this perspective, the real effects of the null traces inscribed by novel philosophical projects would be internal to materialism; the ‘distance’ that these open within the conjuncture would be a distance between materialist positions of which there is no shortage. Thus a history *in* 21st century materialism would be inscribed between the positions staked out, for example, by Catherine Malabou’s neurological dialectics of plasticity, the Churchlands’ eliminative materialism, Ray Brassier’s nihilist physicalism, the Lacanian transcendental materialism extrapolated from the work of Slavoj Žižek by Adrian Johnston, the Deleuzian transcendental materialism associated with the journal *Pli*, Bernard Stiegler’s investigations of the mnemotechnics of tertiary memory, Antonio Negri’s Spinozist ontology of constituent power, varieties of biopolitical theory gleaned from Foucault via Giorgio Agamben, the rationalist phenomenology of Alain Badiou’s materialist dialectic, Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative materialism, Reza Negarastani’s petrophilosophical hermetics of ‘complicity with anonymous materials,’ Gabriel Catren’s quantum mechanical speculative physics... And, to name three of our speakers at this weekend’s event: Peter Hallward’s efforts to rethink the conditions of a politically transformative materialism through a theory of dialectical voluntarism; Martin Hägglund’s incipient theory of arche-materiality; Miran Božovič’s excavation and reorientation of materialist mythoi in modern French philosophy.

This profusion of ‘21st century materialisms’ calls our attention to another basic Althusserian precept: that philosophical ‘tendencies’ are precisely tendencies insofar as they are never pure, but always internally divided by factional struggles and infiltrated by elements of their nominal antagonist. Hence the desire to formulate what one might call a *generic materialism*: one capacious enough to accommodate divergent projects under a single categorical condition, yet robust enough to firmly demarcate the limits of a distinctive philosophical orientation. This is what Lenin attempted a century ago in his 1909 intervention, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, by paring the constitutive criteria of materialism down to a bare minimum. Attempting to drain the ‘idealist swamp’ into which he judged early 20th century physics to have fallen due to the supposed ‘disappearance of matter’ from physical theory, Lenin insisted upon the fundamental compatibility of materialist philosophy with any and all developments in the physical sciences, an accord enabled by a strategic underdetermination of the philosophical category of matter. Citing Engels’ remark that ‘with each epoch-making discovery in the history of science, [materialism] has been obliged to change its form,’ Lenin argues that the sole ‘property’ of matter with the recognition of which materialism is vitally connected is the property of being *objective reality*, of existing outside of our cognition... The electron is as inexhaustible as the atom, nature is infinite, but it exists infinitely; and only this categorical, unconditional recognition of its existence beyond the consciousness and sensation of man distinguishes dialectic materialism from relativist agnosticism and idealism.

Whatever its shortcomings, what remains enticing about Lenin’s book is its proposition that materialism may be *generic* insofar as it is simultaneously *dialectical* and *absolute*: dialectical in its acceptance of the mutability of human knowledge and the relativity of any particular ‘state’ of matter;

absolute in declaring our capacity to posit the objective reality of matter in-itself; and generic insofar as the primary condition for the adequation of dialectical materialism with absolute objectivity is the rejection of any determinate substance.

As Graham Harman’s work suggests, however, the trouble with such a generic materialism is that it is difficult to differentiate from realism. And this is an urgent problem for our present prehension of the future of philosophy in that it touches upon the asymmetrical relation between *speculative materialism* and *speculative realism*.

Thus, if the interventions of Miran Božovič, Martin Hägglund, and Peter Hallward draw lines of demarcation between discrepant orientations *within* materialist philosophy, Graham Harman’s work suggests that the principle contradiction of the present philosophical field may pass *between* materialism and realism, the latter of which would thus displace the conjunctural position of idealism.

In all cases, it is the real effects of these traces and displacements—first and foremost their effects upon one another—that is the matter of concern this weekend.

The Material God in Diderot's D'Alembert's Dream

Miran Božovič

¹ Denis Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, in *Œuvres*, 5 vols., ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1994-97), 1: 616. Translations from the first part of the *Rêve* are my own; translations from the second part are quoted from *D'Alembert's Dream*, trans. Jean Stewart and Jonathan Kemp, in *Diderot, Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works*, ed. David Adams (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 1999).

² *Ibid.*, 1: 614.

³ Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 132.

⁴ Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, 1: 615.

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I shall be discussing the paradoxical deity that briefly appears on the scene of Diderot's *D'Alembert's Dream*.

Widely considered to be Diderot's philosophical masterpiece, this work (consisting of three dialogues, written in 1769) is a highly unusual piece of writing in which Diderot's own philosophical system is expounded not by someone who would be cautiously choosing his words, weighing the arguments with care and thoughtfully refuting the objections as befits a formal philosophical treatise, but by the delirious d'Alembert, who is ranting thoughtlessly in his sleep (he even experiences a sexual climax in the process) and in this way comes to develop the central themes of Diderot's materialism. An insightful and indispensable commentary is provided by the medical doctor, Bordeu, whom d'Alembert's mistress, Mlle de Lespinasse, who has been noting down the words of her sleeping lover, summons to his bedside because she fears he has lost his mind. Furthermore, while in the first dialogue where Diderot has been trying to win him over to materialism, d'Alembert remained a more or less firmly convinced spiritualist dualist believing the soul to be an immaterial, spiritual entity, in the second dialogue he undergoes a philosophical conversion in his dream, that is, a conversion from Cartesian dualism to Diderotian materialism. In *D'Alembert's Dream*, materialist monism is presented, quite literally, as the spiritualist dualist's nightmare.

It certainly comes as a surprise that in the text, which has, already in its first paragraph, done away with the concept of spiritual God and the traditional notion of immaterial soul, there nevertheless appears a sort of deity. Both immaterial soul and spiritual God are rejected, in a single stroke, as agents 'with contradictory attributes,'¹ and all functions traditionally ascribed to them are taken over by matter, the only substance existing in the universe. Matter produces life and develops sensibility and thought by

itself. The transition from inert matter to a sentient being and from a sentient being to a thinking being occurs solely by means of 'material agents' and through 'purely mechanical operations,'² that is, 'without the intervention of any heterogeneous or unintelligible agent,'³ such as spiritual God and immaterial soul.

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The idea that 'everything in nature is linked'⁴ – this idea is one of the central tenets of Diderot's (neo-)Spinozist ontology – which left the waking d'Alembert unimpressed when he first heard it from Diderot's mouth the evening before, is enthusiastically adopted by the dreaming d'Alembert and spoken of as if it were his own. In his feverish sleep, he says:

All beings intermingle with each other, consequently all species ... everything is in perpetual flux. Every animal is more or less a human being, every mineral is more or less a plant, and every plant is more or less an animal. There is nothing fixed in nature... Everything is more or less one thing or another, more or less earth, more or less water, more or less air, more or less fire, more or less of one kingdom or another... therefore nothing is of the essence of a particular being. No, there's no doubt, since there is no quality which any being does not share in... and because it's the greater or smaller ratio of this quality which has made us attribute it to one being to the exclusion of another. And you talk about individuals, you poor philosophers! Forget about your individuals. Answer me this: is there an atom in nature which is exactly similar to another atom? No. Don't you agree that everything is connected in nature and that it's impossible that there should be a gap in nature's chain? Then what do you want to say with your individuals? There are no individuals, no, there are none. There is only one great individual – that is the whole. In that whole, as in a machine or some animal, you may give a certain name to a certain part,

- 5 Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 104-105 (translation slightly modified).
- 6 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 8 Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 462.
- 9 Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 105.
- 10 Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, 1: 620.
- 11 Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1991), art. 'Spinoza,' rem. N, 311.
- 12 Diderot, *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature*, trans. Lorna Sandler, in *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works*, 67.

but if you call this part of the whole an 'individual' you are making as great a mistake as if you called the wing of a bird, or a feather on that wing, an 'individual' ... And you talk of essences, you poor philosophers! Forget about your essences!⁵

In d'Alembert's eyes, 'everything in nature is linked' to such an extent that the whole of nature is a single individual. Furthermore, nature is the only true individual; particular beings by themselves are not true individuals but rather 'parts' of a much wider 'whole' (or totality), *le tout*, that is, nature or material universe as 'the great individual.' How closely the particular beings are linked up into 'the great individual,' can best be seen in d'Alembert's description of his own ontological status within the 'whole': 'Change the whole, and you will necessarily change me; but the whole is changing constantly.'⁶ Already in one of his previous delirious babblings we heard d'Alembert say: 'Everything changes, everything passes away. Only the whole remains.'⁷ Here d'Alembert apparently comes to understand that this general principle is valid also for him, who is himself no less 'a part of the whole' (or of 'the great individual') than any other being. Incidentally, this passage is strongly reminiscent of Spinoza who, in the Second Part of his *Ethics*, writes that 'the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual.'⁸ With regard to the 'whole' which they form, the parts are desubstantialized to such an extent that a particular being is but 'the sum of a certain number of tendencies,' and its life within 'the great individual' but 'a succession of actions and reactions'; within 'the great individual' nothing is really born or dies: 'birth, life, decay' are merely 'changes of form,' and we have no reason whatsoever to ascribe more importance to one form over the others,⁹ and so forth.

According to Diderot, 'there is only one substance in the universe,'¹⁰ that is, matter; all particular beings are modes or transient, changing 'forms' of the only

existing substance. Not only our body, but our thoughts or ideas too are, strictly speaking, modifications of matter, since the soul that produces them is itself nothing other than a properly organized body or a modification of matter. That is to say, every idea that occurs in my mind is at the same time a modification of 'the great individual' whose 'part' is my body—and therefore also my mind. Although Diderot's 'great individual' is an extended thing, the same thing can be said of it that Pierre Bayle said of Spinoza's God—like Spinoza's God, Diderot's 'great individual' too is a being who is 'modified at the same time by the thoughts of all mankind.'¹¹

Although Diderot's 'great individual' is clearly not a true material God, that is, God, who would be an effect of the material universe in the same way as the material soul is an effect of bodily organization—what to some extent spoils the otherwise neat (neo-)Spinozist picture of the 'whole,' that is, nature or the material universe considered as a single 'great individual,' is the fact that for Diderot there is no such thing as *la conscience du tout*, the consciousness of the whole,¹² as he called it in his *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature* while supposedly arguing against Maupertuis's 'most seductive form of materialism'—the dreaming d'Alembert, as portrayed by Diderot, is nevertheless subjected to nature (i.e., to the 'whole' whose 'part' he is) to such an extent that it appears as if it is not he himself who speaks and acts, but it is, rather, nature or 'the great individual' that speaks and acts *through* him. The dreaming d'Alembert says and does things he would most certainly never say or do if it depended on him. First, in his dream, d'Alembert expounds as if it were his own a philosophical theory that he as a convinced spiritualist dualist most certainly rejected, i.e., the materialist monism. Secondly, in the midst of his delirious materialist monologue he begins to masturbate in the presence of his mistress, Mlle de Lespinasse. The medical doctor, who is openly enthusiastic about the philosophy

¹² See Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 100.

¹³ See Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, 1:614.

expounded by d'Alembert in his dream, finds this kind of action in the company of such an attractive young lady as Mlle de Lespinasse one of pure madness, thus indicating clearly that d'Alembert would most likely go about the act in question differently if it depended on his will.¹³ While this unmistakably unintentional, involuntary act of d'Alembert's might, at first, seem to be rather out of place in a formal philosophical treatise, it is actually entirely consistent with the spirit of philosophy unintentionally and unknowingly expounded by d'Alembert in his dream, namely: d'Alembert masturbates while he is speaking about the 'miracle of life,' that is, about spontaneous generation, about various forms of sexual and asexual reproduction, or, in short, about the ways material organization reproduces itself—and the moment his philosophical reflections on the life of matter reach a climax, he himself experiences a sexual climax, that is, his body literally produces 'the living matter.'

Does not the fact that d'Alembert's involuntary talk about 'the great work of nature,' about life of matter, and so forth, coincides with his no less involuntary production of the living matter, or with nature's true act of creation in miniature, make it appear as if matter or nature literally reproduces itself and its life through d'Alembert's body, that is, through one of its 'parts'? That is, the upshot of the scene is—not that d'Alembert's body imitates nature and stages its creative power but, rather, that nature itself literally creates the living matter through d'Alembert and propagates itself. Moreover, does it not also seem as if it is nature or material organization itself that—through the mind it developed in d'Alembert—reflects on itself? (In the first dialogue, d'Alembert as 'a thinking being' has been shown to be nothing other than an effect of 'material agents' and 'purely mechanical operations.')

Since for Diderot there is no 'consciousness of the whole,' the whole thinks about itself through the consciousnesses of its 'parts': thus, when d'Alembert famously solves the 'problem

of the precession of the equinoxes,'¹⁴ in Diderot's eyes this must mean as much as saying that—through the astronomer and mathematician d'Alembert—'the great individual' or the material universe comes to understand itself and its own laws, and that therefore cosmology and astronomy are nothing but the universe's knowledge of itself. Similarly, when d'Alembert unknowingly advances the philosophy of materialist monism, that is, the philosophical theory which is contrary to his spiritualist dualism, does it not seem as if it is not he who is theorizing about the material universe but, rather, that it is the material universe that is theorizing about itself *through* d'Alembert, and that therefore materialist monism is nothing but the philosophical theory that matter, as the only existing substance in the universe, has about itself? And finally, if we include into this reading *D'Alembert's Dream* itself, that is, the theoretical philosophical treatise, in which Diderot formulates and develops the philosophy of materialism, does it not seem as if—through this treatise of Diderot's, which is widely considered to be the pinnacle of the philosophy of materialism—*nature itself writes its own theory* or as if *matter is developing its own philosophy*?

In his youth, Diderot had already toyed with the idea of a 'whole' that thinks through its 'parts' and, consequently, with the idea of a being who at first takes himself to be an autonomous thinking subject and then comes to realize with horror that ideas in his mind are not really his or, in other words, that it is not he himself who thinks his thoughts, but that it is, rather, the 'whole' whose 'part' he is that thinks *in* him or *through* him. In one of his early, lesser-known works, namely *La Promenade du sceptique* (*The Sceptic's Walk*), Diderot presents an eccentric sage—the so-called 'metaphysical egoist'—who believes himself to be the only existing being in the universe while all other beings exist merely as ideas in his mind, that is, as modes of his thought which are entirely dependent upon his will.

¹⁵ For the episode, see Diderot, *La Promenade du sceptique*, in *Œuvres*, 1: 105.

¹⁶ Diderot, *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature*, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*, in *Œuvres*, 1: 1283.

In a word, he believes that he alone is all the universe. He thus, understandably, takes himself to be nothing less than a God of his universe. Firmly believing that his thought is the cause of the existence of all beings, this sage is convinced that, for example, the Roman poet Virgil is nothing other than an ‘idea which refers to nothing’ outside his mind. That is, the egoist (or his mind) is the only substance there is, and Virgil is merely a mode of his thought. Accordingly, the egoist claims to be the author of the ideas constituting Virgil’s *Aeneid*: it was not Virgil who composed the *Aeneid*; it was, rather, the egoist philosopher himself who created, in his thought, both Virgil and ‘his’ epic. When Virgil—who exists solely as a mode of the sage’s thought—came up with any one of the ideas constituting the *Aeneid*, it was, in fact, the sage who came up with that idea. That is to say, it was the egoist sage who composed the *Aeneid* through Virgil.¹⁵ While writing *The Sceptic’s Walk*, Diderot could have hardly failed to notice the obvious implication that, in accordance with the metaphysical theory of the egoist sage he is portraying, he himself and the book he was writing should be considered a part of the egoist’s mind, a mode of his thought, and that, strictly speaking, it is not he who is writing about the egoist metaphysics, but rather the egoist himself who is developing his own metaphysics through him. This should, I believe, hold all the more for *D’Alembert’s Dream*: while Diderot would be unlikely to take himself to be nothing other than an idea in the egoist’s mind, a mode of his thought, that is, a ‘part’ of that ‘whole’ he writes about in *The Sceptic’s Walk*, he did think of himself as a ‘part’ of ‘the great Whole’ he writes about in *D’Alembert’s Dream*. Just as in the *The Sceptic’s Walk* it is the egoist that develops his own metaphysics through Diderot, so, too, in *D’Alembert’s dream*, it is nature as ‘the great individual,’ or matter as the only existing substance, that contemplates itself and expounds its own theory or philosophy through Diderot. Strictly speaking, Diderot

is no more the author of *D’Alembert’s Dream*, than, in the *The Sceptic’s Walk*, Virgil is the author of the *Aeneid*. Just as the philosophy of a mind who believes himself to be ‘alone in the world’ or who believes he is ‘himself the entire universe’ can only be the most radical version of spiritualism, that is, metaphysical egoism or spiritual monism, so, too, the philosophy of matter as the only substance that exists in the universe, can only be one of materialist monism.

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If ‘the universe... forms a whole,’ Diderot writes in his *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature*, there is always a possibility that the perceptions of its constituent parts will fuse into ‘a single perception,’ and the particular consciousnesses into ‘the consciousness of the whole.’¹⁶ This ‘infinite set of perceptions’ is of course nothing other than the ‘world-soul,’ and in this case, Diderot goes on, ‘the world could be God.’¹⁷ Like Spinoza’s God, the material God of that sort would not be thinking any thoughts unthought by us, since he is nothing other than ‘an infinite set of perceptions’ or ‘consciousness of the whole,’ that is, nature’s (or ‘the great individual’s’) consciousness of itself, formed by consciousnesses of its ‘parts’ in the same way as human minds constitute the infinite intellect of Spinoza’s God, that is, the knowledge that takes nature as its object. Of course, this kind of material God—for which Diderot cannot hide his enthusiasm even when he supposedly rejects it—is not the creator or cause of the universe, but its effect in the same way as the material soul is an effect of bodily organization. Just as internally diversified and complex matter, making up the human body, develops its own soul, which is not a spiritual entity distinct from the body that produced it but, as Diderot puts it, *portion du corps*,¹⁸ portion of the body, and therefore material, so properly organized matter, making up the universe as a whole, can develop its own mind too – and this kind of soul, the

- 19 Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, 1: 639.
- 20 Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 107.
- 21 See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 227.
- 22 Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 107.
- 23 François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, trans. Irving Brock, ed. Archibald Constable (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company, 1841), 347.
- 24 Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 107.

'world-soul' or 'universe-soul,' again will not be a spiritual entity distinct from the 'body' that produced it, that is, from the material universe, but, as Diderot puts it, *portion de l'univers*,¹⁹ portion of the universe, and therefore material. Thus, in Diderot's eyes, none of the two souls, neither the human soul nor the 'world-soul,' is a discrete substantial entity in itself, that is, an entity entering the body from without (human soul) or creating the universe outside itself (God), but rather a *constituent part* of the body itself or the universe – and, as such, it cannot exist without the body or universe. Just as without the body there is no human soul, so too without the world there is no 'world-soul' or, in other words, without the universe there is no God. As a 'portion of the universe,' understandably, the material God would be 'subject to vicissitudes,' he would 'grow old and die,'²⁰ and so forth.

This 'Mortal God' (to borrow the expression from Hobbes²¹) would be like a giant spider sitting in the center of its web with its threads extending throughout the entire universe, as the spider metaphor, introduced by Mlle de Lespinasse to illustrate the relationship between the 'meninges' (i.e., the membrane that envelops the brain) and the 'threads' (i.e., nerves), leading to the surface of her body, is elaborated upon by Bordeu.²² In the metaphor, the threads of the web that the spider draws out of its bowels and back again are a 'sensitive part' of itself. That is, the spider is not distinct from its web but continuous with it, just as the material God is not distinct from the universe but continuous with it. Just as the spider senses all that happens anywhere on the web, so God knows all that happens in the universe. The material God, in short, is like the 'meninges' of the world.

Diderot most likely owes the comparison between God and spider (and between the universe and the spider web) to the article on Spinoza in Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. In the first in the series of remarks accompanying the article, Bayle quotes a description from François Bernier's

Travels in the Mogul Empire of a Hindu deity who is said to have produced 'from his own substance' not only the souls

*but also generally everything material or corporeal in the universe... [T]his production is not formed simply after the manner of efficient causes, but as a spider which produces a web from its own navel, and withdraws it at pleasure. The Creation then ... is nothing more than an extraction or extension of the individual substance of God, of those filaments which He draws from his own bowels; and, in like manner, destruction is merely the recalling of that divine substance and filaments into Himself; so that the last day of the world ..., will be the general recalling of those filaments which God had before drawn forth from Himself.*²³

While the comparison between God and spider (and between the universe and the spider web) may well work for the Hindu deity, it is misleading with regard to Diderot's material God: the material universe may be said to be an 'extraction' or 'extension' of the Hindu deity, while in the case of Diderot's material God it is rather the reverse: the material God is an 'extraction' or 'extension' of the material universe.

In an important aspect, the material God of *D'Alembert's Dream* would fall short of the God of traditional theism. Admittedly, through his 'identity with all things in nature' the material God would be aware of 'all that happens' in the universe. In this respect, he would resemble Malebranche's Adam who, before the Fall, was aware of the slightest movement of the smallest particles of his blood and bodily humors, and was thus, with regard to his own body, as all-knowing as God is all-knowing with regard to the universe as a whole. Furthermore, through his memory, the material God would know 'all that has happened' in the past. About the future, however, he would only be able to form 'conjectures that were likely but liable to error';²⁴ in his knowledge of the future, then, he would resemble us, the ordinary

mortals, who are trying to guess what is going to happen inside ourselves, for example, at the tip of our foot or our hand.

Objects, Matter, Sleep, and Death

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Graham Harman

If we define ‘object’ as that which has a unified and autonomous life apart from its relations, accidents, qualities, and moments, we can see that objects remain unpopular in philosophy today. To some they sound a bit too much like old-fashioned substances, and in our time everyone is united in cursing and whipping those substances:

* Quentin Meillassoux has given a brilliant analysis, in *After Finitude*, of the ‘correlationist’ attitude in philosophy. The correlationist thinks that there is no human without world, nor world without human, but only a primal correlation or rapport between the two. Hence, the object has no autonomy for the correlationist. In franker terms, the object does not exist.

* For the empiricist, there is also no object, since there are only bundles of discrete qualities. The unified object is a fiction produced by customary conjunction in the habits of the human mind. There are no objects for empiricism.

* What about materialists? They might seem to be the most object-friendly of all thinkers. But they are not. On the contrary, average materialists are reducers. They start their work by exterminating all large- and medium-sized entities, and ultimately find reality only in physical microparticles such as quarks and electrons, and possibly more exotic ones called strings. And even if one or more of these particles turns out to be the final layer of the cosmos, it will still not give us the reality we need. As Bertrand Russell admits in *The Analysis of Matter*, the entities of physics are purely relational. They give us spatio-temporal co-ordinates and tangible properties that can be measured, but all these features have meaning only in *relation* to other things. What does the relating? It would be autonomous *objects* that do the relating. But there are no objects in materialism.

* Bruno Latour provides the most democratic philosophy of actors that one could imagine. Ignoring the old distinction between substance and aggregate, he says that electrons, humans, tigers, apricots,

armies, square circles, and bald kings of France are all *actors* to an equal degree. This is very close to an object-oriented philosophy. But rather than give objects their full independence, he defines them in terms of their *relations*. As he puts it, an actor is no more than what it ‘transforms, modifies, perturbs, and creates.’ An actor *is* what an actor *does*. But if objects are autonomous, then they must be more than actors. Hence there are no objects in Latour’s actor-network theory, at least not the kind we are looking for.

* Finally, it is popular these days to say that the world is a continuum, a primal dynamic flux, broken into pieces only by the needs of human praxis, or by functional relations of some other sort. I do not agree. I hold that the world itself is *quantized*, broken into discrete chunks, even if they are stranger chunks than the old-fashioned substances of yesterday. To see this, let’s look briefly at a philosopher who has nothing to do with panpsychism at all: Martin Heidegger.

1/ All relations are on the same footing

Heidegger is most famous for asking the question of the meaning of being. His admirers seem to think this question is deeper than any specific answer, while his enemies hold the question to be so vague and empty that no progress can ever be made. Both are wrong. Heidegger *does* answer the question of the meaning of being, in his famous tool-analysis in *Being and Time*. The story is well-known, so there is no reason to repeat it in detail. While Husserl’s phenomenology describes things in terms of their appearance to consciousness, Heidegger notes that things primarily *do not* appear in consciousness. Instead, they withdraw from view into invisible usefulness. The floor in this room, the oxygen in the air, the heart and kidneys that keep us alive, are generally hidden unless and until they malfunction.

In the usual, lazy misreading, this is enough to make Heidegger a ‘pragmatist.’ Invisible background practice comes first;

visible conscious and theoretical awareness comes later. But this interpretation is superficial. For it is not really a question of visibility and invisibility for humans, but of the transformation of a thing's reality. When I look at or theorize about a hammer, oxygen, floor, or bodily organs, my access to these things is a mere caricature. It oversimplifies the dark and concealed reality of these objects themselves, and can give at best a *partial* description of the subterranean hammer whose properties can never be exhaustively known. However, human *praxis* does exactly the same thing! By using the hammer, I have no more direct access to it than when I think about it or look at it. On the contrary—*praxis* is even more *stupid* than theory, distorting and oversimplifying the reality of a thing even more than theory does. Heidegger is no pragmatist.

Yet there is a further step that Heidegger never took, though he ought to have done so, and it builds an unexpected road from Heidegger to a sort of panpsychist position. If theory and *praxis* both distort, caricature, or transform the hidden reality of things, then the same must be true of *any relation whatever*. When fire burns cotton, does it have access to the color or smell that we humans are able to detect in it? Inanimate objects do not make direct contact with one another any more than we do with them. The distortions that arise from relation are not the special burden or flaw of the human or animal psyche, but spring from any relationality at all. Inanimate objects are perhaps even more stupid than we are in reducing the richness of things to a small number of traits.

In other words, *all relations are on the same footing*. This strikes at the real problem with philosophy since Kant. The problem does not lie in the endless dispute over whether there are real things-in-themselves beyond human access. No, the problem is that whether one believes in the *Ding an sich* or not, in either case it is this sole gap or non-gap between human and world that is taken to be fundamental. One of Latour's

great achievements is to save us from this predicament, by allowing that the relation between paint and a house, or rain and desert sand, are negotiations or translations no less than are the relations between a scientist and the world. In any case, we now find a global dualism between the reality of objects and their more or less distorted or translated images for other objects. Human theory and *praxis* are closely associated with the latter half of this dualism, and this already brings us to the verge of panpsychism. Either psyche extends down into the lowest regions of being, or else psyche as we know it is built out of something more primitive that explains the workings of relation.

2/ Intentional Objects

In establishing a region of tool-being deeper than all human access, Heidegger criticized his teacher Husserl for reducing the world to its purely phenomenal character. The point is fair enough, but it misses what is most important about Husserl. Namely, Husserl's most important discovery is the *intentional* object. Even in the claustrophobic phenomenal world he creates, an amazing drama unfolds between objects and their qualities. Indeed, perhaps only *because* of Husserl's imprisonment in the narrow phenomenal sphere does he feel the desperate need to look for a new fissure or rift in this sphere itself.

Franz Brentano revived the medieval discussion of intentionality and gave it this form—every mental act has an object, whether it be thinking, wishing, judging, or acts of love and hate. All of these are directed toward some object immanent in the mind. Initially, there was no attempt to address the question of the status of objects *outside* the mind. This theme was raised by Brentano's brilliant Polish student Kazimierz Twardowski, who draws a distinction between the *object* outside the mind and the *content* through which it appears immanently within the mind. By doing so he awakened the thinking of the young Husserl, who viewed Twardowski as both inspiration

and rival throughout the 1890's, referring to him sometimes with admiration and at other times with misleading contempt.

Everyone usually focuses on only one result of Husserl's engagement with Twardowski. Namely, Husserl rejects Twardowski's objects of the outer world, and veers more and more toward his well-known idealism within the phenomenological sphere. But this is only half of the story, and not the most interesting half. While it is true that Husserl stays within the phenomenal kingdom, he also preserves the object—but places both object and content *within the phenomenal*. Husserl creates a new dualism of intentional object and intentional content. And this has surprising consequences for metaphysics.

This is well-known, but usually forgotten. Insofar as empiricism thinks that objects are just bundles of qualities, Husserl is the anti-empiricist par excellence. I always see a tree from a certain angle and distance, at a certain time of day, in some utterly specific mood. Yet all of these details are overdeterminations of the tree. The tree as an *intentional* object is not a real object growing and nourishing itself in the outer world, but neither is it reducible to the exact details through which it is given at any moment to consciousness. While the real tree is always something *more* than whatever I see of it, the intentional tree is always something *less*. That is to say, I always see it much too specifically, encrusted with too much accidental color or from an accidental angle, or in some purely coincidental melancholic mood. Any of these details could be changed without changing the intentional tree, which always remains an enduring *unit* for as long as I recognize it as one. This is the meaning of an intentional object. It is not an empty *je ne sais quoi* projected onto unformed sense data, because in fact it precedes and shapes any such data. As Merleau-Ponty knew, the black of a pen and of an executioner's hood are different even if their wavelength of light is exactly the same. The qualities are *impregnated* with the objects to which they

are attached.

Along with the Heideggerian difference between the reality of things and their phenomenal apparitions, we have a new dualism *within* the phenomena—between unified phenomenal objects and their specific content. This is not some special or tragic feature of human and animal psychology. Instead, any intentional relation—and we have already seen that such relation is ubiquitous—will be equally haunted by a split between intentional objects and the accidentally specific ways in which they appear. There is no time here to establish this point in detail. But perhaps it is enough to see that objects may register numerous changes in their environment without those changes being *decisive*. The cotton can become five degrees hotter, but until the critical point is reached where it bursts into flame, it is still cotton rather than burning cotton.

3/ On The Inside

Now, let's consider another famous feature found in all intentionality—'immanent objectivity.'

According to Brentano, the object of any mental act is immanent in the mind, not really present in the outer world. But this shows a certain lack of imagination. After all, why should immanent objects be immanent precisely *in the mind*? A different option turns out to provide the true answer.

Husserl remarks that there is a certain paradox about intentionality, insofar as it is both one and two. On the one hand, my relation to the tree is a single unified whole. I can reflect upon it later as one thing, and other people can reflect upon it as well, if for some unknown reason they should choose to analyze my psychic life. In fact, my relation with the tree is a new object in its own right, even if it does not endure for long and consists of no

physical matter. I call it an *object* because it is a unified reality not exhausted by any relation to it from the outside. But at the same time intentionality is also two, not just one. For I never fuse homogeneously into the tree in a blinding flash of light. The tree always remains separate from me, standing over against me. Moreover, this twofold is also *asymmetrical*, since here the *real* me encounters a merely *phenomenal* or *intentional* tree. When by contrast the real tree encounters the phenomenal caricature of me, as it must in all cases when it comes into contact with me, this must result in a different but closely related object. And we now see that such spaces are always found on the *interior* of another object. The twofold intentional relation between me and the tree is located *inside* the unified object that the tree and I form. It is the hollow, molten, inner core of objects where all intentional relation occurs. Against the usual model of human intelligence as a critical, transcendent, liberated force, the mind is more like a burrowing animal digging deeper or laterally or upward through the interiors of things.

Furthermore, the view stated earlier that no two things can touch directly is reminiscent of two moments in the history of philosophy. First, the Islamic and French *occasionalists* held that no two things can touch except through God. Second, Humean *skepticism* held that no two things are linked except through the habits or customary conjunctions linked in the mind. What both positions have in common is a basic hypocrisy. While saying that nothing is truly linked to anything else, these positions must invoke a *deus ex machina* or *mens ex machina* that will form an exception to the rule. One privileged entity is allowed to form links where others cannot. Against this notion, I propose the more democratic solution of a local occasionalism, in which *every entity that exists* must somehow be equipped to serve as a medium of contact between two others. And as we have seen, the one place where two objects can always touch is on the *interior* of another. It is here

that the causal mechanisms of the world must unfold.

4/ Polypsychism, Not Panpsychism

Now, this may sound like a strange panpsychist alternative to the scientific world-view. But what is most remarkable is the way in which it sets a *limit* to panpsychism. The panpsychist view, namely, is that anything that exists must also perceive. But the view I have suggested is that anything that *relates* must perceive. Only by becoming a piece of a larger object, only by entering into the interior of a larger one, does an entity have anything like a psyche. This means that entities have psyches accidentally, not in their own right. For our model allows for entities to exist apart from all relations. This makes it not just conceivable, but also necessary, that there be entities at any moment that are at the very top of their chains of parts, so that they relate to nothing further. For various reasons it is good to think of an infinite regress downward in the world, with no tiniest layer of material microparticle bringing an end to the chain of beings. But the same does not hold in reverse. The idea of a universe as a whole actually seems like a fruitless abstraction, and there is some autonomy for the various different parts of the cosmos, all of which require *work* to be interwoven together, which proves that they are not already interwoven.

Imagine an ocean without a bottom, but with a turbulent surface where certain drops of water have neighbors below but none above. This is the model of the world that has resulted from our previous discussion. The name for an object that exists without relating, exists without perceiving, is a *sleeping* entity, or a *dormant* one, to use the lovely term our language has stolen from the French. Dormant objects are those which are real, but currently without psyche. Each night we make ourselves as dormant as we can, stripping away the accidental accretions of the day and gathering ourselves once more in the essential life where we

are untouched by external relations. Death, by contrast, is nothing like sleep. Death is a subversion from below, a corruption by means of failing parts, when vital components fail in such a way that they can no longer be refreshed or replaced.

* A longer version of the argument I present here can be found in my essay 'Chronolibidinal Reading: Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis,' Living On: Of Martin Hägglund, Special Issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 9.1 (Spring 2009): 1-43.

There is No Death Drive*

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Martin Hägglund

¹ See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), ed. J. Strachey, vol. 18, 8. All page references to Freud refer to the Standard Edition, with the number of the volume followed by the page number.

² Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 62.

The death drive has often been regarded as a radical element in Freud's thought, which calls into question the pleasure principle and accounts for how the psyche can be driven toward trauma and destruction. In contrast, I will argue that there is nothing radical about Freud's notion of the death drive. Although his rhetoric holds out that the death drive is 'beyond' the pleasure principle, Freud's own reasoning shows that they are based on exactly the same axiom, which postulates that the aim of the drive is complete repose. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* does indeed provide resources to question this axiom, but in order to capitalize on these resources one cannot adhere to Freud's notion of the death drive. Rather than the death drive, I contend that it is the *drive for survival* that calls into question the pleasure principle. Freud himself does not develop the notion of a constitutive drive for survival. Nevertheless, I will demonstrate that it holds the key to the problems he encounters in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and undermines his dualistic opposition between the life drive and the death drive.

The life drive constantly gives rise to a tension that Freud describes in terms of excitation (*Erregung*). Without excitation there would be no psychic activity, nothing that drove us to think, to feel, or to act. To experience something is ultimately a question of channeling excitation in one direction or another—of 'binding' its energy to something other than itself. This binding is not an external restriction but is indispensable for the being of libido as such: without binding there would be no pathways and no possible discharge for desire. All forms of experience thus answer to different forms of libidinal bonds. The life drive relentlessly generates more tension, which prevents the organism from coming to rest and forces it to 'bind' its energy anew. These bonds can never completely relieve the libidinal charge and always presuppose the risk of being broken.

To desire is by definition to *not* be self-sufficient, since there can be no desire

without a temporal difference that separates oneself from the object of desire. This temporal difference constitutes both the possibility of binding and the impossibility of any final bonding.

We thus encounter the double bind at the heart of the desire for mortal life. If one is bound to mortal life, the positive can never be released from the negative. Any mortal bond is a double bind, since whatever is *desirable* cannot be dissociated from the *undesirable* fact that it will be lost. This double bind has traditionally been interpreted as a negative state of being that we desire to transcend. Accordingly, Freud argues that the libidinal bonds that restrict our desire are charged with 'unpleasure' and that proper pleasure requires a complete discharge of tension. The ultimate goal of the pleasure principle would be to achieve 'complete stability' (18:8) by discharging the tension that is generated by the life drive.¹

By the same token, however, it is clear that what Freud calls the pleasure principle is inseparable from what he calls the death drive. For Freud, to be alive is by definition an experience of 'unpleasure,' since life is driven by an excitation that prevents the organism from coming to rest and compels it to survive in a state of tension. The aim of the pleasure principle, however, is to discharge the tension of life in favor of a complete release that would allow the organism to rest in peace. The aim of the pleasure principle is thus inseparable from the aim of what Freud calls the death drive. The death drive seeks to restore the living organism to a supposed primordial state of total equilibrium, which is exactly the aim of the pleasure principle. As Freud himself points out, the pleasure principle operates in accordance with 'the most universal endeavor of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence of the inorganic world'², which is to say that it operates in accordance with the death drive.

It follows the death drive cannot explain the phenomena that call into question the pleasure principle and that are the theme

3 The upshot of this argument is that one must develop a conception of pleasure that is not based on the axiom that an increase of tension is unpleasurable and a decrease of tension is pleasurable. As Freud points out in 'The Economic Problem of Masochism,' if we adopt the former axiom the pleasure principle 'would be entirely in the service of the death drives, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state' (19:160). However, Freud himself goes on to argue that 'such a view cannot be correct' since 'it cannot be doubted that there are pleasurable tensions and unpleasurable relaxations of tension' (19:160). Pleasure and unpleasure are therefore not a matter of quantitative relations whose ideal point would be the elimination of tension in complete equilibrium. Rather, Freud speculates that pleasure is a matter of 'the rhythm, the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus' (19:160). The same line of thought can be found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud suggests that the experience of pleasure depends on 'the amount of increase or diminution in the quantity of excitation in a given period of time' (18:8, cf. 63). Following these remarks, I seek to develop a temporalized conception of pleasure, where pleasure is not oriented toward absolute repose. If pleasure is a matter of rhythm and periodicity it depends on an interval of time, which divides the very experience of presence from its inception and entails that unpleasure is intrinsic to pleasure as such. See Häggglund, 'Chronolibidinal Reading.'

4 In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), Cathy Caruth links the experience of trauma to the problem of survival in a perceptive reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. However, Caruth does not develop the notion of a drive for survival and does not call into question Freud's notion of the death drive.

of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. These phenomena comprise the compulsion to repeat traumatic events, as well as masochistic self-destruction and sadistic aggression. Their common denominator is that they contradict the pleasure principle by not seeking to reduce tension. On the contrary, the experience of pain (whether traumatic, masochistic, or sadistic) increases tension, so the compulsion to repeat or provoke painful experiences cannot be explained by a principle that dictates that we seek to eliminate tension. Hence, it cannot be explained by the death drive. If the compulsion to repeat or provoke pain calls into question the pleasure principle it necessarily calls into question the death drive, since the latter two are based on the same axiom. This logical fact undermines the very reason for introducing the death drive in the first place. If the pleasure principle and the death drive are based on the same axiom, the death drive cannot account for what is 'beyond the pleasure principle.'³

Consequently, Freud's own examples show that his theory of the death drive is untenable. Freud introduces the death drive in order to account for the compulsion to repeat that is evident in the nightmares suffered by survivors of trauma. These nightmares call into question the pleasure principle by being driven toward the repetition of events that are charged with unpleasure. If this repetition was ruled by the death drive, its goal would be to eliminate the bonds to the traumatic event and to extinguish the organism that has to endure unpleasure. However, the repetition compulsion has a quite contrary function. It is driven by the desire to *live on* despite the unpleasure that is inherent in survival and seeks to cope with what has happened by establishing a bond to the traumatic event.⁴

In Freud's economical model for the psyche, a trauma is defined by being too *much*. In the event, the mental apparatus is flooded with stimulus that it cannot master. Something happens so brutally and so fast that it exceeds our capacity to experience it

and to feel its impact. The time factor here is crucial. On the one hand, the traumatic event is something that happens *too soon*, since it happens too unexpectedly to be fully comprehended in the event. On the other hand, the traumatic event is something that happens *too late*, since the event is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, as in nightmares or intrusive memories. The experience of trauma is therefore both deferred and delayed: it exposes the psyche to the force of a temporality that it cannot control.

The repetition compulsion is a response to the inherent deferral and delay in the experience of trauma. In the traumatic event, it is impossible to bind the stimulus that breaches the psyche, in the sense that one cannot assimilate what happens to oneself. The return to the event in nightmares or flashbacks is an attempt to make up for this temporal lag: to 'bind' the stimulus of the traumatic event into an experience that can be processed and understood. The response to trauma is primarily about 'the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus that have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can be disposed of' (18:30). This function of binding 'must be accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can even begin' (18:32). Consequently, Freud admits that the necessity of binding is 'independent of and seems to be more primitive than the purpose of gaining pleasure and avoiding unpleasure' (18:32).

The binding of excitation is thus *not* a secondary process that supervenes upon the pleasure principle. On the contrary, the binding of excitation and the drive for survival is primary. Far from seeking the peace of annihilation, the repetition compulsion testifies to a primordial drive for survival. If one were not driven to survive there would be no reason to try to cope with what has happened and to maintain libidinal bonds.

The drive for survival can also be seen to dictate the repetition compulsion in Freud's second example: the famous story

of the game played by his grandson Ernst. Freud reads the game as a response to the experience of being attached to an other who abandons oneself. When his mother leaves him for a few hours, Ernst does not cry or complain, despite his great attachment to his mother. His feelings before the experience of abandonment are rather displaced to the game he plays with his toys. Ernst throws away his toys while uttering a 'long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o', accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction' (18:14). In Freud's interpretation, the o-o-o-o is an abbreviation of the German word *fort*, so that the game consists in playing 'gone' with the toys. The experience of the mother's disappearance is restaged in relation to the toys that are made to disappear. Sometimes a toy that has been *fort* is pulled back and greeted with a joyful *da* ('there'), but Freud emphasizes that the act of playing *fort* is often 'staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety' (18:16).

The question, then, is why the child is driven to repeat the distressing experience of the mother's disappearance. Freud's answer is that the game allows the child to transform his *passive* dependence on a mutable other—his helpless exposure to the possible departure of the mother—into an *active* choice. Rather than being powerless to prevent a loss that he fears, the child posits himself as willing the disappearance of the mother. When throwing away the toy he in effect says: 'All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself' (18:16).

The repetition compulsion here reveals a drive toward aggression and vengeance, but it has nothing to do with a death drive. Freud's examples show how the psyche can be driven to repeat destructive experiences, but they do not show that the drive is oriented toward the absolute quietude of death. Both the traumatic nightmares and the child's game testify to a drive for survival. In the case of the nightmares, it is a matter of trying to live on by processing

what has happened to oneself, and in the case of the child's game it is a matter of trying to come to terms with the experience of being dependent on an other who may be lost. However adequate or inadequate, successful or unsuccessful, these strategies of survival arise in response to the experience of temporal finitude and are driven by a desire to live on as finite. Even when the desire for a finite being is negated (as when the child stages a negation of the mutable mother), the negation itself testifies to a prior attachment and is performed in order to *enable the child to survive beyond the loss of the mother*.

To be clear, my refutation of Freud's notion of the death drive does not seek to rehabilitate a more idealistic account of human nature. The point is not that self-destruction, aggression, or other negative phenomena are derivative in relation to a positive affirmation of life. On the contrary, I argue that the drive for survival accounts for *both* the impetus to preserve *and* the impetus to destroy, so any dualistic opposition between a life drive and a death drive is untenable. Without the drive for survival there would be no compassion and love (since one would not be committed to anything) but there would also be no resentment and hate (since one would not be threatened by anything). The crucial point, then, is that affectivity in general presupposes the *investment* in survival. If one is not invested in survival—be it of oneself or another—one does not care about what happens. And if one does not care about what happens one is neither affected nor susceptible to any affective response.

Consequently, I am not arguing that it is impossible to desire death, but that the desire for death presupposes the investment in survival. Even the most suicidal desire to end all survival presupposes such an investment, for at least two reasons. First, if one were not invested in survival one would not experience any suffering that could motivate suicide, since one would not care about what *has happened or is happening*

5 Derrida, 'Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul,' trans. P. Kamuf, in *Without Alibi*, ed. P. Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 276. One should note that Derrida himself sometimes invokes the notion of the death drive with apparent approval. I argue, however, that insofar as Derrida aligns his arguments with the logic of the death drive he is mistaken to do so. Rather, Derrida's deconstructive reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, most notably in *The Post Card*, should be understood in terms of the logic of survival. See Hägglund, 'Chronolibidinal Reading,' in particular 20-25, 33-36.

6 For a detailed analysis of how the structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time and allows one to account for the synthesis of time without grounding it in a nontemporal unity, see Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford UP 2008), chapters 1 and 2.

7 When Derrida asserts that 'deconstruction is always on the side of the yes, of the affirmation of life' (*Apprendre à vivre enfin* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), 54), he is thus not advocating that we should become healthy, affirmative beings. The unconditional affirmation of survival is not something that can cure us of the fear of death or the pain of loss. On the contrary, it makes us susceptible to fear and pain from the first inception. Before any act of will one has necessarily affirmed the coming of the unpredictable, but the response to the coming and the response of the coming are never given in advance. One may come to negate what one wanted to affirm and what comes may negate the coming that one affirmed.

to oneself. Second, if one were not invested in survival one would not care to end all survival, since one would not care about what *will happen* to oneself. The investment in survival is not only the source of all joy in life but also the source of all suffering in life. The response to the condition of survival can therefore not be given in advance and may be resentful just as well as passionate.

My argument here can be described as a *deconstruction* of psychoanalysis. In particular, I seek to develop Derrida's suggestion that one must think the problem of the drive proceeding from the unconditional affirmation of survival, which he describes as 'the originary affirmation *from which*, and thus *beyond which* the death drive and the power, cruelty, and sovereignty drives determine themselves as 'beyond' the principles.'⁶ While Derrida does not elaborate this idea of a constitutive drive for survival, his work offers powerful resources to think life as survival and the desire for life as a desire for survival. Indeed, every moment of life is a matter of survival because it depends on what Derrida calls the structure of the trace. The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself*. Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace enables the past to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The trace is thus the minimal condition for life to resist death in a movement of survival. The trace can only live on, however, by being left for a future that may erase it. The tracing of time is the minimal protection of life, but it also attacks life from the first inception, since it breaches the integrity of any moment and makes everything susceptible to annihilation.⁷

Life can thus only be given through the movement of survival, which takes the time to live by postponing death. The unconditional 'yes' to such finitude does not oblige one to accept whatever happens; it only marks the exposure to what happens as an

unconditional condition of life. Whatever we do, we have always already said 'yes' to the coming of the future, since without it nothing could happen. But for the same reason, every affirmation is essentially compromised and haunted by negation, since the coming of the future also entails all the threats to which one may want to say 'no.'

The double bind of temporal finitude is therefore intrinsic to the drive for survival as such. On the one hand, to survive is to keep the memory of a past and thus to resist forgetting. On the other hand, to survive is to live on in a future that separates itself from the past and opens it to being forgotten. I can only protect my past self by exposing it to the coming of a future self that may erase it, but which also gives it the chance to live on.

The unconditional affirmation of survival allows us to read the so-called desire for immortality against itself. The desire to live on after death is not a desire for immortality, since to live on is to survive as a temporal being. The desire for survival cannot aim at transcending time, since temporality is intrinsic to the state of being that is desired. There is thus an internal contradiction in the purported desire for immortality. If one did not affirm mortal life there would be no desire to save anything from death, since only mortal life can be threatened by death. Thus, without the affirmation of mortal life there would be no fear of death and no desire to live on. But for the same reason, the prospect of immortality cannot even hypothetically appease the fear of death or satisfy the desire to live on. Rather than redeeming death, the state of immortality would bring about death, since it would put an end to mortal life.

Accordingly, a deconstructive thinking of desire does not only deny the existence of immortality; it also seeks to demonstrate that the so-called desire for immortality dissimulates a desire for survival that precedes it and contradicts it from within. The fundamental problem of desire is not that mortal life cannot answer to the immortality we

8 See Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. J-A Miller, trans. B. Fink, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 111.

desire, in accordance with Lacan's formula That's not it.⁵ Rather, the fundamental problem of desire is that This is it: that mortal life is the condition for everything we desire and everything we fear. The double bind is irreducible because it is inherent in the movement of survival as such. To live is necessarily to affirm survival, since it gives the possibility to live on in the first place. But to live is also to fear survival, since it entails that one may always die or be left to mourn the death of the beloved. A deconstructive thinking of desire seeks to develop a framework for thinking this double bind and thereby open a new way of reading the dramas of desire as they are staged in philosophy, literature, and, indeed, in life itself.

'The Material Will of the People'

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Peter Hallward

* A longer version of this piece appears in *Radical Philosophy* 155 (May/June 2009): 17–29.

By 'will of the people' I mean a deliberate, emancipatory and inclusive process of collective self-determination. Like any kind of will, its exercise is voluntary and autonomous, a matter of practical freedom; like any form of collective action, it involves assembly and organisation. Recent examples of the sort of popular will that I have in mind include the determination, assembled by South Africa's United Democratic Front, to overthrow an apartheid based on culture and race, or the mobilisation of Haiti's Lavalas to confront an apartheid based on privilege and class. Conditioned by the specific strategic constraints that structure a particular situation, such mobilisations test the truth expressed in the old cliché, 'where there's a will there's a way.' Or to adapt Antonio Machado's less prosaic phrase, taken up as a motto by Paulo Freire: they assume that 'there is no way, we make the way by walking it.'

To say that we make the way by walking it is to resist the power of the historical, cultural or socio-economic terrain to determine our way. It is to insist that in an emancipatory political sequence what is 'determinant in the first instance' is the will of the people to prescribe, through the terrain that confronts them, the course of their own history. It is to privilege, over the complexity of the terrain and the forms of knowledge and authority that govern behaviour 'adapted' to it, the purposeful will of the people to take and retain their place as the 'authors and actors of their own drama.'

To say that we make our way by walking it is not to pretend, however, that we invent the ground we traverse. It is not to suppose that a will creates itself and the conditions of its exercise abruptly or ex nihilo. It is not to assume that the 'real movement which abolishes the existing state of things' proceeds through empty or indeterminate space. It is not to disregard the obstacles or opportunities that characterise a particular terrain, or to deny their ability to influence the forging of a way. Instead it is to remember, after Sartre, that obstacles appear as such in the light of a project to climb past

them. It is to remember, after Marx, that we make our own history, without choosing the conditions of its making. It is to conceive of terrain and way through a dialectic which, connecting both objective and subjective forms of determination, is oriented by the primacy of the latter.

Affirmation of such relational primacy informs what might be called a 'dialectical voluntarism'. A dialectical voluntarist assumes that collective self-determination – more than an assessment of what seems feasible or appropriate – is the animating principle of political action. Dialectical voluntarists have confidence in the will of the people to the degree that they think each term through the other: 'will' in terms of assembly, deliberation and determination, and 'people' in terms of an exercise of collective volition.

In a European context, the optimism characteristic of such an approach is still emphatic in Gramsci (who seeks 'to put the 'will', which in the last analysis equals practical or political activity, at the base of philosophy') and in the early writings of Lukács (for whom 'decision', 'subjective will' and 'free action' have strategic precedence over the apparent 'facts' of a situation). Comparable priorities also orient the political writings of a few more recent philosophers, like Beauvoir, Sartre and Badiou. Obvious differences aside, what these thinkers have in common is an emphasis on the practical primacy of self-determination and self-emancipation. However constrained your situation you are always free, as Sartre liked to say, 'to make something of what is made of you.'

Overall, however, it is difficult to think of a canonical notion more roundly condemned, in recent 'Western' philosophy, than the notion of will, to say nothing of that general will so widely condemned as a precursor of tyranny and totalitarian terror. Pending a more robust philosophical defence, contemporary critical theorists tend to dismiss the notion of will as a matter of delusion or deviation. But since it amounts to little

more than a perverse appropriation of more fundamental forms of revolutionary determination, there is no reason to accept fascist exaltation of an ‘awakening’ or ‘triumph of the will’ as the last word on the subject. The true innovators in the modern development of a voluntarist philosophy are Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, and the general principles of such a philosophy are most easily recognised in the praxis of Rousseau’s Jacobin followers.

Of course, in the movement from Rousseau to Marx, via Kant and Hegel, the category of a popular or general will expands from the anachronistic idealisation of a small homogeneous community towards an anticipation of humanity as a whole. Kant’s abstract universalisation makes too sharp a distinction between determination of the will and its realisation, between determination in its subjective and objective senses; Hegel goes too far in the other direction. I will assume here that the most fruitful way to begin thinking a dialectical voluntarism that might eventually draw on aspects of both Kant, Hegel and Marx is to start with a return to Rousseau and the Jacobins, supplemented by reference to more recent interventions that might be described in roughly neo-Jacobin terms. Unlike Rousseau or Hegel, however, my concern here is not with a community conceived as a socially or ethically integrated unit, one that finds its natural horizon in the nation-state, so much as with the people who participate in the active willing of a general or generalisable will as such. Such a will is at work in the mobilisation of any emancipatory collective force – a national liberation struggle, a movement for social justice, an empowering political or economic association, and so on – which strives to formulate, assert and sustain a fully common (and thus fully inclusive and egalitarian) interest.

On this basis we might briefly enumerate, along broadly neo-Jacobin or proto-communist lines, some of the characteristic features of emancipatory political will:

1/

The *will* of the people commands, by definition, voluntary and autonomous action. Unlike involuntary or reflex-like responses, if it exists then will initiates action through free, rational deliberation. As Rousseau puts it, the fundamental ‘principle of any action lies in the will of a free being; there is no higher or deeper source [...]. Without will there is no freedom, no self-determination, no “moral causality.”’ Robespierre soon drew the most basic political implication when he realised that when people will or ‘want to be free they will be.’ Abbé Sieyès anticipated the point, on the eve of 1789: ‘every man has an inherent right to deliberate and will for himself’, and ‘either one wills freely or one is forced to will, there cannot be any middle position’. Outside voluntary self-legislation ‘there cannot be anything other than the empire of the strong over the weak and its odious consequences.’

An intentional freedom is not reducible to the mere faculty of free choice or *liberum arbitrium*. If we are to speak of the ‘will of the people’ we cannot restrict it (as Machiavelli and his followers do) to the passive expression of approval or consent. It is the process of actively willing or choosing that renders a particular course of action preferable to another. ‘Always engaged’, argues Sartre, freedom never ‘pre-exists its choice: we shall never apprehend ourselves except as a choice in the making.’ Augustine and then Duns Scotus already understood that ‘our will would not be will unless it were in our power.’ Descartes likewise recognised that ‘voluntary and free are the same thing’, and finds in the ‘indivisible’ and immeasurable freedom of the will our most fundamental resemblance to divinity. Kant (followed by Fichte) then radicalises this voluntarist approach when he defines the activity of willing as ‘causality through reason’ or ‘causality through freedom.’ For Kant, will achieves the practical liberation of reason from the constraints of experience and objective knowledge, and it is

the active willing which determines what is possible and what is right, and makes it so. As the French revolution will confirm, it is as willing or practical beings that ‘people have the quality or power of being the *cause* and [...] *author* of their own improvement.’ Those sceptical of political will, by contrast, assume that apparently voluntary commitments mask a more profound ignorance or devaluation of appetite (Hobbes), causality (Spinoza), context (Montesquieu), habit (Hume), tradition (Burke), history (Tocqueville), power (Nietzsche), the unconscious (Freud), convention (Wittgenstein), writing (Derrida), desire (Deleuze), drive (Žižek)...

2/

The will of the *people*, of course, involves collective action and direct participation. A democratic political will depends on the power and practice of inclusive assembly, the power to sustain a common commitment. The assertion of what Rousseau calls a general will is a matter of collective volition at every stage of its development. The inaugural ‘association is the most voluntary act in the world’, and to remain an active participant of the association ‘is to will what is in the common or general interest.’ Insofar (and only insofar) as they pursue this interest, each person ‘puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme control of the general will.’ Defined in this way, ‘the general will is always on the side most favourable to the public interest, that is to say, the most equitable, so that it is necessary merely to be just to be assured of following the general will.’

A general interest exists only if the will to pursue it is stronger than the distraction of particular interests. To say that a general will is ‘strong’ doesn’t mean that it stifles dissent or imposes uniformity. It means that in the process of negotiating differences between particular wills, the willing of the general interest eventually finds a way to prevail. There is an inclusive general

will insofar as those who initially oppose it correct their mistake and realise that ‘if my private opinion had prevailed I would have done something other than what I had willed’, i.e. something inconsistent with my ongoing participation in the general will. So long as it lasts, participation in a general will, be it that of a national movement, a political organisation, a social or economic association, a trade union, etc., always involves a resolve to abide by its eventual judgement, not as an immediate arbiter of right and wrong but as the process of collectively deliberating and *willing* what is right. Participation in a general will involves acceptance of the risk of finding yourself being, at any given moment, ‘wrong with the people rather than right without them.’ By the same token, it’s precisely insofar as it remains actively capable of seeking and willing the collective right that we can agree with Rousseau and Sieyès when they insist that, in the long run, a general will can neither err nor betray.

After Robespierre, Saint-Just summarises the whole Jacobin political project when he rejected ‘purely speculative’ or ‘intellectual’ conceptions of justice, as if ‘laws were the expression of taste rather than of the general will’. The only legitimate definition of the general will is ‘the material will of the people, its simultaneous will; its goal is to consecrate the active and not the passive interest of the greatest number of people.’

Mobilisation of the general will of the people must not be confused, then, with a merely putchist vanguardism. An abrupt appropriation of the instruments of government by a few ‘alchemists of revolution’ is no substitute for the deployment of popular power. In spite of obvious strategic differences, Lenin is no more tempted than Luxemburg to substitute a Blanquist conspiracy for ‘the people’s struggle for power’, via mobilisation of the ‘vast masses of the proletariat.’ It’s not a matter of imposing an external will or awareness upon an inert people, but of people working to clarify, concentrate and organise their own will.

Fanon makes much the same point, when he equates a national liberation movement with the inclusive and deliberate work of ‘the whole of the people’.

3/

The will of the people is thus a matter of material power and active empowerment, before it is a matter of representation, authority or legitimacy. What divides society is its response to popular self-empowerment. This is as much a Marxist as it is a Jacobin insight. Any social ‘transformation can only come about as the product of the – free – action of the proletariat’, notes Lukács, and ‘only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat possesses this ability to transform things.’ Such a praxis-oriented philosophy did not die out after the political setbacks of the 1920s. Sartre took up the same theme in the early 1950s (before Badiou in the 1970s): as far as politics is concerned a ‘class is never separable from the concrete will which animates it nor from the ends it pursues. The proletariat forms itself by its day-to-day action. It exists only by action. It *is* action. If it ceases to act, it decomposes.’

Will commands the initiation of action, not representation. An exercise in political will involves taking power, not receiving it, on the assumption that (as a matter of ‘reason’ or ‘natural right’) the people are always already entitled to take it. ‘The oppressed cannot enter the struggle as objects’, Freire notes, ‘in order *later* to become human beings.’ A similar impatience informs the strategic voluntarism of Che Guevara, who knew that it is pointless to wait ‘with folded arms’ for objective conditions to mature. Whoever waits for ‘power to fall into the people’s hands like a ripe fruit’ will never stop waiting. Those who lack confidence in the people, by contrast, recommend the virtues of patience. Between confidence in the people and confidence in historical progress, as Rousseau anticipated, there is a stark choice.

4/

Like any form of free or voluntary action, the will of the people is grounded in the practical sufficiency of its exercise. Will is no more a ‘substance’ or object of knowledge than the cogito variously reworked and affirmed by Kant, Fichte and Sartre. A ‘fundamental freedom’ or ‘practical exercise of reason’ proves itself through what it does and makes, rather than through what it is, has or knows. Freedom demonstrates and justifies itself through willing and acting, or else not at all. *We are free*, writes Beauvoir, but freedom ‘is only by making itself be.’ We are free insofar as ‘we will ourselves free,’ and we will ourselves free by crossing the threshold that separates passivity and ‘minority’ from volition and activity. We will ourselves free across the distance that our freedom puts between itself and a previous unfreedom. We are free as self-freeing.

5/

If it is to persist, a political association must be disciplined and ‘indivisible’ as a matter of course. Internal difference and debate within an organised association is one thing; factional divisions or schisms are another. Popular freedom persists as long as the people assert it. ‘In order that the social pact may not be an empty formula,’ as Rousseau’s notorious argument runs, ‘it tacitly includes the commitment, which alone can give force to the others, that anyone who refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the entire body; this means nothing else than that he will be forced to be free.’ Preservation of public freedom, in Robespierre’s arresting phrase, requires acknowledgement of the ‘despotism of truth’. Collective freedom will endure, in short, only so long as the people can defend themselves against division and deception.

‘Virtue’ is the name that Rousseau and the Jacobins gave to the practices required to defend a general will against deception

and division. Virtue in this generic sense need not take the form of an exclusive patriotism. To practice virtue is simply to privilege collective over particular interests, and to ensure that society is governed 'solely on the basis of the common interest. [...] Each person is virtuous when his private will conforms totally to the general will.' If then 'we wish the general will to be accomplished' we only need to encourage 'all the private wills to agree with it, or in other words [...]: make virtue reign.'

6/

The practical exercise of will only proceeds, as a matter of course, in the face of resistance. To will is always to continue to will, in the face of difficulty or constraint. To continue or not to continue – this is the essential choice at stake in any militant ethics. Either you will and do something, or you do not. Even as it discovers the variety of ways of doing or not-doing, these are the alternatives a political will must confront: yes or no, for or against, continue or stop, where 'to stop before the end is to perish.' If for the Jacobins of 1793 'terror' comes to figure as the complement to 'virtue', it is above all as a consequence of their determination to overcome the resistance of the privileged and their political protectors. Terror in the Jacobin (as opposed to Thermidorian) sense is the deployment of whatever force is required to overcome those particular interests that seek to undermine or disempower the collective interest. The reasons why the Jacobin terror continues to terrify our political establishment, in a way that the far more bloody repression of the 1871 Commune does not, has little to do with the actual amount of violence involved. From the perspective of what is already established, notes Saint-Just, 'that which produces the general good is always terrible.' The Jacobin terror was more defensive than aggressive, more a matter of restraining than of unleashing popular violence. 'Let us be terrible', Danton said, 'so that the people need not be.'

7/

By the same token, the practical exercise of will distinguishes itself from mere wish or fantasy through its capacity to initiate a process of genuine 'realisation'. After Fichte, Hegel complements the voluntarist trajectory initiated by Rousseau and Kant, and opens the door to Marx, when he identifies a free collective will – a will that wills and realises its own emancipation – as the animating principle of a concrete political association. Thus conceived, the will is nothing other than 'thinking translating itself into existence [...]. The activity of the will consists in cancelling and overcoming [*aufzuheben*] the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and in translating its ends from their subjective determination into an objective one.' After Hegel, Marx will expand the material dimension of such concrete determination, without ever abandoning the idea that what is ultimately determinant are not given economic or historical constraints but free human action – the ability of 'each single individual' to prescribe their own ends and make their own history.

8/

Realisation of the will of (the) people is oriented towards the universalisation of its consequences. As Beauvoir understood better than Sartre, I can only will my own freedom by willing the freedom of all; the only subject that can sustain the work of unending self-emancipation is *the* people as such, humanity as a whole. Kant, Hegel and Marx take some of the steps required to move from Rousseau's parochial conception of a people to its universal affirmation, but the outcome was again anticipated by Jacobin practice: 'the country of a free people is open to all the people on earth', and the only 'legitimate sovereign of the earth is the human race [...]. The interest, the will of the people, is that of humanity.'

9/

A final consequence follows from this insistence on the primacy of political will: voluntary servitude is in some ways more damaging than external domination. If the will is 'determinant in the first instance' then the most far-reaching forms of oppression involve the collusion of the oppressed. This is the point anticipated by Etienne La Boétie, and then radicalised in different ways by Du Bois, Fanon, and Aristide (and also Foucault, Deleuze, and Žižek...): in the long run it is the people who empower their oppressors, who can harm them 'only to the extent to which they are willing to put up with them.'

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