IS ONTOLOGY MAKING US STUPID?

This is a translation and expansion of my paper given at Bernard Stiegler's Summer Academy in August 2012. In it I consider the ontologies of Louis Althusser, Graham Harman, and Paul Feyerabend.

Abstract: I begin by "deconstructing" the title and explaining that Feyerabend does not really use the word "ontology", though he does call his position sometimes (and the "sometimes" is important) ontological realism. I explain that he talks about his position as indifferently a "general methodology" or a "general cosmology", and that he seems to be be hostile to the very enterprise of ontology, conceived of as "school philosophy". I then go on to say that there is perhaps a concept of a different type of ontology, that I call a "diachronic ontology" that perhaps he would have accepted, and that is very different from ontology as ordinarily thought, which I claim to be synchronic ontology (having no room for the dialogue with Being, but just supposing that Being is already and always there without our contribution). I discuss Althusser and Graham Harman as exemplifying synchronic ontology, giving a reading of Harman's recent book THE THIRD TABLE. I then discuss Feyerabend's ideas as showing a different way, that of a diachronic ontology, in which there is no stable framework or fixed path. I end with Andrew Pickering whose essay NEW ONTOLOGIES makes a similar distinction to mine, expressing it in the imagistic terms of a De Kooningian (diachronic) versus a Mondrianesque (synchronic) approach.

IS ONTOLOGY MAKING US STUPID?

A. INTRODUCTION

The question posed in the title, is ontology making us stupid?, is in reference to Nicholas Carr's book THE SHALLOWS, which is an elaboration of his earlier essy IS GOOGLE MAKING US STUPID?, and I will destroy the suspense by giving you the answer right away: Yes and No. *Yes* ontology can make us more stupid if it privileges the synchronic, and I will give two examples: (1) the «marxist» ontology of Louis Althusser and (2) the object-oriented ontology of Graham Harman. *No*, on the contrary, it can make us less stupid, if it privileges the diachronic, and here I will give the example of the pluralist ontology of Paul Feyerabend.

Normally, I should give a little definition of ontology: the study of being as being, or the study of the most fundamental categories of beings, or the general theory of objects and their relations. However, this paper ends with a presentation of the ideas of Paul Feyerabend, and it must be noted that Feyerabend himself does not use the word «ontology», preferring instead to talk, indifferently, of «general cosmology» or of «general methodology». Sometimes as well he talks of the underlying system of categories of a worldview. And towards the end of his life he began to talk of Being with a capital B, but he always emphasized that we should not get hung up on one particular word or approach because there is no «stable framework which encompasses everything», and that any name or argument or approach only «accompanies us on our journey without tying it to a fixed road» (Feyerabend's Letter to the Reader, Against Method xvi, available here: http://www.kjf.ca/31-C2BOR.htm. Feyerabend explicitly indicated that his own «deconstructive» approach derived from his fidelity to this ambiguity and this fluidity. Thus ontology for Feyerabend implies a journey, ie a process of individuation, without a fixed road and without a stable framework.

As for «stupid», it refers to a process of «stupidification» or dumbing down, of dis-individuation, that tends to impose on us just such a fixed road and stable framework. The word «making» also calls for explanation. We are noetic creatures, and so the good news is that we can never be completely stupid, or completely disindividuated, except in case of brain death. The bad news is that we can always become stupider than we are today, just as we can always become more open, more fluid, more multiple, more differenciated, in short more individuated. Ontology is not a magic wand that can transform us into an animal or a god, but it can favorise one or the other fork of the bifurcation of paths.

ARGUMENT: My argument will be very simple:

1. traditional ontologies are based on an approach to the real that privileges the synchronic dimension, where the paths are fixed and the framework is stable. Althusser and Harman are good examples of synchronic ontology.
2. Another types of ontology is possible, and it exists sporadically, which privileges the diachronic dimension, and thus the aspects of plurality and becoming, the paths are multiple and the framework is fluid. Feyerabend is a good example of diachronic ontology.

NB: For the sake of brevity, I talk of synchronic and of diachronic ontologies, but in fact each type of ontology contains elements of the other type, and it is simply a matter of the primacy given to the synchronic over the diachronic, or the inverse.

Philosophy is inseparable from a series of radical conversions where our comprehension of all that exists is transformed. In itself, such a capacity for conversion or paradigm change is rather positive. A problem arises when this conversion amounts to a reduction of our vision and to an impoverishment of our life, if it makes us stupid. My conversion to a diachronic ontology took place in 1972, when I read Feyerabend's AGAINST METHOD (NB: this was the earlier essay version, with several interesting developments that were left out of the book)., where he gives an outline of a pluralist ontology and an epistemology. On reading it I was transported, transformed, converted; unfortunately, at the same period my philosophy department converted to a very different philosophy – Althusserianism

B. ALTHUSSER AND ALTHUSSERIANISM

In fact, 1973 was a year that marked a turning point between the "diachronic tempest" of the 60s and the synchronic return to order desired by the Althusserians. I am deliberately using the expression that Bernard Stiegler uses to describe the invention of metaphysics as it was put to work in Plato's REPUBLIC, in support of a project of synchronisation of minds and behaviours. I was the unwilling and unconsenting witness of an attempt at such a synchronisation on a small scale: my department, the Department of General Philosophy, sank into the dogmatic project, explicitly announced as such, of forming radical (ie Althusserian) intellectuals under the aegis of Althusserian Marxist Science. A small number of Althusserian militants took administrative and intellectual control of the department, and by all sorts of techniques of propaganda, intimidation, harassment and exclusion, forced all its members, or almost all, either to conform to the Althusserian party line or to leave.

Intellectually the Althusserians imposed an onto-epistemological meta-language in terms of which they affirmed the radical difference between science and ideology, and the scientificity of Marxism. It is customary to describe Althusserianism from the epistemological point of view, but it also had an ontological dimension, thanks to its distinction between real objects and theoretical objects: scientific practice produces, according to them, its own objects, theoretical objects, as a means of knowing the real objects. The objects of everyday life, the objects of common sense, and even perceptual objects, are not real objects, but ideological constructions, simulacra (as Harman will later claim, they are "utter shams").

Faced with this negative conversion of an entire department, I tried to resist. Because I am "counter-suggestible" (as Feyerabend claimed to be) – in other words, because i am faithful to the process of individuation rather than to a party line – I devoted myself to a critique of Althusserianism. Its rudimentary ontology, the determination of Being in terms of real objects, corresponds to a transcendental point of view of first philosophy which acts as a hindrance to scientific practice, and pre-constrains the type of theoretical construction that it can elaborate. To maintain the diachronicity of the sciences one cannot retain the strict demarcation between real objects and theoretical objects, nor between science and ideology. The sciences thus risk being demoted to the same plane as any other ideological construction and having their objects demoted to the status of simulacra. This is a step that the Althusserians did not take, but that, as we shall see, Harman does, thus relieving the sciences of their privileged status.

NB: The set of interviews with Jacques Derrida, POLITICS AND FRIENDSHIP, describes the same phenomenon of intellectual pretention and intimidation supported by a theory having an aura of epistemologica and ontologicall sophistication but which was radically deficient. Derrida emphasises that the concepts of "object" and of "objectivity" were deployed without sufficient analysis of their pertinence nor of their theoretical and practical utility and groundedness.

After the period of Althusserian hegemony came a new period of "diachronic storm", this time on the intellectual plane. Translations came out of works by Foucault and Derrida, but also of Lyotard and Deleuze. Althusserian dogmas were contested and deconstructed. But for me there still remained serious limitations on thought despite this new sophistication. There was an ontological dimension common to all these authors, and this ontological dimension was either neglected or ignored by the defenders of French Theory. Feyerabend himself seemed to be in need of an ontology to re-inforce his pluralism and to protect it against dogmatic incursions of the Althusserian type and against relativist dissolutions of the post-modern type. I obtained a scholarship to go and study in Paris, and I left Australia in 1980 to continue my ontological and epistemological research.

What I retain from this experience, over and above the need to maintain and to push forward the deconstruction by elaborating a new sort of ontology to accompany its advances, is the feeling of disappointment with the contradictory sophistication in Althusserian philosophy. I had the impression that it pluralised and diachronised with one hand what it reduced and synchronised with the other. Thus, despite its initial show of sophistication it made its acolytes stupid, disindividuated. Further, as an instrument of synchronisation on the large scale it was doomed to failure by its Marxism and its scientism, both of which made securing its general adoption an impossible mission. It would have been necessary to de-marxise and de-scientise its theory to make it acceptable to the greatest number. Further, its diffusion was limited to the academic microcosm, because at that time there was no internet. These limitations to the theory's propagation (Marxism, scientism, academic confinement) have been deconstructed and overcome by a new philosophical movement, called OOO (object-oriented ontology) which has conquered a new sort of philosophical

public. Lastly, I retain a distrust of any "movement" in philosophy, and of the power tactics (propaganda, intimidation, harassment, exclusion) that are inevitably implied. Oblivious to this sort of "wariness" with respect to the sociology of homo academicus, the OOOxians publicise themselves as a movement and attribute the rapid diffusion of their ideas to their mastery of digital social technologies.

C: HARMAN AND OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

In THE THIRD TABLE, Harman gives a brief summary of the principle themes of his object-oriented ontology. It is a little book, published this year in a bilingual (English-German) edition, and theEnglish text occupies a little over 11 pages (p4-15). The content is quite engaging as Harman accomplishes the exploit of presenting his principal ideas in the form of a response to Eddington's famous "two tables" argument. This permits him toformulate his arguments in terms of a continuous polemic against reductionism in both its humanistic and scientistic forms. All that is fine, so far as it goes. However, problems arise when we examine his presentation of each of Eddington's two tables, and even more so with his presentation of his own contribution to the discussion: a "third table", the only real one in Harman's eyes.

In the introduction to his book THE NATURE OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD (1928), Eddington begins with an apparent paradox: "I have just settled down to the task of writing these lectures and have drawn up my chairs to my two tables. Two tables! Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me two tables, two chairs, two pens" (xi). Eddington explains that there is the familiar object, the table as a substantial thing, solid and reliable,against which I can support myself. But, according to him, modern physics speaks of a quite different table: "My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed" (xii). Eddington contrasts the substantiality of the familiar table (a solid thing, easy to visualise as such) and the abstraction of the scientific table (mostly empty space, a set of physical measures related by mathematical formulae). The familiar world of common sense is a world of illusions, whereas the the scientific worl, the only real world according to modern physics, is a world of shadows.

What is the relation between the two worlds? Eddington poses the question and dramatises the divergence between the two worlds, but contrary to what Harman seems to think, he gives no answer of his own. He declares that premature attempts to determine their relation are *harmful*, more of a hindrance than a help, to research. In fact, Eddington refuses to commit himself on the ontological question posed in his introduction because he is convinced that it is empirical research, mobilising psychology and physiology as well as physics, which must give the answer. It is clear that he would have regarded Althusserianism as just such a premature and harmful attempt. But what would he have thought of OOO? We shall return to this question in the last part of this talk.

In his little text Harman explains very succinctly the difference between the two

tables. But in opposition to Eddington's supposed scientism, Harman affirms that these two tables are "equally unreal" (p6), that they are just fakes or simulacra ("utter shams", 6). Assigning each table to one side of the gap that separates the famous "two cultures" dear to C.P.Snow (the culture of the humanities on one side, that of the sciences on the other), he finds that both are products of reductionism, which negates the reality of the table.

"The scientist reduces the table downward to tiny particles invisible to the eye; the humanist reduces it upward to a series of effects on people and other things" (6).

Refusing reductionism and its simulacra, Harman poses the existence of a third table (the "only real" table, 10) which serves as an emblem for a third culture to come whose paradigm could be taken from the arts which attempt to "establish objects deeper than the features through which they are announced, or allude to objects that cannot quite be made present" (THE THIRD TABLE, 14). Philosophy itself is to abandon its scientific pretentions in order to speak at last of the real world and its objects.

In WORD AND OBJECT Quine proposes a technique called "semantic ascent" to resolve certain problems in philosophy. He invites us to formulate our philosophical problems no longer in material terms, as questions concerning the components of the world ("objects") but rather in formal terms, as questions concerning the correct use and the correct analysis of our linguistic expressions ("words"). The idea was to find common ground to discuss impartially the pretentions of rival points of view. Unfortunately, this method turned out to be useless to resolve most problems, as the important disputes concern just as much the terms to employ and their interpretation as soon as we take up an interesting philosophical problem.

Inversely, Graham Harman with his new ontology proposes a veritable semantic descent (or we could call it an "objectal descent"), to reverse the linguistic turn, and to replace it with an ontological turn. According to him the fundamental problems of ontology must be reformulated in terms of objects and their qualities. These objects are not the objects of our familiar world, let us recall that Harman declares that the familiar table is unreal, a simulacrum, an "utter sham". The real object is a philosophical object, which "*withdraws* behind all its external effects" (10). We cannot touch the harmanian table (for we can never touch any real object) nor even know it.

"The real is something that cannot be known, but only loved" (12).

Thus Harman operates a reduction of the world to objects and their qualities which is intended to be in the first instance ontological and not epistemological (here Harman is mistaken, and the epistemological dimension is omnipresent in his work, but as the object of a denegation). This objectal reduction is difficult to argue for, and sometimes it is presented as a self-evident truth accessible to every person of good will and good sense, and Harman's philosophy is trumpeted as a return to naiveté and concreteness, triumphing over post-structuralist pseudo-sophistication and its abstractions. But we shall see that this is not the case.

This reduction of the world to objects and their qualities amounts to a conversion of our philosophical vision that is disguised as a return to the real world of concrete objects:

“Instead of beginning with radical doubt, we start from naiveté. What philosophy shares with the lives of scientists, bankers, and animals is that all are concerned with objects” (THE QUADRUPLE OBJECT, 5).

“Once we begin from naiveté rather than doubt, objects immediately take center stage” (idem, 7)

This “self-evidence” of the point of view of naïveté is in fact meticulously constructed and highly philosophically motivated. We must recall that Harman’s “objects” are not at all the objects of common sense (we cannot know them nor touch them). So the “naiveté” that Harman invokes here is not some primitive openness to the world (that would only be a variant of the “bucket theory of mind” and of knowledge, denounced by Karl Popper). This “naiveté” is a determinate point of view, a very particular perspective (the “naive point of view”, as the French translation so aptly calls it). Under cover of this word “naiveté”, Harman talks to us of a “naïf” point of view, that is nevertheless an “objectal” point of view., that is to say not naïf at all but partisan. Harman deploys all his rhetorical resources to provoke in the reader the adoption of the objectal point of view as if it were self-evident. This “objectal conversion” is necessary, according to him, to at last get out of the tyranny of epistemology and the linguistic turn, and edify a new ontology, new foundation for a metaphysics capable of speaking of all objects. We have seen that this “self-evident” beginning implies both a conversion and a reduction.

We see the parallels and differences of object-oriented ontology in relation to Althusserianism. Both relegate the familiar object and the perceptual object to the status of social constructions. OOO goes even further and assigns the scientific object to the same status of simulacrum (“utter sham”): only philosophy can tell us the truth about objects. Both propose a meta-language, but OOO’s meta-language is so de-qualified that it is susceptible of different instanciations, and in fact no two members of the movement have the same concrete ontology. Finally, OOO spreads in making abundant, liberal (and here the word has all its import) use of the means that the internet makes available: blogs, discussion groups, facebook exchanges, twitter, podcasts, streaming.

I have spoken here principally of *Graham Harman’s* OOO because I do not believe that OOO exists in general and I also think that its apparent unity is a deceitful façade. There is no substance to the movement, it is rather a matter of agreement on a shared meta-language, ie on a certain terminology and set of themes, under the aegis of which many different positions can find shelter. I have spoken here almost exclusively of THE THIRD TABLE because Harman’s formulations change from book to book, and I find that in this little brochure Harman offers us his meta-language in a pure state. In his other books Harman, without noticing, slides constantly between a meta-ontological sense of object and a sense which corresponds to one possible instanciation of this meta-language, thus producing much conceptual

confusion.

My major objection to Harman's OOO is that it is a school philosophy dealing in generalities and abstractions far from the concrete joys and struggles of real human beings ("The world is filled primarily not with electrons or human praxis, but with ghostly objects withdrawing from all human and inhuman access", THE THIRD TABLE, 12). Despite its promises, Harman's OOO does not bring us closer to the richness and complexity of the real world but in fact replaces the multiplicitous and variegated world with a set of bloodless and lifeless abstractions – his unknowable and untouchable, "ghostly", objects. Not only are objects unknowable, but even whether something is a real object or not is unknowable: "we can never know for sure what is a real object and what isn't".

Yet Harman has legislated that his object is the only real object (cf. THE THIRD TABLE, where Harman calls his table, as compared to the table of everyday life and the scientist's table, "the only *real* one", 10, and "the only *real* table", 11. As for the everyday table and the scientific table: "both are *equally unreal*", both are "utter shams", 6. "Whatever we capture, whatever we sit at or destroy is not the real table", 12. And he accuses others of "reductionism"!). To say that the real object is unknowable ("the real is something that cannot be known", p12) is an epistemological thesis. As is the claim that the object we know, the everyday or the scientific object, is unreal.

How can this help us in our lives? It is a doctrine of resignation and passivity: we cannot know the real object, the object we know is unreal, an "utter sham", we cannot know what is or isn't a real object. Harman's objects do not withdraw, they transcend. They transcend our perception and our knowledge, they transcend all relations and interactions. As Harman reiterates, objects are deep ("objects are deeper than their appearance to the human mind but also deeper than their relations to one another", 4, "the real table is a genuine reality deeper than any theoretical or practical encounter with it…deeper than any relations in which it might become involved", 9-10). This "depth" is a key part of Harman's ontology, which is not flat at all and is the negation of immanence. Rather, it is centered on this vertical dimension of depth and transcendence.

Harman practices a form of ontological critique which contains both relativist elements and dogmatic elements. At the level of explicit content Harman is freer , less dogmatic than Althusser, as he does not make science the queen of knowledge. Harman situates himself insistantly "after" the linguistic turn, after the so-called "epistemologies of access", after deconstruction and post-structuralism. He considers that the time for construction has come, that we must construct a new philosophy by means of a return to the things themselves of the world – objects. But is this the case?

D. Feyerabend and the harmfulness of the Ontological Turn

Feyerabend stands in opposition to this demand for a new construction, and wholeheartedly espouses the continued necessity of deconstruction. He rejects the

idea that we need a new system or theoretical framework, arguing that in many cases a unified theoretical framework is just not necessary or even useful:

"a theoretical framework may not be needed (do I need a theoretical framework to get along with my neighbor?). Even a domain that uses theories may not need a theoretical framework (in periods of revolution theories are not used as frameworks but are broken into pieces which are then arranged this way and that way until something interesting seems to arise)" (Philosophy and Methodology of Military Intelligence, 13).

Further, not only is a unified framework often unnecessary, it can be a hindrance to our research and to the conduct of our lives: "frameworks always put undue constraints on any interesting activity" (ibid, 13). He emphasises that our ideas must be sufficiently complex to fit in and to cope with the complexity of our practices (11). More important than a new theoretical construction which only serves "to confuse people instead of helping them" we need ideas that have the complexity and the fluidity that come from close connection with concrete practice and with its "fruitful imprecision" (11). Lacking this connection, we get only school philosophies that "deceive people but do not help them". They deceive people by replacing the concrete world with their own abstract construction "that gives some general and very mislead (sic!) outlines but never descends to details". The result is a simplistic set of slogans and stereotypes that "is taken seriously only by people who have no original ideas and think that [such a school philosophy] might help them getting ideas".

Applied to the the ontological turn, this means that an ontological *system* is useless, a hindrance to thought and action, whereas an ontology which is not crystallised into a system and principles, but which limits itself to an open set of rules of thumb and of free study of concrete cases is both acceptable and desirable. The detour through ontology is useless, because according to Feyerabend a more open and less technical approach is possible. In effect, Feyerabend indicates what Eddington could have replied to Harman: just like Althusserianism OOO must be considered a premature and harmful failure because it specifies in an apriori and dogmatic fashion what the elements of the world are. This failure is intrinsic to its transcendental approach: it is premature because it prejudges the paths and results of empirical research, it is harmful because it tends to exclude possible avenues of research and to close people's minds, making them stupid.

Eddington's position is in fact very complex. He gives a dramatised description of what amounts to the incommensurability of the world of physics and the familiar world of experience. This is implicit in the whole theme of the necessary "aloofness" (xv) that scientific conceptions must maintain with respect to familiar conceptions. He then goes on to pose the question of the relation, or "linkage", between the two. Sometimes he seems to give primacy to the familiar world eg: "the whole scientific inquiry starts from the familiar world and in the end it must return to the familiar world" (xiii), and "Science aims at constructing a world which shall be symbolic of the world of commonplace experience" (xiii). Sometimes he gives primacy to the

world of physics, and seems to declare that the familiar world is illusory, eg: “In removing our illusions we have removed the substance, for indeed we have seen that substance is one of the greatest of our illusions” (xvi), though he does attenuate this by adding: “Later perhaps we may inquire whether in our zeal to cut out all that is unreal we may not have used the knife too ruthlessly”. On the question of the relation between physics and philosophy he is no mere scientistic chauvinist. Indeed, he gives a certain primacy to the philosopher: “the scientist … has good and sufficient reasons for pursuing his investigations in the world of shadows and is content to leave to the philosopher the determination of its exact status in regard to reality” (xiv). But he considers that neither common sense nor philosophy must interfere with physical science’s ” freedom for autonomous development” (xv). His conclusion is that reflection on modern physics leads to ” a feeling of open-mindedness towards a wider significance transcending scientific measurement” (xvi) and warns against a priori closure: “After the physicist has quite finished his worldbuilding a linkage or identification is allowed; but premature attempts at linkage have been found to be entirely mischievous”.

As we can see, Graham Harman ‘s discussion of this text in THE THIRD TABLE makes a mess of Eddington’s position, treating him as advocating the scientistic primacy of the world of physics. Harman can then propose his own “solution”: the objects of both common sense and physics are “utter shams”, the real object is that of (Harman’s) philosophy. This is why I think that Harman’s OOO is a contemporary example of what Eddington calls “premature attempts at linkage” and that he finds “mischievous”, ie both failed and harmful.

My thesis is that much of OOO is a badly flawed epistemology masquerading as an ontology. An interesting confirmation of this thesis is the touting of Roy Bhaskar’s A REALIST THEORY OF SCIENCE. For those too young to remember: this book came out initially in 1975, after the major epistemological works by Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend. It was an ontologising re-appropriation of their epistemological discoveries. It was hailed as a great contribution by the Anglophone Althusserians (I kid you not!), as it gave substance to their distinction between the theoretical object, produced by the theoretical practices of the sciences) and the real object. The Althusserians used Bhaskar to legitimate their posing of Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis as sciences. Their universal critique of any philosophical view that did not square with theirs was to disqualify it as demonstrably belonging, sometimes in very roundabout and tortuous ways to the “problematic of the subject”. Does this begin to sound familiar? real object vs theoretical object, problematic of the subject = correlationism. These themes are not new, but go back to the dogmatic reaction of the 70s!). It is amusing to see that Bhaskar, who is a prime example of someone who invented an ontological correlate to epistemological insights, is now being used as the proponent of a non-correlationist “realist” position, to condemn those who supposedly give primacy to epistemology over ontology. The whole procedure is circular. That is to say, far from really asking the transcendental question of what must the world be like for science to be possible? (this is an ideological cover-up for the real historical stakes of Bhaskar’s intervention) Bhaskar

proceeds to an ontologisation of insights and advances in epistemology, and so constrains future research with an a posteriori ontology projected backwards as if it were an a priori "neutral" precondition of science. So Harman's supposed primacy of ontology is in fact based on his continual denegation of his de facto dependence on results imported from epistemology and on the dogmatic freezing and imposition of what is at best only a particular historical stage of scientific research and of epistemological reflection.

One of my biggest objections to OOO concerns the question of primacy, which remains moot in contemporary philosophy. As we have seen, Harman's ontological turn gives primacy to (transcendental, meta-level) philosophy. Feyerabend articulates an Eddingtonian position, one that gives primacy neither to philosophy nor to physics, but defends the open-mindedness of empirical (though not necessarily scientific) research. I think this can be clarified by examining Feyerabend's defense of the "way of the scientist" as against the "way of the philosopher". Feyerabend's references to Mach (and to Pauli) show that this "way of the scientist" is transversal, not respecting the boundaries between scientific disciplines nor those between the sciences and the humanities and the arts. So it is more properly called the "way of research". Eddington too seems to espouse this Machian way out of the pitfalls of primacy.

Ernst Mach is often seen as a precursor of the logical positivists, an exponent of the idea that "things" are logical constructions built up out of the sensory qualities that compose the world, mere bundles of sensations. He would thus be a key example of what Graham Harman in THE QUADRUPLE OBJECT calls "overmining". Feyerabend has shown in a number of essays that this vision of Mach's "philosophy" (the quotation marks are necessary, according to Feyerabend "because Mach refused to be regarded as the proponent of a new "philosophy"", SCIENCE IN A FREE SOCIETY, p192) is erroneous, based on a misreading by the logical positivists that confounds his general ontology with one specific ontological hypothesis that Mach was at pains to describe as a provisional and research-relative specification of his more general proposal.

Following Ernst Mach, Feyerabend expounds the rudiments of what he calls a general methodology or a general cosmology (this ambiguity is important: Feyerabend, on general grounds but also after a close scrutiny of several important episodes in the history of physics, is proceeds as if there is no clear and sharp demarcation between ontology and epistemology, whereas Harman, without the slightest case study, is convinced of the existence of such a dichotomy). Feyerabend's discussion of Mach's ontology can be found in SCIENCE IN A FREE SOCIETY (NLB, 1978, p196-203) and in many other places, making it clear that it is one of the enduring inspirations of his work. Mach's ontology can be summarised, according to Feyerabend, in two points:

1) the world is composed of elements an their relations

2) the nature of these elements and their relations is to be specified by empirical research

One may note a resemblance with Graham Harman's ontology, summarised in his "brief SR/OOO tutorial":

1. Individual entities of various different scales (not just tiny quarks and electrons) are the ultimate stuff of the cosmos.

2. These entities are never exhausted by their relations. Objects withdraw from relation.

The difference is illuminating. Whereas Mach leaves the nature of these elements open, allowing for the exploration of several hypotheses, Harman transcendentally reduces these possibilities to one: elements are objects (NB: this reduction of the possibilities to one, enshrined in a transcendental principle, is one of the reasons for calling Harman's OOO an objectal reduction). Further, by allowing empirical research to specify the relations, Mach does not give himself an a priori principle of withdrawal: here again "withdrawal" is just one possibility among many. Another advantage of this ontology of unspecified elements is that it allows us to do research across disciplinary boundaries, including that between science and philosophy. Feyerabend talks of Mach's ontology's "disregard for distinctions between areas of research. Any method, any type of knowledge could enter the discussion of a particular problem" (p197). in my terminology Mach's ontology is diachronic, evolving with and as part of empirical research. Harman's ontology is synchronic, dictating and fixing transcendentally the elements of the world.

Feyerabend uses most often a dialogical method, although he was led to complain that this was often a one-sided dialogue. This was because many of the his philosophical reviewers were what he called "illiterate", what I am in this talk calling "stupid", that is to say instances of a dogmatic and decontextualised image of thought conjugated with a disindividuated academic professionalism. Of these failed dialogues Feyerabend writes (in SCIENCE IN A FREE SOCIETY, 10):

> I publish them…because even a one-sided debate is more instructive than an essay and because I want to inform the wider public of the astounding illiteracy of some "professionals"

Fortunately, not all his dialogues were so one-sided. In his encounters with interlocutors Feyerabend tends to function like a zen master, trying to get people to change their attitude, to get them to "sense chaos" where they perceive "an orderly arrangement of well behaved things and processes" (cf. his LAST LETTER). A very instructive example of this can be seen in his correspondence on military intelligence networks with Isaac Ben-Israel, over a 2 year period stretching from September 1988 to October 1990.

Though Feyerabend mainly refers to the philosophy of science, after all it was his domain of specialisation for many long years, he gives sporadic indications that his remarks apply to all philosophy, to all "school philosophies", and not just to epistemology and the philosophy of sciences. So it is possible to see in a very general way what Feyerabend's ideas on ontology are in this epistolary dialogue which begins with considerations of school philosophy as a useless detour, comparing it

unfavourably to a more “naive” unacademic critical approach (Feyerabend’s first letter, L1: p5-6), goes on to consider in a little more detail what an unacademic critical philosophy would look like (L2: p11-14) proceeds to plead for the “non-demarcation” of the sciences and the arts-humanities” and for the need to see epistemology and ontology as parts of politics (L3: p21-23),, and culminates in L4-5 (p31-33) with a sketch of Feyerabend’s own views on ontology. This is an amazing document, as the dialogue form takes Feyerabend into a domain that he has not discussed before (intelligence networks) and permits a concise yet progressive exposition of his later ideas and of their “fruitful imprecision”.

Feyerabend tells us that ontological critique, or the detour through ontology, is unnecessary, because a more open and less technical approach is possible. He gives various figurations of that unacademic approach: the educated layman, discoverers and generals, certain Kenyan tribes, a lawyer interrogating experts, the Homeric Greek worldview, his own minimalist ontology. The advantages he cites of such an unacademic approach are:

1) ability to “work in partly closed surroundings” where there is a “flow of information in some direction, not in others” (p5)

2) action that is sufficiently complex to “fit in” to the complexity of our practices (p11) and of the real world (p12)

3) ability to work without a fixed “theoretical framework”, to “work outside well-defined frames” (p22), to break up frameworks and to rearrange the pieces as the circumstances demand, to not be limited by the “undue constraints” inherent to any particular framework (p13)

4) ability to work not just outside the traditional prejudices of a particular domain (p5) but outside the boundaries between domains, such as the putative boundary between the arts and the sciences (p21)

5) an awareness of the political origins and consequences of seemingly apolitical academic subjects: ontology “without politics is incomplete and arbitrary” (p22).

But one could object that Feyerabend is a relativist and so that “empirical research” for him could give whatever result we want, because in his system *anything goes*. In fact the best gloss of this polemical slogan is “anything could work (but mostly doesn’t)”. Feyerabend’s epistemological realism is supported by an ontological realism: “reality (or Being) has no well-defined structure but reacts in different ways to different approaches”. This is one reason why he sometimes refuses the label of “relativist”, because according to him “Relativism presupposes a fixed framework”. For Feyerabend, the transversality of communication between people belonging to apparently incommensurable structures shows that the notion of a frame of reference that is fixed and impermeable has only a limited applicability:

“people with different ways of life and different conceptions of reality can learn to communicate with each other, often even without a gestalt-switch, which means, as far as I am concerned, that the concepts they use and the perceptions they have are not nailed down but are ambiguous”.

Nevertheless, he distinguishes between Being, as ultimate reality, which is unknowable, and the multiple manifest realities which are produced by our interaction with it, and which are themselves knowable. Approach Being in one way, across decades of scientific experiment, and it produces elementary particles, approach it in another way and it produces the Homeric gods:

"I now distinguish between an ultimate reality, or Being. Being cannot be known, ever (I have arguments for that). What we do know are the various manifest realities, like the world of the Greek gods, modern cosmology etc. These are the results of an interaction between Being and one of its relatively independent parts" (32).

The difference with relativism is that there is no guarantee that the approach will work, Being is independent of us and must respond positively, which is often not the case.

Feyerabend draws the conclusion that the determination of what is real and what is a simulacrum cannot be the prerogative of an abstract ontology, and thus of the intellectuals who promulgate it. There is no fixed framework, the manifest realities are multiple, and Being is unknowable. Thus the determination of what is real depends on our choice in favour of one form of life or another, ie on a political decision. This leads to Feyerabend's conclusion: ontology "without politics is incomplete and arbitrary".

Inversely, Harman has repeated many times that ontology has nothing to do with politics. Seen through Feyerabend's eyes Harman's OOO is thus both *incomplete*, because it is apolitical, and *arbitrary*, because it is a priori and monist, we have already said that, but also because it attributes to a little tribe of intellectuals the right to tell us what is real (Harman's "ghostly objects withdrawing from all human and inhuman access", THE THIRD TABLE, 12) and what is unreal (the simulacra of common sense, of the humanities, and of the sciences). It is also *harmful* because it is based on ghostly bloodless merely intelligible real objects that transcend any of the régimes and practices that give us qualitatively differentiated objects in any recognisable sense. Objects *withdraw* from the diverse truth-régimes (the sciences, the humanities, common sense, but also from religion and politics), i.e. etymologically they abstract themselves: real objects are abstractions, indeed they are abstraction itself. This is not a revolutionary new "weird" realism, this is regressive transcendent realism, cynically packaged as its opposite. I consider Harman's OOO as a purified and consensualised (i.e. demarxised depoliticised descientised) version of Althusser's ontology of the real object and of his anti-humanism, and as exhibiting the same defects as any other synchronic ontology.

E. CONCLUSION

The structure of my argument is very classical, and very abstract, as it remains wholly in the domain of philosophy, and even worse of first philosophy. So to conclude I would like to give some indications to show that these questions are, or can be, very practical. In his article NEW ONTOLOGIES Andrew Pickering presents

the two ontologies that I discuss in terms of the contrast between the painters De Kooning and Mondrian. Mondrian's paintings are examples of a synchronic approach, where the subect distances itself from the world in order to dominate it, according to a transcendent plan which imposes its abstract representations on a passive material. The painter foresees and imposes his order on everything, there is no room for surprises that emerge during the process of painting. The canvas does nothing, it is receptive rather than agentive, there is no exchange between the painter and his canvas, no dialogue.

On the other hand, De Kooning's canvases participate themselves in the elaboration of the work. There is a continual back-and-forth between the painter and his canvas, "between the perception of emergent effects and the attempt to intensify them". The De Kooningian approach is diachronic, it involves an immanent, concrete, incarnated, open process of engagement in the world, whereas the Mondrianesque approach is synchronic and implies a transcendent , abstract, disincarnated, closed process of distanciation from the world. The Mondrianesque approach corresponds, according to Pickering, to Heideggerian "enframing", while the De Kooningian approach practices aletheia, unveiling.

Pickering's hope is that the diachronic practices which are still marginal in our society can come together and overflow or dissolve the dominant synchronic enframing. Pickering gives several concrete examples of diachronic practices, not only in art (De Kooning) but also in civil engineering (the ecological and adaptative management of a river) and also in psychiatry (anti-psychiatric experiments like Kingsley Hall, institutional psychotherapy like La Borde, favourising symmetric and non-hierarchical relations). He also talks of mathematics, music and architecture, to show in each case the concrete effects of both approaches. Thus we should keep in mind that even if the discussion in this paper is situated on the conceptual plane, the differences and disputes over ontology are inseparable from our concrete daily existence.