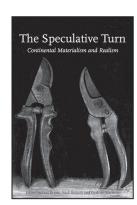
Reviews

Issue 03



The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism, Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (eds.), re.press, 2011, 440 pp. Reviewed by Thomas Nail

What is speculative realism? Simply put, it is the philosophical position that there is a reality independent from human thought, language, and culture. This may sound banal, since it is so widely accepted as "common sense," but this sort of argument has not been seriously made by philosophers for a long time, and never quite like this. In fact, most of the last hundred or so years of philosophy has been explicitly directed at disabusing us of this sort of "naïve" realism in favour of a vision of reality strictly limited or mediated by human experience, language, embodiment, social and political structures, etc.

After decades of post-Kantian philosophy (phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, and

deconstruction), is it possible to discern a new philosophical practice today that would allow knowledge of reality, untethered by human consciousness, discourse, culture, or power? The Speculative Turn assembles more than two dozen essays by many of the key figures in present-day continental philosophy on precisely this question. If you have heard the words 'speculative realism" (SR) in passing over the last four or so years and were curious as to who the main theorists of this new tradition are, what the main debates are about, and where its main critics stand, this is the first book you need to own. Not only does The Speculative Turn provide a robust (440 page!) introduction to this philosophical debate, it marks a new turn in contemporary continental philosophy that can no longer be ignored as a

The lineup here is impressive. Among the many contributors are: Alain Badiou, François Laruelle, Bruno Latour, Slavoj Žižek, Quentin Meillassoux, Isabelle Stengers, Alberto Toscano, Peter Hallward, Manuel DeLanda, Adrian Johnston, and John Protevi. With 25 contributions, this is perhaps one the most extensive and diverse anthologies of continental philosophy of the last ten years. However, attention should also be directed to its method of publication with re.press, an open-access publisher that publishes under a creative commons license. In addition to printing 'real' books available in stores and online, open access titles are also available free of charge in digital form. How many book reviews can say, "if this review sounds interesting to you,

you can download the book right now for free from the publisher"? Books like The Speculative Turn support and give credibility to what I hope will be the future of academic publishing.

The Speculative Turn is organized into five main thematic sections. The first section, "speculative realism revisited," is composed of essays from the participants of the first Speculative Realism event held in 2007 at Goldsmiths College, London: Graham Harman, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Ray Brassier. Having followed the published transcriptions of this conference in the third volume of the journal Collapse, I found this first section a great marker of how much these thinkers have changed since then (Brassier now even rejects the name Speculative Realism altogether). The second section is devoted to Quentin Meillassoux's book After Finitude (2006) and includes (among other essays) a compelling critique of his notion of a "virtual God," by Adrian Johnston. How Meillassoux remains committed to the absolute necessity of contingency (non-totality) and still maintains the potentiality of God seems entirely inconsistent and gives the origins of SR a strange theological dimension that Johnston rejects. The third section on politics is disappointing. It is clear that Speculative Realism has demonstrated "a notable absence so far when it comes to issues of subjectivity and politics," as Nick Srnicek says (165). However, in attempting to locate the implications of SR for politics, he concludes that realism constitutes "the necessary, but not yet sufficient, conditions for constructing

new empirico-transcendental spaces incommensurable with the capitalist socius" (181). In other words, SR is so far insufficient for thinking politics This insufficiency is further supported by other realists: for Brassier, "there can be no ethics of radical immanence (178), and for Hallward, SR even fails to account for any "actual process of transformation or development" (139). The fourth section on metaphysics is quite strong and includes essays from Meillassoux, Laruelle, Levi Bryant, Bruno Latour, Harman, and Steven Shaviro on what SR analyzes best: being and potentiality. The final section on science is diverse, perhaps too diverse to conclude anything in particular about SR's relationship to science beyond what the individual authors seem to have already been up to well before anyone was talking about SR.

The courage and boldness of The Speculative Turn in announcing a break with the last 150 years of continental anti-realism is impressive, even exciting. However, when the editors compare this with the traditions of phenomenology, structuralism, poststructuralism, post-modernism, and deconstruction, one cannot help but feel the inadequacy of SR. What constitutes a new philosophical tradition? There are too many characteristics to list here, but at least one of them is that it bears directly on the actual world in some fashion. Every philosophical tradition has been able to rethink not only "what is," but also how being is specifically distributed in art, love, ethics, and politics. In short, 'there is no theory of the event in SR,' as Alain Badiou says in the opening

interview of this volume (20).

Not only is there no theory of the event, but much of the focus of SR remains unconcerned with actual politics, ethics, or art at all. With such a large volume, it is a shame that this lack could not more clearly be filled. Why should anyone who is working on aesthetics, ethics, or politics find SR attractive or useful? Even if they agree with its ontological convictions, what consequences do they have? This will no doubt be one of the largest barriers to establishing the coherency of SR as more than an "interesting, but ultimately useless theoretical venture" (165). If SR is defined only by its ontological commitment to some variety of realism, but remains too radically divided in its methodology and theory of actuality, it will not be intelligible as a new tradition. This is a particularly unfortunate dilemma given that we are witnessing today the largest constellation of world-wide revolutionary movements since the 1960s. It is also possible, however, that The Speculative Turn is an untimely announcement: something which, at the moment, sounds absurd and insufficient, but which in time will have already been true. Even still, while philosophical realism may be the necessary condition for contemporary philosophy to move forward, it is definitely not yet the sufficient condition. X

Thomas Nail is a Post-Doctoral Lecturer in European Philosophy at the University of Denver. He is the author of Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari, and Zapatismo (Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

Issue 03 Realism 40 Scapegoat Architecture/Landscape/Political Economy