

Object-Oriented France: The Philosophy of Tristan Garcia

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The French philosopher and novelist Tristan Garcia was born in Toulouse in 1981. This makes him rather young to have written such an imaginative work of systematic philosophy as *Forme et objet*,¹ the latest entry in the MétaphysiqueS series at Presses universitaires de France. But this reference to Garcia's youthfulness is not a form of condescension: by publishing a complete system of philosophy in the grand style, he has already done what none of us in the older generation of speculative realists has done so far. His book is sophisticated, erudite, rigorous, imaginatively rich, and abundant in worldly wisdom—despite the author's conclusion that wisdom does not exist.

The quality and scope of *Forme et objet* took few observers by surprise, since Garcia has been treated as an emerging philosopher to watch across half a decade of Parisian oral tradition. But Garcia was not just the subject of rumor, being already well known to the French public as a writer of fiction. His debut novel, *La meilleure part des hommes*,² was awarded the 2008 Prix de Flore³ and has already appeared in English as *Hate: A Romance*.⁴ His follow-up novel, *Mémoires de la jungle*,⁵ made clever use of a chimpanzee narrator. Nor was Garcia only published as a novelist before last November: his philosophical study *L'Image*⁶ had already appeared when the author was just twenty-six, a year before he was crowned by the muses at the historic Café de Flore. And then in 2011, just months before the appearance of *Forme et objet*, Garcia published a widely distributed work entitled *Nous, animaux et humains*,⁷ with a focus on Jeremy Bentham's ideas about animals.

Given this prolific and versatile track record, an optimistic scenario might envisage the young Garcia as one of those combined literary/philosophical talents who appear intermittently in France across the centuries: Jean-Paul Sartre is merely the most famous recent case. While more time is needed to see how Garcia will channel his impressive mental energies, *Forme et objet* displays such breadth of insight that its author has a good chance to emerge as one of the leading philosophers of his generation. If we accept Aristotle's dictum that the peak mental age is fifty-one, then to read Garcia's massive book is to gain some idea of what European philosophy might look like in the futuristic-sounding 2030's.

The present article is confined to *Forme et objet*. At 486 pages, the work is obviously daunting in size. Indeed, it is even longer than it sounds, given that many of its early sections are printed in a smaller typeface to designate them as supplemental commentary to the main flow of the argument. But while the length of the book reportedly led to delays in French publication, and will probably slow the inevitable appearance of an English translation, this factor should not deter interested readers—much of it results from Garcia's teacherly writing style. Whereas Quentin Meillassoux's prose displays an arctic economy of means, Garcia's style is reminiscent of the repeated lessons of oral classroom proceedings. Rarely is the reader given fewer than three or four chances to master an idea before the author moves on to the next. In practice, the style feels welcoming rather than long-winded.

Otherwise, the structure of *Forme et objet* is surprisingly simple. There is a useful Introduction of less than twenty pages. Then comes Book I: *Formally*, running to approximately 135 pages. Here Garcia outlines the most basic features of a thing “no matter what it is,” or *n'importe quoi*, an everyday phrase that Garcia

¹ Tristan Garcia, *Forme et objet: Un traité des choses* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011).

² Tristan Garcia, *La meilleure part des hommes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

³ Excerpts from the ceremony can be viewed online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZtMkrP36Yc>

⁴ Tristan Garcia, *Hate: A Romance*, trans. M. Duvert & L. Stein (New York: Faber and Faber, 2010).

⁵ Tristan Garcia, *Mémoires de la jungle*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

⁶ Tristan Garcia, *L'Image*, (Neuilly, France: Atlande, 2007).

⁷ Tristan Garcia, *Nous, animaux et humains: Actualité de Jérémy Bentham*, (Paris: Bourin, 2011).

shapes into a technical term. This part of the book feels at times like a more amiable version of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, a parallel emphasized further by the threefold articulation of its theme: 1. Thing; 2. Thing and World; 3. Being and Understanding. This is followed by the much longer Book II: *Objectively*, totaling more than 300 pages. It contains sixteen essay-like meditations on specific *kinds* of objects—including time, animals, humans, history, gender, and death. Here each chapter rolls smoothly into the next, making this second part of the book feel more like a different work of Hegel: *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But these are merely analogies. Garcia is no Hegelian, even if the book contains a few dialectical flourishes that seem to reflect his early enthusiasm for the Frankfurt School. *Forme et objet* ends with a six-page Coda, followed by the usual page of acknowledgments. In what follows, I will briefly summarize each of these four parts of the book before ending with some more general remarks.

Before doing so, it will be useful to situate Garcia biographically (as much as I am able) and philosophically. Though Toulouse is his native city, his formative years were spent largely in Algeria, where his family has deep roots. During our sole private conversation, Garcia mentioned that his parents are professors of literature.⁸ As a student of philosophy, Garcia flourished so early that many of his current ideas date to his teenaged years: “There are sentences in *Forme et objet* that I wrote when I was seventeen,” he said in response to a question on that cold night on the Canal St.-Martin. I recalled that remark when reading his brilliant account, late in the book, of the central role of adolescence in contemporary culture. While many prodigies blow through their formal academic training without serious obstruction, Garcia's student memories are rich in tales of isolation and struggle, though equally rich in gratitude for a half-dozen or so exceptional teachers who provided the intellectual space he needed: Meillassoux and Alain Badiou are simply two of the most prominent figures on that list.

Though there are many points of agreement between Garcia's philosophical position and my own, he not only reached his position years before reading my work,⁹ he arrived along a rather different path: not through phenomenology, but via the Frankfurt School, which may be one of the reasons for his profound fascination with aesthetics. Garcia's cultural background is as broad as one could wish: he is no less informed about punk rock and European football leagues than about the spiritualist roots of Bergson's philosophy. Curious about everything and contemptuous towards nothing, Garcia can be expected to write insightfully on dozens of topics in the years to come. Given that his philosophy is so personally tantalizing in its agreements and disagreements with my own, and given the great internal richness of *Forme et objet* itself, the present review is no better than a first effort at coming to terms with the challenges posed by this minstrel from the rising generation. This is especially intriguing for older Generation X'ers like me, since confrontation with the younger generation is one of the many themes treated insightfully in Garcia's book.

1. Introduction

Garcia begins in defense of a so-called “flat ontology,” in which all things are equally things. While Roy Bhaskar¹⁰ used this term pejoratively to refer to anti-realist philosophies that flatten everything onto an epistemic plane of human access, Manuel DeLanda¹¹ (an admirer of Bhaskar) reversed it into the positive principle that all realities are equally realities. Similar notions can be found in the “absistence” of Alexius Meinong,¹² the “irreduction” of Bruno Latour,¹³ and my own critique¹⁴ of the undermining/overmining pair. Also noteworthy is Levi Bryant's use of the term “flat ontology” throughout *The Democracy of Objects*¹⁵ and his earlier essay “The Ontic Principle.”¹⁶ But for Garcia, flatness is only one face of the cosmos, and one that he ultimately declares to be rather impoverished. Even so, he always remains an advocate of a flat ontology. Insofar as everything is equally something, no matter what it is (*n'importe qui*), everything is equally a thing, equally solitary in its relation

⁸ Personal conversation, January 17, 2012.

⁹ Garcia reports that he first read my *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002) in approximately 2008, on Meillassoux's recommendation. But as early as 2006, Meillassoux had sent me an informal summary of Garcia's chief ideas.

¹⁰ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, (London: Routledge, 2008). On page 253, for instance, Bhaskar refers with contempt to “the flat undifferentiated ontology of empirical realism,” which is by no means the sort of flatness defended by DeLanda or Garcia.

¹¹ Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, (London: Continuum, 2002). See for instance page 58.

¹² Alexius Meinong, *On Assumptions*, trans. J. Heanue (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press 1983).

¹³ Bruno Latour, “Irreductions,” in *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. A. Sheridan & J. Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988).

¹⁴ Graham Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011).

¹⁵ Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Levi R. Bryant, “The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011).

with world. This is why his book abounds in those long lists of random, ontologically equivalent entities that Ian Bogost has playfully termed “Latour Litanies.”¹⁷ The first litany in Garcia’s book runs as follows: “We live in this world of things, where a cutting of acacia, a gene, a computer-generated image, a transplantable hand, a musical sample, a trademarked name, or a sexual service are comparable things.” (7) Yet Garcia is frankly dualistic; his flat ontology only lasts until page 159 and the end of Book I (entitled “Formally”), which deals entirely with things that are equally things. Thereafter Garcia turns his attention from things to *objects*, which are not flat in the least, but engage in hierarchical relations with one another.

In agreement with both DeLanda and the speculative realists, Garcia proclaims that his book “proposes to put to the test a thought *about things* rather than a thought *about our thought about things*.” (8) Just as ducklings are “imprinted” (9) after hatching and treat the first creature they see as their mother, philosophers are imprinted by the idea with which they begin. Hence, philosophies that begin with human access will never truly find their way back to things. This makes Garcia rather suspicious of twentieth century philosophy, since “the twentieth century—to which in some way this work proposes to bid adieu—has been a period of theorizing modes of access to things rather than things...” (9) Among other possible benefits of the philosophy of things that Garcia proposes, it is fully able to account for thought as a special variant of things, while the reverse is not possible. (10)

In Book I of *Forme et objet*, Garcia’s “things” are so flat, so de-determined, that he is forced to renounce some of the most basic features ascribed to things by most realists. As he tells us in his foreboding third footnote: “We will maintain that the solitude [of things] is less than unity, less than identity, and that it does not imply acceptance (any more than refusal) of the principle of non-contradiction.” (11) In a contemporary world cluttered with too many things, Garcia’s flat and formal plane provides us with some breathing room: “The formal plane of thought enables or re-enables us to cut short all accumulation—whether of knowing, experience, or action—by a simplicity, an impoverished surface...” (13) As Garcia says elsewhere in responding to a Deleuzian critic of the book, his starting point in flat ontology is designed to obstruct the claims of both analytic philosophy and Hegelianism: “Hence, this work seeks to protect each thing—real, imaginary, inconsistent, contradictory—both against Ockham’s Razor and against the *Aufhebung* or dialectical process.”¹⁸ Yet contrary to the equalizing spirit of many flat ontologies, “we will add to our *formal* ontology of the equal, an *objective* ontology of the unequal.” (13) But initially, Garcia joins all flat ontologists in holding that everything is irreducible: “this irreducibility, which we will term the ‘chance’ of each thing... also marks the refusal of a positive thought that reduces things exclusively to natural things, or social things, or historical things, etc.” (15) This irreducible “chance” of a thing emerges as an important technical term in the book, always paired with its inverted brother, the “price to pay” (*prix à payer*).

On pages 17-19, we find the only diagrams in the book. What they illustrate is that Garcia wishes to avoid two equally dangerous extremes. The first is the philosophy of substance, featuring the thing-in-itself as a mighty river fed by attributes as if by subordinate tributary streams. This model can be found in many of the classic thinkers of West and East alike. In it, “there is obviously a hierarchization between that which is dragged towards something other than itself, and this other which serves it as an ontological support while supporting its proper being.” (16) For Garcia, the second extreme worth avoiding is the philosophy of events: “One thus conceives trajectories of being, identified as events, facts, powers, intensities, or intentionality. These vectors of being come first, bearing and supporting being, displacing it, but without ever finding a stopping point, a buffer, an objective consistency.” (17) The first model gives us a thing too wrapped up in itself, too *compact*. This word “compact” (the French and the English are the same) is another technical term for Garcia. But if the “compact” model of things leads us to something *more* than things, the philosophy of events gives us *less* than things, by dissolving them into a play of vectors. Garcia’s alternative lies midway between these two extremes:

Being enters the thing, being comes out of it. And a thing is nothing other than the *difference* between the being that enters and the being that comes out. Thus, the circuit of being is never halted. In the thing, there is never the thing-in-itself. And the thing is never in-itself, but outside of itself. Nonetheless, being is not eventually “pollinated” by vectors: it possesses an objecting halting-point... (19)

¹⁷Ian Bogost, “Alien Phenomenology: Toward a Pragmatic Speculative Realism.” Plenary address at the annual conference of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts. Atlanta, GA, November 5-7, 2009. Bogost has also written an amusing web-based “Latour Litanizer” that randomly selects Wikipedia article topics to create Latour Litanies on demand. See http://www.bogost.com/blog/latour_litanizer.shtml

¹⁸Garcia, in his February 2012 response to Deleuze’s friend Jean-Clet Martin: <http://jeanclmartin.blog.fr/2012/02/16/la-ligne-de-flottaison-tristan-garcia-12803975/>

This single idea is the key to Garcia's book: the thing is neither a self-contained durable lump nor some sort of eventual flux. Instead, the thing is the *difference* between its various components and its relations with its environment. Or stated differently: "the price to pay for this disposition is a circulation of being that systematically distinguishes two senses of things: *that which is in the thing*, and *that in which the thing is*, or that which encompasses it and that which it encompasses," (19) translating *comprendre* here as "encompass."¹⁹ In a beautiful description of a piece of black slate, Garcia sums up the various minerals, qualities, and shapes that compose [*comprend*] it, and calls them "that which is in the thing," (20) noting that this tells us nothing about "that in which [the slate] is"—namely, all the various situations in which the black slate can be found. Instead, the slate is the difference between these two: the most characteristic principle of Garcia's philosophy.

2. Formally

Book One of *Forme et objet*, "Formally," is concerned with the formal equality of all things in a flat world. "Two questions mark the boundaries of reflection: of what is everything composed [*composé*], and: what do all things compose?" (27) Looking downward, we wish to know what everything is made of; looking upward, we want to know the ultimate result of the combination of all things. Here we must turn our attention to the thing *n'importe quoi*—no matter what it is. (30) Anything with finite qualities is obviously too specific to be relevant to global ontological questions. To an equal degree, something possessing all qualities (think of Whitehead's God)²⁰ would not be *n'importe quoi* either, since it would still be too definite, even if incredibly vast. The same holds for contradictions, since these all differ from each other. The square circle, the non-white black white, and the non-city city are all too distinct to count as the thing no matter what it is. The *n'importe quoi* must be devoid of all specific qualities, including contradictory ones. In one of the more intriguing points in his book, so reminiscent of Meinong, Garcia proclaims that "the 'no matter what it is' is neither a reality nor an abstract construction, nor both of these at once; the 'no matter what it is' is simply the plane of equality of that which is real, that which is possible, that which is inexistent, that which is past, that which is impossible, that which is true, that which is false, that which is bad." (39-40)

Since everything has two faces, it would be a grievous mistake to focus on just one of them at the expense of the other, as physicalism or materialism do when reducing the world to minuscule physical underpinnings. For scientific materialism, "it is either atoms, particles, or fields of force... which are the things." (47-48) Moreover, "these more-than-things are accompanied by less-than-things: for example, ideas or facts of consciousness are determined by the state of matter and are not autonomous things, but manifestations reduced to secondary effects of material processes..." (48) On this point, Garcia's position is in complete accord with my own critique of undermining and overmining.²¹ Where we disagree is that Garcia is deeply suspicious of the notion of substance, which I view as salvageable with a few needed changes, while Garcia sees this operation as hopeless: "A substance, in the history of philosophy, is the more-than-thing par excellence." (51) Another agreement between our positions is visible when Garcia claims (correctly, in my opinion) "that it is vain to distinguish between things which are material and those which are not." (52) Yet we also find an even more important disagreement, since for Garcia withdrawal cannot be the quality of a thing. Instead, the absence of a thing is simultaneous with it, embodied in all that is not it—the absence of the sculpture of a woman is to be found in the mold that appears at the same time as it, and thus withdrawal must be viewed as an "event" rather than as something pertaining to an object. For Garcia, nothing withdraws beyond access.

Since we must distinguish between "that which is something" and "that which something is," and since the former is identified with "no matter what it is" and the latter with "*not* no matter what it is," we can say that "everything is thus a milieu, a fragile link between 'no matter what it is' and '*not* no matter what it is.'" (62) And here we find Garcia's critique of the thing-in-itself: "A thing is never defined *en bloc*. We can affirm that a thing is this or that, but that does not suffice. It is still necessary to state precisely *that which is this thing*." (62) Stated differently, "something is not *in itself*: for that which is in the thing is not the thing, and that in which the thing is is not the thing." (62) And here Garcia and I, facing the same evidence, draw opposite conclusions. For me, the fact that nothing can be identified with either its components or its concrete location means that the thing must

¹⁹ Garcia's term *comprendre* might be translated at different times as "comprehend," "encompass," "comprise," "contain," or "be composed of." But Garcia is no panpsychist, and *comprendre* does not imply full-blown mental life when it refers in his book to inanimate objects.

²⁰ See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979).

²¹ See Graham Harman, "I Am Also of the Opinion That Materialism Must Be Destroyed." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 5 (2010): 772-790.

be something in-itself distinct from both of these. Yet for Garcia, to be in-itself would mean to be identified with just one of these two extreme terms, and hence the thing can only be the difference between them. Garcia is equally suspicious of the classical tendency to view “unity” as a property of the thing, since in his eyes unity is too relational a property to belong to things. (65) While specific things are situated determinately with respect to other things, we are still speaking here about the thing no matter what it is, and this can be viewed only in terms of solitude, which all things share: a human being, a hand, or a chair or all equally things insofar as they are *on their own*, not insofar as they are *one*. (64) A thing is alone, and relates only to the one thing that is not another thing: world. In a striking parallel to my own argument for a partial revival of occasionalism, Garcia tells us that “the things communicate only by their solitude: it is because everything is equally on its own in the world that things can be together, enmeshed in one another.” (67) Alone in their solitude, things all relate to world, which serves as a mediator allowing them to become mixed up in one another.

As we have seen, one reason that nothing can be in itself is because everything is in something else. For Garcia, “to be in something and to be something are equivalent.” (69) Stated more broadly, “being is thus the difference between the two aspects of each thing: that which is it, and that which it is.” (70) And even more vividly: “a thing is almost like a sack: there is that which one puts in the sack and that which remains outside the sack.” (70) But not *quite* like a sack, “since a thing is not a thin skin or film. Instead, a thing is comparable to a sack that is immaterial and without thickness: it is nothing other than the *difference* between that which is this thing and that which the thing is, between content and container.” (71) Nothing can be in-itself because everything is two selves at once. For example, we cannot say that our self is defined by our consciousness: “Everything *has* a self because nothing *is* in itself. The self is not the quality of that which is related to itself (which is conscious, for example) or which thinks itself related to itself. Nonetheless, for an entity called ‘conscious’ to be related to itself, it is necessary that this very relation should be another thing than the self to which it is related.” (71) Consciousness cannot be the self, precisely because it is other than that of which it is conscious. Nothing is able to grasp itself. The self is “the function by which being and composition [*compréhension*] are mutually excluded...” (72) The self is “the point of shadow of everything that projects some light...” (72)

The in-itself faces two opposite dangers: “For something to be in-itself is to be a self. Something which is a self flies out through one of its two sides... Stated differently, being in-itself is simply the possibility of a double failure.” (73) The in-itself can be termed *compact*: “There remains to us a means of thinking that which does not fully enter into the world, though without exiting from it. This means is what we call the compact.” (76) In a sense, the compact is the opposite of the world. For in the case of the world, everything enters it and it enters nothing; as for the compact, it enters the world (since it is something, after all) while nothing enters it. (77) The compact marks the presence of the impossible in the world. (78) It is not impossible, but possible only on the condition that it fails. (78)

The time has come to speak of where a thing is located. “The sole *condition* of a thing is that of being in another thing than itself, and thus in another thing than something.” (78) A condition is “that which determines something, that which *forms* something, that in which something is.” (78) As for humans, “the condition of someone is his situation; my social condition is that which socially determines me, my place and my function...” (79) More generally, “to be conditioned is to find oneself reduced to that in which one is.” (79) Everything is conditioned, but nothing is reducible to this condition. To determine the condition of something is to determine *in what* it is. A thing is located in that which contradicts it, just as a statue exists in its mold, which is precisely that which it is not. Since the thing is finite and definite, its condition or form must be infinite and indefinite. That in which all things are is the world, which Garcia also terms “the whole.” (81) “To try to be in-itself is to attempt to remain outside the world. And indeed, to try to be in-itself is only a path of entry into the world.” (83)

For Garcia, “the world is not the pre-existent container of the things it contains, *a priori*, nor the construction by the mind of a fictional ensemble of all things, *a posteriori*.” (85) Instead, the world is simultaneous with all things; the two always go together. The world cannot be a *determinate* world, such as the physical universe or mathematical space, since these are already too specific and limited. “Every determinate world, which is in fact a *universe*, is a ‘big thing’ [*grosse chose*]: it is a set, however vast, of composite things which itself embodies a thing.” (85) Every determinate world is really just a “big thing.” Stated differently, “it is nothing other than a balanced *milieu* between the things that compose it and the thing that it composes.” (85) We generally picture the world as a physical universe typified by certain constants, but this is already far too determinate: “the world is precisely that which is not something... it hardly has any other determination.” (86) Stated even more clearly, “the world *has* no form, since it *is* the form of each thing... The world has no particular quality.” (87)

In one sense the thing is found only in the world, as that which it is not and which is therefore its form. But in another sense, “a thing can be found in an infinity of other things.” (87) And furthermore, “each thing is in

other things, which are in other things.” (88) Garcia’s term for things insofar as they are contained in others is “objects.” (88) “A thing is objectively such and such in such and such an objective condition. That is to say, it is on the interior of some other thing, some other event, some other situation; but it remains formally a thing insofar as it is alone in its condition and in its negative.” (88) And here we catch sight of the *mediating* role of world. As Garcia puts it: “A thing can be in another thing because these two things, composing and composed [*comprende et comprise*] are equally but separately in the world.” (89) Where is a tree branch, for instance? The branch qua object is in the tree; the branch qua thing is simply alone in the world, and nowhere else. And since we *relate* to the world, the world must be something *other* than us, since no term in a relation can be created in the very same moment in which it relates to something else.

If things are in the world, then we might also ask where the world itself is located. Garcia’s answer is simple: “Each thing is in the world precisely because the world is in nothing.” (92) If the world is in nothing, this might seem to make it “compact,” which is normally the most horrible possible outcome in Garcia’s philosophy. Yet Garcia finds a way to say that the world is not compact: it simply is *not*; it is nowhere; it has no face or form. (93) Nonetheless, it is not compact: “The world as we have defined it is thus not compact. It does not short-circuit the meaning of being and of composition. It composes each thing, but it is not in itself, it is not outside of itself and it is not any longer in some other thing.” (93) Only this formal understanding of world enables us to understand all the various levels of objects that also partake in the world as formally equal *things*. If the world were something, it would lose this status of being shared in common by all things: “Stated differently, the fact that the world is not something is what authorizes the local progress of the knowledge of objects, while ultimately preventing it. Since the world is not something, there is always a faint color of failure that tinges all the human, artistic, scientific, religious, and metaphysical portraits of the world, including the one found in this book.” (94) For “if the world were something, we would never be acquainted with objects.” (94) Since every object is composed of numerous other things, every object can be viewed as a “big thing,” defined as “a thing whose composition is *differentiated*, and rich in other things.” (95) For example, a sponge does not exist on the same level as all its components, even though they are all formally equal things. Instead, the sponge is the “little world” (96) of its components. “In the world, we are always on our own; in a big thing, we are always several.” (96) Taken in objective terms, “the things are objectively composed of things and compose other, bigger things.” (98)

When objects are pieced together into larger and larger wholes, they never add up to the world, which is not a sum of things. “Where is the accumulation of objects located? In a bigger thing. The things are not accumulated in the world, for there is always only one thing at a time in the world.” (105) The biggest of big things is the universe, which of course must not be identified with the *physical* universe, since it must also include non-physical things. There are other differences between objects and things. For instance, “an object which has been *is no more*; a thing which has been, *is*.” (107) The reason for this should be clear enough: the world of things is so ontologically flat that past things cannot be excluded from it.” (107) By rendering all things formally equal, the world is able to allow things to communicate while preventing them from dissolving entirely into one another. Speaking of the whole, which means the same thing for him as world, Garcia says that “the whole—far from being a tyrannical concept—is precisely what permits the things to remain equal in a certain respect. It is that which makes the inferior thing count just as much as the superior thing.” (108) And further, “if the things were not in a sense equal, the inferior would systematically disappear into the superior.” (109) This enables the emergence of larger things from small ones, and also leads Garcia to speak poetically of how “every society suffers from being less than an individual, every sum suffers from not being a part, every hand suffers from not being a finger. The essential frustration of that which encompasses other things is that of never being able to be that which it encompasses.” (110) The elements or components of a thing are never fully exhausted by the larger things into which they enter.

It is in this context that Garcia explains to us his views on the meaning of being, that central topic of twentieth century philosophy. As he sees it, *être* and *comprendre* are reciprocal to one another. (113) To be means “to be contained in,” and encompass (*comprendre*) means to contain other things. World and thing are *first* in this sense; being or encompassing, which bring it about that one is the other and that the other encompasses the one, are *second*.” (114) Whatever we are, we do not encompass it; whatever we encompass is not that which we are. A set encompasses its elements and a substrate encompasses its qualities, but neither a set nor a substrate comprehends itself. “To be is to belong to something... that is to say, to find oneself in a certain thing, and more exactly in a series of enmeshed objects, like Russian dolls quite impossible to hierarchize...” (115) For all Heidegger’s worries about the meaning of being withdrawn beyond all human grasp, Garcia concludes simply that “to be is to enter. Being is not a mystery.” (115) As for encompassing, which contains numerous unrelated things, it is like loving two people who do not love each

other. (119) As for being, the chair does not have a self-contained being of its own, extending across time, for “it is I who identify this chair here and now with the chair that was here a few minutes or seconds ago. It is I who momentarily substantialize the chair in identifying diverse things with one and the same object...” (122-123)

Garcia now touches on some of the more intricate details of his metaphysics. On the one hand, everything is that in which it is: “a thing is all that which is not it. A thing is in all that which is not it. In the broadest sense, each thing is the world...” (124) More bluntly, Garcia says it is not relativist to claim “that there is nothing in itself and that everything is that in which it is...” (125) The thing is also that which is in it, but “*that which is in a thing* cannot determine *that which this thing is*: that which composes a thing never permits us to determine necessarily that which this thing is.” (125) If there were an immediate link between the two sides—if the composition of a thing directly informed us of its status in the world—then the thing would be *compact*, and there would no longer be an intermediate thing as the difference between these two. We already know that this is the essence of reductionism: “All reductionism consists in refusing to think the irreducibility of that which is a thing and that which the thing is. The price of reductionism is always the conception of a compact point.” (126) For Garcia, this entails a challenge to causation, for we should not allow determinism to replace things with their causes.

We are already familiar with Garcia’s Owl of Minerva moment: “We are excluded from that which we comprehend [*comprendre*].” (133) Often enough, we understand that which we have been but no longer are. This is *nostalgia* (134), which later turns out to be an important mood for Garcia, given his view in Book II that each age of life contains its predecessors. In fact, this is what Garcia calls the tragedy of the ages of life: “the fact that non-comprehension [*non-compréhension*] is a price to pay for being, that non-being is a price to pay for comprehension, that there is no gain of consciousness of being.” (135) The root of the tragedy lies in the incommensurability of being and comprehending: “The tragic is thus the consciousness of the reciprocal relationship between *being* and *comprehending*: that which I am, I will never comprehend.” (134) And although this tragedy exists everywhere, humans dramatize it to an especial degree. (136)

But to comprehend something does not mean to comprehend it all the way down. The science of matter keeps finding ever smaller particles of matter (140), and in this sense materialists never really comprehend it. (141) Matter is what is ultimate in the things, and in Garcia’s view it is vain to attempt to define it. (142) Matter is that which always composes other things without itself ever being composed. (143) If there were ultimate particles the world would be compact, and thus Garcia supports an infinite regress of smaller and smaller components rather than a final layer of tiniest pieces. (143) This might make him seem like an anti-materialist. However, Garcia’s distaste for materialism is much less pronounced than his distaste for *anti*-materialism: a theory which holds that not everything is made of matter, that there are also phantoms and spirits or other such forces in the world along with matter. For Garcia, advocate of a flat ontology, there cannot be multiple incommensurable sources for all that exists. Even if materialism fails as the supposed discovery of the ultimate constituents of the cosmos, it is worth preserving for its refusal to posit mysterious ulterior factors in the world. (143-144) For this reason, Garcia endorses matter as referring to all the ingredients of a thing (145), as everything that enters into the composition of a thing. (146)

For Garcia, objects cannot really be considered apart from that in which they are located, since the attempt to do so would yield nothing but “compact” objects. As he puts it, “to identify that which is an object is to comprehend that in which it is what it is; it is to cut it off from the bottom of a big thing.” (153) A thing has no unity, only finitude and solitude. (154) Unity is produced from the outside, as Garcia partially echoes Bergson: “to consider an object, to handle it, to contemplate it, to make it function as an object, is to forbid it temporarily from resolving itself into an infinity of things. It is to give it unity in making it be another thing: a consciousness, a chain of events or reactions, a moment, a structure of belonging, a goal, a value, a field, a group.” (154)

But ultimately, Garcia concludes, the formal realm of flat ontology is poor. He feels capable of drawing from it only some fragile truths, “like paper Japanese flowers coursing in a river.” (159) By contrast, the objective realm of objects is rich. It is “rich in content, in significations, in relations, in novelties, in accumulation, in choices, in disciplines, divided and multiplied in all senses to infinity...” (159) This objective realm is the topic of Book II of *Forme et objet*, to which we now turn.

3. Objectively

Book One of *Forme et objet* gave us a flat ontology of the thing no matter what it is. Book Two gives us something rather different. Here we find sixteen chapters on specific topics, each leading directly into the next. To repeat an earlier analogy, if the formality of Book One is reminiscent of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, Book Two

feels more like *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as it traverses the various concrete shapes of things that emerge in the world. These rich and erudite chapters are so immediately graspable that one might even read the book in reverse order, beginning with the very concrete Book Two before moving backwards into their rather technical ontological backdrop as presented in Book One.

Chapter I, "Universe," starts by defining the universe as the largest of all "big things." (163) This is enough to distinguish it from world, for "while the world is the backside or form of each thing, the universe is a big thing, susceptible to changes of identity, which can be defined only by a superlative..." (163) And whereas *universal* judgments obviously pertain to the universe, those concerning the world can be called *formal*. According to Garcia, the confusion of these two has had serious consequences. But the distinction between them is simple, if subtle: "while the search for the universal supposes an objective knowledge, a knowledge of the state of the objects enmeshed together in the universe, the formal implies nothing more than consciousness of the fact that each thing is equally in the world." (163) The universal finds something *common* to all members of a given multiplicity. For example, deep down all humans may be alike in certain ways, and this provides the basis for a *universal* theory of human rights. But if we look in the opposite direction, the *formal* would stress that each particular human being and human culture is equally human *despite* its particularity (i.e., its *lack* of universality). Hence, "the formal is... the possibility, the ultimate pedestal and at the same time the bad conscience of the universal. If we win the rights of all humans, we ought thus to lose in particularity what we gain in universality." (165) In this way the formal short-circuits the usual hierarchical order that consists of larger containing objects and smaller contained objects. For example, a given social class might seem to be entirely contained in society at large. Yet how often it happens that the contained determines that which contains it, such as when one social class sets the rhythm for the whole. "Human nature contains [*comprend*] different cultures, but each culture contains human nature and fashions it in turn. The order of universality is thus potentially halted at each level by formal equality." (167)

Chapter II bears the disjunctive title "Objects, Events." Present-day fashion in philosophy has little time for objects, but celebrates events endlessly. In the face of this fashion, Garcia's approach is not to swing the pendulum back towards objects, but to preserve the truth contained in both sides of the opposition. Chapter II begins with the theme of *presence*. Objects cannot simply exist, but must also be present, since if all objects were absent there would be no universe. Garcia addresses the problem by way of absence, giving examples from two different types of cases: "In the first case, my heart has been torn out of my body... My body is missing my heart. In the second case, I consider that my heart is in my body... but that my body no longer encompasses my heart. My heart is missing my body." (178) This yields the two types of absence, "void and exile" (178), the two basic types of absence that are able to subvert presence. Working backwards from this, we learn what presence is: "the link between the being and the comprehension of a thing, which are its two senses, constitute its presence." (178) Or stated differently, "an object is present in another object when *being* and *comprehension* of two objects are conjoined." (179) But in fact there are two kinds of presence— the mutual presence of an object to another object that contains it, and that of a thing and world. The mutuality of presence is important, since the unilateral is the chief feature of absence for Garcia.

While objects are simply things in other things, events involve the presence of objects or things. (181) Garcia uses the extended example of a murder, (182-184) showing how it can be viewed as both object and event. If the universe were made up entirely of objects, we would have facts and results but no deeds. Hence there would be presence, but nothing that could distinguish the present from other moments. "In a world of objects, everything is certainly there, but nothing is more or less there. What has been and what will be are equal, and equally objects." (183) By contrast, we might imagine a universe filled only with events, the sort of theory that Garcia ascribes to Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze. (184) Here all objects are dissolved into a series of concrete events; everything is a modality of presence or absence, never of being. The difference between objects and events is defined as follows: "An object is a thing in another thing, an event is the inclusion of this thing in another thing. The object is present or absent from that in which it is; the event is the presence or absence of the thing in that which encompasses it." (185) Objects communicate only with objects and events only with events. What links the two of them is the fact that both are things in the flat plane of ontology. Considered as things, all of them are in the world.

Garcia extends these ideas in Chapter III, "Time," in which the difference between objects and events is translated into temporal terms. "If there were no present but solely an order of facts, everything would only be objects. If there were no past or future existents apart from the present, everything would only be instantaneous events, and there would not be objects (one would never see a chair, but simply that a chair is there right now)." (189) After considering the strengths and weaknesses of several theories of time from analytic philosophy, Garcia reaches an unusual but interesting conclusion. All past and present moments exist, but some exist more

intensely than others. From here on out in the book, Garcia often has recourse to this concept of intensity. Whereas so-called presentism holds that only the present moment exists, Garcia claims that past moments exist on the same flat plane as the present, but simply with less intensity. Garcia's approach to the future is no less unorthodox. Whereas common sense tells us that with age we move forward ever more into the future, Garcia holds that we move constantly *backwards*, away from the future. For in one sense, my future is closer to me at the time of my birth, (196) and furthermore, "no event has ever existed in the future. My current blink of the eye was not present before being present. Thus, a determinate event never starts by being forthcoming (since the future is indetermination)..." (196) In a further striking metaphor, Garcia describes the present as the summit of an infinite pile of leaves; the future, for its part, is the soil on which the entire pile rests, just as the remainder of the pile is the past. (198) For Garcia the past and present are one sort of thing, differentiated only by levels of intensity, while the future is something completely different: pure indeterminacy.

Chapter IV is entitled "The Living." Life is not something already contained potentially in matter. Instead, "the emergence of living objects is the intensification of certain structures of the material universe: that is to say, the local augmenting of certain mechanisms, certain properties..." (201) Of course intensity can only be *objective*, since on the formal plane everything is equal. Garcia holds that life is more intense than the inanimate, insofar as it adds a new level in the structure of container and contained: the *cell*, with various *populations* later adding new levels to the living, just as *organs* and *tissues* are also separate levels of the living. (202) This is the well-known phenomenon of emergence, in which an object is irreducible to the sum of its parts. But Garcia rejects the thesis that emergence is most characteristic of the living, since emergence is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Instead, life is the *intensification* of irreducibility: "only the fact that this irreducibility takes on a particular *intensity* permits us to think the emergence of the living." (205) Each thing can be viewed as having a self, halfway between that which is a thing and that which a thing is (in other words, its components and its situation). A living thing is "a thing that *intensifies* its self—that is to say, a thing which renders more intense the difference between that which is in it and that in which it is." (206-207) Living things maintain this difference with especial insistence, whereas inanimate objects do not. Unlike primitive cells, "a block of quartz in no way defends the distinction between that which composes it and that in which it is located. This difference *exists*... but it does not *resist*, in the sense that no energy is expended in maintaining this difference." (209) Not only does life exert efforts on behalf of difference within the objective realm: it also lies at the interface of the formal and the objective. (210) Modern biology has tried to eliminate form and thus tried to become a variant of physics (213-214). In rejecting vitalism it has thrown the baby out with the bathwater, eliminating form altogether. In general, scientism knows only the objective, not the formal. (214)

Chapter V, "Animals," uses the previously established distinction between objects and events to give a brief interpretation of contemporary biology. These days "the species is no longer understood as an *object* (of classification), but as an *event*." (221) And "the objective present-day conditions of the definition of life lead us to think of it first as a set of events, not of objects." (222) This trend of thinking tends to favor a "species nominalism" of "family resemblances" between living creatures rather than the objective existence of species. (221) By contrast, the Gould/Eldridge theory of "punctuated equilibrium" turns the species into a "super-object" and thus into the true level of natural selection. (223) Garcia, who always tries to avoid both upward and downward reductions alike, rejects the extreme attitudes of both cases. This leads Garcia to reflect on the status of humans vis-à-vis other animals, including some expressions of skepticism towards vegetarianism, which he portrays as a refusal of the community between humans and other animals. (230-231)

Chapter VI, "Humans," pursues further the question of human particularity. In accordance with Garcia's usual method, we read that "the gulf which seems impassable in each case is that which separates *that which is human* from *that which the human is*, his identity." (241) Garcia first considers a formal determination of the human, such as the one proposed by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who maintains that anything counts as human that is an "I," and hence "in the world of the jaguar... the jaguar is 'human' for itself." (240) Garcia rejects this option no less than its opposite, the "substantial" determination of the human, in which the human becomes a privileged subject cut off from all other animal species, and thus even from the animal species known as human being. (240) We can see the difficulty of determining the qualities of the human. (242) What Garcia most wishes to avoid is a "compact" theory in which that which the human is (the stance of humans amidst other objects) would be reduced to that which is the human (the constituent elements of the human). (241-242) Sometimes humans are treated as an animal species, other times as ideas. For Garcia, it is no accident that artificial intelligence boomed at precisely the same point in the twentieth century as ethology and evolutionary anthropology. (251) We humans like to play animals and machines off against each other: we deny that we are animals by pointing to our calculating rationality, and

deny our Spock-like or HAL-like machinic rationality by pointing to our animal emotions. (261) Instead of these two extremes, “there is no human except *between the two*.” In other words, “we exist humanly only *between*. We are able to cure ourselves of animality only by artificiality, and of artificiality only by animality.” Or differently still, “humans no longer think they are the center of the world, but they remain a milieu: the human only has meaning *between*.” (261) We humans are a milieu between the animal background that constitutes us, and the representations that we constitute in turn. (262)

Chapter VII, “Representations,” pursues this theme in a new direction, as Garcia distinguishes between two kinds of representations. The first is the representation of an object by a subject. This kind of representation is obviously always *mine*, since my representation of a table cannot be replaced by that of any other person. (263) The second kind, however, is the representation of an object by an object. Consider for instance a painting by Cézanne that depicts Mont Sainte-Victoire. Clearly the painting does not represent the mountain *to itself*, yet it still represents the mountain in the same way for everyone who views the painting. Admittedly, the painting would represent nothing if someone did not eventually look at it. But for Garcia “this *representatio sui* intervenes only in a second time, as the representation of a representation which is, for its own part, without a self.” (264) He endorses the view of Jocelyn Benoit (a leading French specialist on Austrian philosophy) that both phenomenology and analytic philosophy proceed by distinguishing between a representation for a self (*avec soi*) and a representation in-itself (*en soi*). He cites the view of Bernhard Bolzano, a hero to many of Brentano’s pupils (including Husserl), that there are objective representations viewed by no thinking being other than God. But what Garcia seeks is neither representation for itself or in itself, but *sans soi*: without a self. And as he correctly notes: “the objective representation [of Bolzano] does not correspond at all to what we have called ‘representation without self’ and which designates objects that represent without representing to themselves that which they represent: [Bolzano’s] objective representation embodies instead the ideal portion, detached from the support of consciousness, of all possible representation— the cat that I represent to myself, but insofar as it is not my own representation.” (265) Roughly the same thing holds for Frege, whose “sense” is not subjective, but is reminiscent of the objective representation of Bolzano. (267)

Garcia notes a common blind spot in the theories of Bolzano and Frege: both fail to deal with representations *sans soi*. They draw a distinction only between the objectivity and subjectivity of representations *avec soi*, and never brush up against the reality of the *sans soi*. But Garcia expects more than this from a theory of representation. As he puts it: “thus I can represent the sea... : I can describe it by writing a few phrases on a piece of paper, I can draw it, photograph it, or record the sound that emanates from it. These representations do not need me. In order to represent the sea, they *no longer* need me once they have been produced, since what they represent, they do not represent to *themselves*.” (270) Towards the end of the chapter, we finally discover that Garcia’s theory of representation *sans soi* was meant to pave the way for his reflections on art. Whereas the *sense* of a representation always requires an observing self—whether for Frege, Husserl, or Peirce—(281), “the *art* of this representation, by contrast, is impressed in the same object.” (281) Humans are capable of manipulating certain objects as if they were forms, (271) of transforming objects into forms. (272) In signs the presence of the signifier is effaced in favor of that at which it points. But in representation, something remains present while something else becomes absent. (274) Garcia complains that the present-day tendency, too much under the influence of hermeneutics and semiotics (278), is to treat all representations as significations. (277) But this is mistaken, since significations are always translatable, whereas representations are not. (278)

Although Chapter VIII has a twofold title, “Arts and rules,” it is primarily just about rules. Games are made of rules— whether it be the game of chess, the social game, football, the game of love, playful games between lion cubs and their mothers, or the game of Russian roulette, as Garcia records in a beautiful Latour Litany. (284) “In chess, it is possible to take the bishop and move it to the edge of the diagonal on which it is located—and this move, I *can* make. It is equally possibly for me to take the rook and conduct it to the extremity of its diagonal, but I *cannot* do it. I can even add two more pieces to the chessboard—but I cannot do it.” (284) I can even eat the chess pieces or kill my opponent, but at the same time I cannot do this, since this will leave the realm of chess and bring me into the very different realms of social etiquette or mortal combat. Garcia’s reference to bizarre methods of cheating at chess is not meant solely as a comic interlude. Games always require, at the same time, both the possibility and impossibility of cheating. In other words, games exist in a middle ground or milieu between these two extremes. (285) To establish rules as a form is to create a *genre*, and “the genre, among all the arts, is that which is best distributed” (*mieux partagé*, in obvious reference to Descartes). (288) For Garcia, genre is not just a taxonomic method for classifying artworks from the outside, but an active internal principle that governs these works from within. (288) A genre does not just classify, but defines what is possible and impossible. “Why? In order to permit combinatory and cumulative representations. Each Western supposes the existence of other Westerns and thus permits us to combine the figures of the genre in a novel manner that plays with the codes.” (289) In passing it is of interest to note that Garcia views twentieth-century modernism as

a quasi-classical reaction against the so-called “mass” or “popular” arts such as videogames, rock music, and comic books, of which Garcia shows all signs of being a committed champion.

The discussion of rules leads us to Chapter IX, “Culture.” While the usual tendency is to contrast the cultural with the natural, Garcia disagrees, in accordance with his own familiar method. Culture can only be thought as the *intermediary* between the natural and the universal (307), much like humans in an earlier chapter proved to be the mediator between the animal and the representational. “More precisely, the cultural (which is not frontally opposed to the natural) is that which, for certain groups of living animals, lies *between* the natural and the universal.” (307) Nature works from below, providing everything that enters into objects or events. By contrast, the universal is obviously what lies above. But “what is cultural... is every body of rules that lies *between* the natural and the universal...” (308) Culture need not be human; Garcia gives the example of a Japanese macaque that learns to wash potatoes and eventually passes on this technique as a cultural tradition. Instead of culture being specifically human, human culture is an intensification of animal culture more generally. Indeed, culture is an animal effort towards the universal. (309)

Chapter X is entitled “History.” Harking back to the earlier chapter on time, Garcia reminds us here that “the future is opposed to the present as the maximum of absence to the maximum of presence. And the past is contained in the present as a progressive diminution of presence.” (313) In other words, only the future is absent, while on the side of presence we have two different things: a more intense present and a less intense past. The usual model of time is rather different. For instance, if we imagine a homogeneous time unrolling towards the future, “one never conceives of the future as anything but a past that has not yet happened. One creates an image of the future as that which, not yet being History, *will be* History—as that which, not yet being narrated, *will be* narratable.” (319) The myth of an ahistoric origin is replaced by this homogeneous model of a coming future. What gives meaning to human history is no longer its origin, but rather “the future destined to become historic.” (319) This has obvious consequences for the writing of history, and Garcia tries to show its impact on such figures as Voltaire, Condorcet, and the Scottish School (319 ff.), as well as the reaction against these trends in an author like Herder. (322) The idea of history as universal progress can only be objective rather than formal; if we consider time formally, then all instants are equal and none is redeemed by what comes later: “This strictly formal equality short-circuits historical accumulation.” This has the following consequences: “And that is what prevents the constitution of a History as [universal], whether it be Marxist as Darwinist.” (325) Insofar as such theories reduce time to an accumulation of knowledge and experience, they make time compact. Garcia also makes the intriguing point that the idea of time as progress fails to do justice to historical *seasons* and *fashions*: “While progress is the non-return, whether it be linear or dialectic, the season is *the return of the same* and fashion is *the return of the different*.” (326) And though we intellectuals are generally expected to mock the movements of fashion, history can only be conceived as the deep intertwining of progress, fashions, and seasons. (327)

Chapter XI is entitled “Economy of Objects.” Garcia launches the chapter with a discussion of utilitarianism, which desubstantializes things by means of a relational ontology that reduces them to their effect on us. As he puts it: “utilitarianism provides a network of events and objects whose value depends on the manner in which they affect, in context, their surrounding events and objects— not on a value that things and beings bear in themselves in the manner of an essence.” (331) Garcia proceeds to complicate the theory of value as grounded in utility. For there is also luxury. (337) There is also the diminishing marginal utility of the seventh glass of water as opposed to the first, (342) and there are the gift (352) and excess (357), concepts so dear to postmodern thinkers. There is also perversity, “an acknowledged engine of the human spirit,” (362) which leads us to numerous acts of sumptuous and irrational waste. Even Kant goes beyond economic value only in the sense that he allows *people* to have a more than economic value. Non-human things never attain super-economic value in the Kantian framework (350), though Garcia contends that there are many intermediate levels between people and things. (351) He initially focuses on the “irreplaceable” (348) as that which lies outside all economic calculation of value. But contrary to the reader’s expectations, Garcia is no fan of counter-economies and anti-economies. For it is not entirely true that the irreplaceable is fully irreplaceable. Indeed, the “irreplaceable” is more apt to be translated into economic terms than anything else. A specific painting by Vermeer, or Nixon’s resignation letter, are irreplaceably unique. Yet this simply encourages a higher price to be placed on them. In short, things are intermediaries between irreplaceable and replaceable. What follows from this, though Garcia does not address the issue, is the disturbing but fascinating implication that not even the individual *person* is irreplaceable. Given the failure of counter-economies, “it is necessary to accentuate [the replaceability of things], to maximize it—rather than wishing to attenuate or minimize it at any cost and without success.” (363)

Chapter XII, “Values,” picks up where Garcia’s reflections on economics leave off. Along with the economy of objects, we must also speak of their value. According to one widespread theory, objects have no value at

all apart from whatever humans project onto them. According to this theory, values are merely the result of “valorization.” (366) Yet Garcia regards the theory of valorization as “a fundamental confusion.” (366) Instead, we need to be more economical than the economists, and discover that there is value in objects themselves: “the value of things is not given to things by non-things, subjects, consciousness, interests, structures, or models of equilibrium, but *found in the things themselves.*” (368) Yet if we speak of the three classical topics of the beautiful, the true, and the good, they turn out not to be qualities of the things, but *intensities* of them. (369) Intensity is the opposite of flatness. In the flat, formal world everything is equal. In the world of intensity, by contrast, a thing can be more or less than itself. After considering several past theories of beauty, Garcia settles on the following definition: “the Beautiful is the transformation, by natural, cultural, and individual operation, of a thing determined in a greater or lesser intensity, by which we compare the thing to that which it is not.” (378) But if beauty intensifies a *thing*, truth intensifies a *relation*. (378) Thus aesthetic intensity belongs to *things* taken as solitary in the world, while truth belongs to *objects* considered in their relation to other objects. Since no statement is completely true, and since even a false statement is something rather than nothing, truth (no less than beauty) is an intensity, not just one pole of a binary opposition between truth and falsity. (379) One highlight of this section is Garcia’s wonderful account of conspiracy theories, which he concludes by saying that “doubt is excited by the truth, like a child by a house of cards that he burns with desire to bring down.” (385) Having considered the beautiful and the true, we now come to the good: “What augments its universe is good, what diminishes it is bad.” (385) From this we can see why all forms of the compact are bad for Garcia, since they collapse different portions of reality into a point of identity, and thereby diminish the universe. (387) All of Western history, he claims, is an attempt to escape any compacity of the three major types of values. (388) And what is the major source of non-compact intensity? For Garcia, the source of intensity is *life*, which is incontestably an intensifying force: “A living being finds the things beautiful or ugly—that is, it finds them to be more than they or less than they are. It finds relations to be true or false—that is, it finds them solidified or diminished. It finds the good and the bad— that is to say, it finds augmentations that are superabundant or impoverishing.” (392) The living is what gives value to the universe.

Chapter XIII is entitled “Class.” Whereas values deal with intensity, class is concerned with extension. “The universe is alternately *valorized* and *classed*: these are the two fundamental actions which give order to the universe.” (393) To classify objects means simply to find their way of being together in something else. (393) Everything can belong to multiple classes at once: the same person can be simultaneously Canadian, female, socialist, diabetic, unemployed, and divorced. To define people by their origin is to make of them a *race*; to define them by their beliefs is to classify them as a *sect*; to group them according to their interests is to make of them a *social class*. But the danger arises of a compact class: “A *compact class* is a class such that the thing which encompasses the objects of the same class becomes the class itself.” (395) In other words, to belong to a compact class is to be defined *only* in terms of that which one has in common with the others. (395) Yet it would be equally compact to reduce a class to an assortment of individuals. (401) Individuals do belong to classes, yet it is never *they* who belong to the classes—rather, all that belongs to the classes is that limited portion of them which is shared in common with the other members. (402) Part of me always remains outside of all the classes to which I belong.

That brings us to Chapter XIV, “Gender,” in which Garcia tackles one of the most politically charged themes of our time. The two extreme positions on gender are naturalism and nominalism, and they turn out to be mirror images of one another. (406-407) The naturalist begins with the smallest difference, the genetic difference, and on that basis tries to show that all other gender differences follow naturally from this truly fundamental, genetic difference. For the nominalists of the gender studies departments, there are only “effects of construction that come not from Nature, but of active subjectivities.” (406) Since this is the only real difference for the nominalists, they “descend from the individual difference towards the specific difference, which [they] deconstruct.” (407) For Garcia, of course, both of these are “compacting” strategies in which the reality of a thing is compressed entirely into a single level of reality. For this reason, he insists on four different levels. First there is the purely genetic level, which Garcia calls XX/XY in reference to the chromosomal difference. Second, there is the genetal difference between male and female, which does not follow automatically from the genetic difference—in the 1960’s, it was discovered that there are a certain number of XX males and XY females, with hormonal rarities leading to different results than one might have expected. Third, there is the difference between man and woman, which does not follow automatically from the difference in genitalia. And finally, there is the symbolic difference between masculine and feminine. (406)

All four of these levels are real for Garcia, and none of them automatically determines the character of the level above or below it. But even such determination would not yet be domination. Instead, the problem of domination arises when an intensive difference (one that pertains to values) is confused with an extensive

difference (one that pertains to classes). For example: “I no longer judge that a male human is a man, and that a man can be masculine or feminine, but maintain that a man is male, that the masculine is what is proper to the man, who is male.” (408) That is to say, the extensive class “male” is misidentified with the intensity “masculine,” such that to be a man means to be particularly masculine. By a similar error, woman is allowed to be formally just as human as man, while man is allowed to be more human than woman on the objective level— such that man is more intensely human than woman. (411) Even so, Garcia does not agree that nominalism is inherently more liberating than naturalism. (420) It is certainly true that the naturalist position will judge effeminate men badly, and may treat those who have female genitals despite XY chromosomes to be scientific circus freaks. Nonetheless, the nominalists are sometimes equally harsh in their haughtiness. In the view of the nominalists, for instance, “all individuals are equal, but certain individuals are more so insofar as they realize and adopt this singularity (they are *queer*), by relation to those who express it in ‘banal’ generic fashion (they are *straight*).” (421)

We now come to Chapter XV, “Ages of Life.” Whereas Schopenhauer’s famous essay on the same topic tried to survey the full range of different ages, Garcia focuses like a laser on one age in particular: adolescence, which he views as the dominant age of contemporary life. “The time is now distant when it seemed to humans that the maximum of life was the age of adulthood or maturity. Today, the maximum of an individual is presented as adolescence.” (425) It is well known that puberty is a disharmony of multiple elements simultaneously. (430) But here, just as with gender and everything else in Book II of *Forme et objet*, Garcia insists that neither of the two levels can dominate the other, such that puberty would define adolescence or the reverse. In fact, as was first established in the chapter on gender, “the best weapon against reductionism consists in emphasizing the different stages or levels in every order of objects or events...” (431) The chapter on the ages of life is a good place to establish this lesson, since for Garcia each age is contained in its successor, like a smaller Russian doll inside a larger one. (432) Adolescence can be viewed as either an event or an object. Or rather, it was once viewed as an event, but became stretched out to the point of being too long for an event, and finally it became an object. (439) At the end of the nineteenth century adolescence was treated *morally*, as the age where one runs the risk of going wrong. Towards the beginning of World War II, adolescence came to be viewed *sociologically*, as an interesting landscape of marginal youth cultures. This gave way to the third standpoint, which persists even today: adolescence as a *crisis*. (441-442) It is proclaimed that adolescence as a “moment” is normal, while adolescence as a “state” is pathological. (445) But even though the ages of life contain one another successively, advancing age also includes a sense of loss. Garcia may be a young author for a metaphysician, but he is acutely sensitive to the sense of *nostalgia* that comes with age. (450)

Book II concludes with Chapter XVI, with the definitively somber title of “Death.” As is so often the case, Garcia sees a risk of the compact here in two separate directions. The first mistaken option would be to “functionalize” death. If we follow this path, death “is inscribed in the living as a mechanism of regulation of the evolution of the species, an internal clock, a programming of the organism, the condition of possibility of renewal, the very sign of triumph of the logic of the life of species over the logic of the life of individuals.” (455-456) In this way death is explained from below, through the workings of things tinier than the whole organism that dies. The opposite attitude “idealizes” death, with Heidegger ranking among the primary culprits, since for Heidegger “death belongs only to those who think, to those who are conscious of [death], who have an Idea of it: the others only ‘perish’... such as animals, plants, and amoebas.” (456) For Garcia, by contrast, death must be viewed as a kind of *absence*, and we encounter this absence in three separate ways. The first type of encounter with death comes through growing old ourselves. The “nostalgia” mentioned in the previous chapter was perhaps an early omen of this new mood, which Garcia appropriately terms *melancholic*. Second, there is the death of others, which can be termed *tragic*. Third and finally, there is one’s own death, termed *paradoxical* for the obvious reason that we ourselves can never experience it. (456-457) Whenever one’s own death becomes too central a feature of discussion, we quickly reach the dead end of the wise man who downplays the significance of death to an excessive degree. Consider Epicurus, who holds it impossible to feel the absence of sensation, and thus contends that we should value a good life rather than an endless one. (472) But this purportedly “wise” view of Epicurus is of little comfort when we are faced with the death of *others*: “the death of others is not nothing for me— and the wisdom of those who are rendered equal to their own deaths is also non-wisdom: the trace of consideration that it grants to the death of others.” (473) Death puts an end to life as an object filled with intensities, returning us to the plane where all things are equally something. Garcia’s book has now come full circle, bringing us back to the flatness with which we began.

4. Coda

The book ends with a five-page reflection on the failure of wisdom. Garcia begins with a marvelous litany of possible reasons why one might wish to live. I count twenty-one on his list, including: the pursuit of success in one's undertakings, financial and political power, athletic triumphs, ethical perfection, having children, linking oneself to something eternal, to love and be desired, to achieve a work of art. (481) What all these aspirations have in common is that they are larger goals that contain me, which implies that if I attain these goals I will dissolve into them like a river flowing into a measureless sea. Garcia concludes as follows: "There is no salvation, because if it is effective it does not concern me, and if it concerns me then it is not effective. It absorbs me as part of an ensemble." (481) If the meaning of life is salvation, then this means to lose oneself—to be dissolved into something much larger.

Yet there are two meanings of life. For just as I am encompassed in something larger, I also encompass much that is less than I am, though I also cannot be dissolved downward into these components. What saves me from dissolution in either direction is the flatness of the world which leaves me, like all other things, in solitude.

Because things are in me and by me, because I encompass things no less than something encompasses me, I (like every thing) infinitely resist my dissolution or realization, my being drawn up into salvation, into a totality, an idea, a spirit, or an eternity that envelops me. I am encompassed, but I encompass. And I will never become fused into that which is more than I am.

This resistance is the tragedy of each thing, which will never be saved, whose end cannot be the exclusive meaning, which is not realized in that which completely encompasses it. But this is also the chance of each thing.
(482)

My solitude in the world is what prevents my dissolution into a higher purpose, and in this way it also obstructs my salvation. Nor can my individuality become a form of purpose or salvation, since I am not just myself, but exist in other things. (483) Tragedy indeed.

Faced with this tragedy, the sage always offers us wisdom. This wisdom generally consists in the view that nothing of this world is truly important. Thus we should strive to balance our temperament and not become too attached to the world. But this wisdom does not change the fact that I am still a very specific thing in the world, with one chance and one price to pay (the closure that accompanies every chance). (484) As Garcia puts it: "All wisdom, whether oriental or occidental, is the illusion according to which it would be possible to bring what I am into accord with what I know." (484) But does the knowledge of the sage really add anything not already present in the ignorance of the non-sage? Does the recognition of truths by the wise make them any more true? In the *objective* realm there may be better ways of living in a society or dealing with nature, but when it comes to the flat formality of the world, wisdom and non-wisdom are equivalent, and hence there is no wisdom about the world. There is only my solitary resistance as a thing in the world that cannot be dissolved either upward into salvation or downward into material particles (even after my death, I *will* be dead and *will* be forgotten). There is nothing but my chance and my price to pay.

5. Brief Critical Assessment

Forme et objet is lengthy and complicated enough that an English translation is probably some years away. But the Anglophone world ought to become aware of Garcia even before a translation is available. For this reason, the present review has focused on providing a fairly detailed summary of the arguments of the book. But I should also close by expressing a few possible points of disagreement with Garcia's metaphysics. His position has enough similarities with my own that it can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint exactly why I agree or disagree with any given formulation in the book. Yet I feel a certain obligation to readers of this review to make a first rough attempt.²²

²² During my first one-on-one meeting with Garcia on January 17, 2012, I was stunned when he pulled out a brilliant three-page summary of his agreements and disagreements with my own position. I cannot complain about much of what he wrote in that document ("Graham Harman, *Tool-Being et L'Objet quadruple, Quelques interrogations*,") which I hope he will eventually publish in some form. For my own part, I will include an entire chapter on Garcia in my forthcoming book *Treatise on Objects*, already under contract with Open Humanities Press.

The first and most obvious difference is that while Garcia condemns autonomous substance as “compact,” autonomous substances are for me the royal road to metaphysics. While it is true that I reject a great portion of the traditional concept of substance, that is of no concern here, since the point that Garcia rejects about substance—autonomy—is precisely the point on which I insist. Garcia and I agree that nothing should be reduced either downward to its components (“undermined” for me) or upward to its relational stance amidst other things (“overmined” for me). Yet we draw seemingly opposite conclusions from this. For me, the thing cannot be identified with either its components or its context, but must be something in-itself that has qualities not contained either in the pieces that compose it or in the events in which it participates. The object emerges as something beyond its pieces, and withdraws from any situation in which it participates. For Garcia, by contrast, the thing is outside itself rather than contained inside itself. Hence, an entity is the *difference* between its internal components and its specific situation. The chair is neither its own particles nor its own concrete location in the cosmos, but the middle ground where these two extremes meet.

My initial objection to this model is as follows. If we define something as the difference between two other things, then to modify either of these two other things is obviously to modify their difference. If we define the number X as the difference between the numbers Y and Z, then to change Y and Z from 38 and 54 to 37 and 54.8 changes X from 46 to 45.9. The same holds if we change only Y or only Z. Likewise, if we define a basketball as the difference between the ball’s components and the exact situation in basketball history in which the ball happens to be used, then to make even the tiniest alteration in the ball’s ingredients or the historical and physical situation of the ball will change the ball completely. By defining the basketball as a *difference* between two other terms, Garcia effectively falls into all the dangers of relational ontology that plague such authors as Whitehead and Latour. If the ball picks up an extra grain of dust, it will no longer be the same, since by changing the ball’s components, the “difference” between these components and the historical/physical situation will have changed, even though the latter has not changed at all. Likewise, if the physical components of the ball do not change at all, but the game situation changes—since Chicago’s Derrick Rose has just been ejected from the game for a flagrant foul, or because a controversial celebrity has just arrived at the arena and taken a front-row seat—then the ball is also not the same ball. Despite Garcia’s appearance of striking an even balance between objects and events, he makes the constitution of the object too dependent on its interaction with other objects. My primary worry about this wonderful book is that it leads us more towards a relational ontology than towards a genuine philosophy of things.

My second worry concerns the key role played in Book II by the concept of “intensity.” Quite often Garcia tells us that living organisms merely *intensify* differences already found in the inorganic world. But in what does this intensity consist? The best answer Garcia gives, as far as I can tell, is that more intensity is the result of more *complexity*. To identify new layers, levels, and stages in any phenomenon is one of Garcia’s chief methods for avoiding the purported banality of compactness. Yet I wonder whether complexity and intensity always go together in this way. There is sometimes a greater power to simplicity. But it is possible that I have misunderstood Garcia on the question of simplicity versus complexity, and thus return to the more crucial point: how can something become *more* or *less* itself, *more* or *less* intense? The mechanism for this remained unclear to me by the end of the book.

Forme et objet is an intricate piece of work by an emerging philosopher who is now a force to reckon with. It will take even more time to digest than the considerable time I have already invested in trying to understand the whole of the book’s argument. For those who read French, *Forme et objet* is worth significant reading time during the months to come; for those who do not, it can be hoped that an English translation will appear as quickly as the great length of the book permits. Tristan Garcia is most likely a name that we will all be pronouncing hundreds or thousands of times in the decades to come.

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