

Thing Theory

Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained: From Phenomenon to Thing*, Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, pp x, 193.

We are all inclined to take the climate for granted. We are basically acclimatised to the seasonal cycle and most of the variations that occur from day to day and week to week. It is all too easy to forget just how much of this comfort depends on the fact that our buildings, food and energy supplies, health and transport systems and leisure activities are carefully designed to meet the challenges of the local climate. But when extreme events occur, it becomes acutely apparent how vulnerable much of the infrastructure of society is to climatic fluctuations. (Burroughs, 2001: ix).

So begins a recent primer on climate change by physicist William J Burroughs that I've been finding helpful. Climate change and other geophysical upheavals have been keeping me busy lately. Too busy, in fact, to make it through Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which sits half read on a high shelf. Heidegger's philosophy, I'm aware, has frequently been set to work by fellow writers and commentators grappling with environmental issues. Radical ecologists, in particular, have taken inspiration from his critique of modern technology, finding much to empathise with in the German philosopher's preference for the authenticity of rural life over the banalities of urban industrialism and his condemnation of the way that the whole earth is being reduced to 'standing reserve' for the imperatives of production.

This sort of critique, I confess, never quite convinced me of the need to engage with Heidegger - beyond a cursory reading of a couple of his better known short pieces. An antipathy to nostalgia, a wariness of the couplet of soil and belonging, and a preference for more redemptive readings of technology saw me heading off in the direction of philosophers who were less encumbered by notions of 'being', and more enthralled with 'becoming'. Grappling with global climatic instabilities, and other catastrophes of human or other-than-human origin, I turned for inspiration not to the advocates of dwelling in place and gathering in, but to the theorists of monstrous energy and roiling excess, the celebrants of restless change and endless recombination.

That is, until I encountered Graham Harman's Heidegger, a figure who turned out to be rather different from the Heidegger of my imagination and passing acquaintance. The appeal for me of Harman's take on the 20th century's most famous philosopher is not so much that he casts new light on the indecencies inflicted by modern humankind on a vulnerable planet. It isn't what he says about the dealings of humanity at all. It's more what he has to say about things that aren't necessarily human, or even associated with humankind. It's about how Heidegger might help us to think through a universe packed with objects and events that generally go about their business without any great regard for human agency - a cosmos that doesn't revolve around us, that never did and never will.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Harman's *Heidegger Explained* is, on the whole, a rather more inclusive and less idiosyncratic entry point to the philosopher's work than I have been insinuating. Reading as a genuine ingénu, Harman's text seems to me to do all the things one might expect and wish for from an introduction. It brings Heidegger as a person and as a thinker to life by weaving together major developments in his work with historical and biographical events, it tracks the formative influences on his thought and the conversations and exchanges that nourished his writings, it surveys his major texts and lecture courses, and explains his most important concepts. Credit is given unreservedly for Heidegger's major intellectual achievements: Harman is unafraid of superlatives as he is of confronting his protagonist's personal flaws, moments of misjudgement, and notorious political leanings.

The story-telling is accessible, and often amusing. The story itself, however, is all about inaccessibility. It is, as I suggested above, a tale about the withdrawal of things themselves

into their own secretive worlds. This is the recurrent motif of *Heidegger Explained*, the refrain around which sub-themes and details are threaded. It first emerges out of a discussion of Heidegger's engagement with the work of his teacher Edmund Husserl. The conversation with Husserl is important for the obvious reason that it sets up the accomplishment that Heidegger is most famous for - his critique of the idea of the pure, unmediated presence of the world, and because this discovery informs all the subsequent denunciations of the metaphysics of presence that have been such a staple of post-structural thought. But it is also salient for the way that it prepares the ground for Harman's own twist on Heidegger.

Harman recounts how Husserl came to the conclusion that not only the natural sciences, but most of the canon of philosophy has wrongly assumed that the reality of things could be made fully present in human consciousness. According to Husserl's 'philosophy of phenomena', the objects on which we focus our attention only ever reveal to us certain facets or attributes - all the while concealing a great deal more (18). In place of pure presence, then, what we apprehend of any entity is no more than a compendium of our perceptions of it, from all the vantage points available to us. Absorbing this insight, Heidegger quickly pushed it further, making the claim that how objects become present in our mind offers no more of a sure handle on the truth than any other kind of access. Putting the emphasis on presence for human consciousness - the achievement of Husserlian phenomenology, then, was not enough of a break with natural science's positing of physical presence in the universe. For Heidegger, as Harman puts it, 'both science and phenomenology only see things from the outside, failing to grasp their turbulent ambiguous depths' (44). And what goes for phenomenology goes for practically the entirety of western philosophy, from the Ancient Greeks to Descartes, from Kant to our contemporaries: being is reduced to presence at the expense of the absence or impenetrability that imbues the very nature of the objects which comprise our worlds.

The book traces the development of this key idea through Heidegger's career. Harman guides us in gentle steps from the early lecture in 1919, when Heidegger begins his radicalisation of phenomenology, through the 1923 lecture series *Ontology* where the idea of the inherent concealment of phenomena is deepened and extended, and on to the masterwork *Being and Time*, where (as the majority of commentators proclaim) the critique of presence comes to full fruition. *Being and Time* earns a chapter of its own, and here Harman zeroes in, unsurprisingly, on the famous broken tool episode; the moment where Heidegger uses a minor mishap to demonstrate how much of the world we habitually leave unnoticed or unexamined, and how the simple malfunction of an everyday object can suddenly rupture this taken-for-grantedness. When the hammer's head and handle part company, what suddenly becomes conspicuous is the irritating fragility of the things we rely upon. Just as importantly, Harman underlines, what is also revealed is the background murmur of things unobtrusively ticking over and performing the tasks we expect of them. And this 'tool-analysis', he announces, 'is perhaps the greatest moment of twentieth-century philosophy' (63).

But is this moment so earth-shattering because it tells us something novel and interesting about our use of tools? Is it primarily a meditation on technology, and what happens when technology goes wrong? As Harman would have it, there is much more than this at stake when Heidegger speaks of tools breaking and 'equipment' letting us down. 'Equipment' or what Heidegger also calls 'readiness-to-hand' refers not only to that aspect of tools that we habitually take for granted, but to that side of all the entities around us that we characteristically ignore and overlook as they go about their business. Thus, in Harman's example 'the chair we are sitting in, the floor that supports it, the solid earth beneath the floor, the oxygen we breathe, or the heart and kidneys that keep us alive' are each in their own way equipment: they are all for the most part 'ready-to-hand' rather than 'present' (62). Just like the earth's climate, we might add. To be equipment, then, is not just to be put to any specific use, but to be part of the complex mesh of bits and pieces, entities and events, that make up what we experience as the 'world'. And it is this positing of the ubiquitous and inevitable tension between functional tool and broken tool, between concealing and revealing, between readiness-to-hand and presence, Harman insists, that is Heidegger's one great contribution to western thought.

From where I stand, at a safe distance from the bulk of Heidegger's work and the extensive commentary it has attracted, there are two pleasant surprises that accompany the particular stress that Harman puts on the broken tool story.

The first is that, while I had anticipated that Heidegger would have profound things to say about time (and especially the human experience of time haunted by impending death), I didn't expect a take on his work that had some rather interesting things to say about space. In fact, Harman rather radically demystifies Heidegger on time, suggesting that most of his pontificating on temporality is little more than iteration of the dominant concealment/revealing refrain. 'Time simply refers to the mysterious way in which everything that appears or comes to presence is shadowed by a bottomless depth of concealed reality – every moment is an event, and an event is never fully visible, definable or describable' (48). Although he touches on Heidegger's concern with the way human life is lived in the shadow of eventual death, Harman doesn't let this case of a very big and final departure overwhelm the more mundane experience of dwelling amidst multitudes of a less portentous withdrawals. And this concern with the ordinariness of flickering presence and absence turns out to be at least as much about space as it is about time. As Harman has it, Heidegger's favoured term for human existence - Dasein (literally 'being there') is, in an important sense, inherently spatial, given that it puts the stress on our location in the world, and evokes an interplay of proximity and distance as constitutive of this positioning (35). Or to put it another way, human being - in and through its inescapable entanglement with equipment - is inherently relational.

A lot of recent work in geography, sociology and related social sciences has concerned itself with the critique of the objectivity of space, exploring the claim in a variety of ways that space is not an emptiness which is then filled by collections of objects, but is itself composed out of the relations between things; things which only exist by virtue of their collisions, meetings and mergers with other things. Harman presents Heideggerian readiness-to-hand as, in certain respects, precursory of this sort of 'relational' spatial thought, in the way that it proposes that our experience of space emerges through our encounter with the whole system of interwoven, interacting objects. The spatiality of the world', he writes 'is primarily a spatiality of equipment, in which everything has its own proper place and its own significance (35).

But things are a little more complicated than this, for Heidegger is not just another relational spatial thinker who happened to get in early. The very idea that things are inherently mysterious and unfathomable - that they come replete with hidden dimensions - gestures toward something more than merely an obscurity that arises out of their complex entanglement with other things. As Harman reminds us, Heidegger believed that human beings were occasionally privy to the impenetrability of things, at those moments when the normal spatial relation of readiness-to-hand broke down. This is our own unique faculty. Other entities, devoid of our perceptual and cognitive abilities, have no access to such insights. So while we, on special occasions, might truly 'touch' other entities, 'a chair can never touch a wall, because these objects have no way of encountering one another, even if their physical bodies are in direct contact' (61). One important implication of this, as Harman would have it, is that it implies an obduracy, an impenetrability, which is a quality of things all of their own, quite aside from that opacity that emerges out of the messiness of their mutual inter-relating.

It is this 'internal' unfathomability of things, it seems to me, that starts to open up issues that most contemporary theories of relationality, in the social sciences at least, would find hard to digest - for it intimates that there are qualities and facets of 'things themselves' that are irreducible, even immune, to what is usually thought of as 'relating'. To be sure, *Heidegger Explained* only offers hints of this challenge to relational thinking. For a fuller exploration of this theme, we need to look at Harman's pair of monographs that extrapolate from Heidegger's tool analysis: *Tool Being* (2002) and *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005), in which he delves at great depths into the inner obscurity of things. But that's another story and a different review.

Heidegger's claim that human beings, and human beings only, have the ability to break through and grasp the enigma of equipment brings me to the other surprise that this little book delivers. Unlike almost all previous philosophers, Heidegger resists any idea that humans are privileged by their capacity to know the world as it really is. This, as we have seen, is his single greatest achievement. But as Harman insists, this idea that human beings alone can transcend their absorption in the opacity of the ready-at-hand still puts *us* at the centre of everything. In keeping with the dominant tenor of western philosophy, the rest of the world only gains its significance from the way it is apprehended by *our* species. No humans on the scene, in other words, no truth, no world.

It is around this issue that Harman starts to do something with Heidegger's thought that feels a little like what Heidegger did with the work of Husserl. That is, grab hold of the most radical bit and push it further. We can catch this beginning to happen when Harman plays what he tells us is a perennial game amongst Heideggerian scholars: make a case for what is, (after everyone's favourite Being and Time), the philosopher's second greatest hit. His own choice, so he informs us, is an unpopular one: a seventy page lecture, delivered in 1949 entitled *Insight Into What Is*. Why Harman chooses this 'strange masterpiece' is that he detects in it a subtle shift away from the assumption that human beings need to be present to give reality its meaning: a turn in the direction of 'the independent thinghood of the thing' (130). As Harman seems to imply, this sense that concealment or lack of presence inheres in objects themselves, rather than just arising out of our encounter with them, is bubbling under in all Heidegger's most searching theorising of things. It just never quite surfaces, until the tantalising glimpse which comes in this mid-to-late-career lecture.

The second surprise, then, is that Heidegger's discoveries about the play of presence and absence have the potential to lead us away from a human-centred perspective on worldly existence and into a conceptual realm where other-than-human entities are fully licensed to do their own thing. To really stretch Heidegger's thought on what it might mean to recoup reality from human access to it is to go a step beyond what the philosopher himself made of his own insights, and as Harman concedes, this is inappropriate for an introductory text (134). Once again, to catch Harman in full flight on the secret life of other-than-human things we must look beyond the current volume to *Tool Being* and *Guerrilla Metaphysics*: weightier tomes which set out from the premise that Heidegger's work is bursting with potential unrecognised by its author to confront the mysteries and machinations of things themselves. That being said, this turn is clearly signposted at the close of *Heidegger Explained*, when Harman states his own position. 'Although human Dasein's involvement with things brings them into an ambiguous interplay of presence and absence,' he writes, 'the same is true of the things with respect to each other' (162).

Which brings me back to my opening quote. Burroughs' point about climate being taken for granted until extreme weather events exceed the capacity of our technological systems to cope clearly chimes with classic Heideggerian tool analysis. But it's important to keep in mind that Burroughs is easing us into an exploration of climate change that is not simply about human-induced climate change, nor even about the human experience of variable climatic conditions in general. His book focuses on the inherent volatility and changeability of our planet's climatic systems, drawing attention both to those aspects of climate dynamics that are relatively well deciphered, and those that are 'shadowy and surrounded by controversy' (3). Indeed, Burroughs concedes that some of the physical systems that determine our planet's weather are so inherently complex as to defy our full understanding, and are thus likely to remain 'wholly unpredictable' (8). 'It is this mixture of the well established and the unknown', he muses, 'which make the subject so hard to pin down and so fascinating' (3).

Or as Harman might say, this is precisely what makes *everything* so hard to pin down and so worthy of intrigue. An atmospheric physicist by professional specialisation, Burroughs is no closet Heideggerian, as far as I'm aware. And there is nothing unusual about this kind of movement between knowing and unknowing, shadowiness and revelation in contemporary science writing. Whether its in response to pressing issues like global environmental problems or disaster prediction, or whether the focus is more 'purely' with the working of our planet's physical systems, scientists these days are routinely willing to acknowledge the inherent indeterminacy or unpredictability of many of their objects of inquiry. Just as they are often

happy to affirm their own 'wonderment for the immensity and complexity of the Earth's climate', along with the other components of the cosmos that concern them (Burroughs, 2001: 274).

What I am trying to say here is that Harman is offering us a timely and relevant Heidegger, one who might converse in generative ways with some of the most vital issues that spring forth from this mysterious, intermittently broken planet on which we find ourselves: a conversation that in no way needs to exclude the pronouncements of natural science. And just as Harman's vision of Heidegger as the theorist of readiness-to-hand engages in a usefully vexing manner with a range of 'relational' theories fashionable in social science and the humanities, so too does a Heidegger massaged into a spokesman for the independent activism of things mesh in productive ways with a lot of contemporary social and cultural thinking around the issue of 'other-than-human' agency.

Needless to say, these two themes are closely related, for much of the current contingent of relational thinking deals explicitly with the issue of encounters, assemblies and networks which cross-over between the spheres formerly known as 'the social' and 'the natural' – and thereby bring their traditional duality into question. And once again, Harman's Heidegger resists simple absorption into the stream of relational culture-nature studies now on offer - on account of the way that the inner obscurity of independent things raises a challenge to the prioritising of the relations between different kinds of things. Effacing the boundary between nature and society ceases to be such a big deal when the really important borderline is that which persists, in whatever domain we chose, between presence and absence or knowing and unknowing.

This modest-sized introduction, however, is not the place to go for any exploration of potential dialogues with recent turns in social thought. Again, that is another story. Where Harman does leave off, however, is with a provocative signalling of a possible liaison between continental and analytic philosophy. Or rather, with a suggestion that bridging between the deeply divided philosophical traditions - both of which (despite their other animosities) privilege the issue of human access to the world of things - might itself be a moribund project. Instead, he hints, a Heidegger-inspired plunge into the unfathomable depths of things themselves might offer a way out of the human-centred morass on either sides of the philosophical divide, a path that could appeal to both camps. And if there is a more innervating way to wind up an introduction to a dead thinker, I'd like to see it.

Heidegger Explained, it seems to me, is a very generous and generative point of entry into the universe of one of the more daunting luminaries of 20th century thought. It wouldn't be a bad thing if it was also read as introduction to Graham Harman's own work.

References

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