



## **Form and Object** **A Treatise on Things**

by Tristan Garcia

Translated by Mark Allan Ohm and John Cogburn

Part of the *Speculative Realism* series

### **Author Q&A with Tristan Garcia**

Asked by Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism* series editor

Translated by Mark Allan Ohm

**Graham – Though I’m sure we will see even more from you in the years to come, *Form and Object* is already a full-blown system of philosophy, running to 438 pages. You mention some of your influences, yet this book is not obviously derivable from those influences. There is a real freshness to the work. Could you tell us a bit about the history of the project?**

**Tristan** – *Form and Object* is in part an intellectual *Bildungsroman*. I drafted some of the passages of the book when I was seventeen years old, and wrote some of the others in my thirties, after Quentin Meillassoux’s and Alain Badiou’s work influenced me. *Form and Object* is a complex work, the style and tone of which changes from one part to another. It can be read in several ways. Since it was very difficult to translate, I am especially grateful to Mark and Jon for their remarkable work.

Readers who are not familiar with my work will not realize this, but I view it as a palimpsest of different ages of my youth. I was educated in a family sympathetic to Marxism and, indirectly, Hegelian dialectics. Early on I read Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. But Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* was the most important work for me. Wittgensteinian distinctions can be found in *Form and Object* – for example, the difference between objective and formal concepts.

Since then, most of my intellectual development involves defending neither dialectical thought (after Hegel) nor analytic thought (after Frege and Wittgenstein). By simplifying to the extreme, I claim that the reduction of some things to others lies at the foundation of all dialectical ways of thinking (as being becomes that which is not), and that the reduction of some things to nothing

lies at the foundation of all analytic ways of thinking (as it is impermissible that entities be unnecessarily multiplied).

*Form and Object* is a defense of the *chance* of each thing insofar as each thing can be reduced neither to another thing, nor to nothing. When I was finishing the book, I became dissatisfied with recent phenomenology, deconstruction's ruins, and the cognitive sciences' reprogramming of the mind. I knew nothing of object-oriented philosophy, but my aim was to reestablish a philosophical *beginning*. I removed all references from the first book; I decided to adopt neither the tone of argumentative debate nor that of proof, but, rather, to present a new model of "something," in all its naïveté, as a quasi-simple construction, and, then, to set in motion this ontological model through a series of metaphysical debates and analyses, in order to derive various concepts (of time, of living things, of species, of gender) from the starting point of this minimal "something."

My conviction has always been the following: the more one has at one's disposal a weak, less determinate (though not indeterminate) ontological point of view, the better one is capable of inferring concepts which are not primitive, but derivative. By beginning only with "something" (nothing less, nothing more), I hope to redefine time, life, humanity, values, and so on, as several different *configurations of objects*.

*Form and Object* is thus both a *tabula rasa*, and an essay in revisionary (non-absolute, non-exhaustive) metaphysics, with the hope of setting an example: the construction zone is open.

**Graham – Before being widely known as a philosopher, you had already come to prominence as a novelist by winning the Prix de Flore in Paris. And you continue to write both philosophy and fiction even now. How do these two careers co-exist in your working life? Do you go through periods where you write only philosophy or only fiction, or do the two tasks intermix on a daily basis?**

**Tristan** – To be honest, my existence as a novelist and my existence as a philosopher have always seemed to me to be two parallel lives vying over the same body and mind... But if I try to reflect on the reasons which led me to write fiction and philosophy either alternatively or simultaneously, I don't feel

that I am doing anything that original. Perhaps the intellectual gravitation toward novels and philosophy is just a characteristic of French history: the Rousseau of *The New Heloise* and the Rousseau of the *Discourse*; the Sartre of *The Roads to Freedom* and the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*; the Alain Badiou of his early novels – reminiscent of Julien Greccq and Alain Robbe-Grillet – and the Alain Badiou of *Theory of the Subject*...

When I was young, the idea of a philosophical fiction and a fictional philosophy terrified me. This is likely the reason why I remain impervious to the importance of some writers, such as Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, and to others stamped with a *poetic desire*, such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy.

I hold persistently to a structural distinction between discourses. I hope it's not the case that novelists are the lords of philosophy, or that philosophers are the lords of novels.

My aesthetic dictum could in general be the following: "equal but distinct." It is for this reason that I am neither a reactionary (whose motto would be: "distinct and unequal") nor a postmodernist ("equal and indistinct"); my objective is to distinguish all things without ordering them absolutely. In my own life, I also try to distinguish art from philosophy as much as possible, without giving either priority over the other.

My philosophy may appear radical or extravagant. But my novels couldn't be considered as belonging to the avant-garde. I'm more interested in description, narrative, and character. My philosophy embraces the possibility of accelerating to the limits, by stripping things of their experiential determinations. My narratives value the possibility of decelerating thought by affecting an experience (joy, sadness, melancholia, or an impression).

Since internal conflict between philosophy and fiction is inevitable, I often write novels or short stories *against* my philosophical convictions, or try to demonstrate some truth *against* my own fiction.

My whole life structures this schizophrenia. Defending one's own interests can be a rather bland affair. But being a philosopher affords the rare possibility of disinterestedness, of comprehending everything, and of arguing against whoever proves said philosopher wrong.

I deny that any particular argument can establish its own validity. I have at least two different kinds of argument in mind: one leads to theory and the other to literary fiction. My daily life consists in my spatial transformation through this struggle.

**Graham – *Form and Object* is split into two unequal parts: “Formally,” and the longer “Objectively.” Please tell us about the difference between the two parts.**

**Tristan** – The whole book is presented as if it were the expression of a dualism. This is only partially true. The first part (the formal part) is concerned with the conceivability of an atomic, solitary thing, abstracted from all relations to any other thing. For me, the aim of metaphysics is to account for the relations between entities (identity and difference, causality, properties, classification...). The ontology defended in the first part of the book consists in a *minimalization* of metaphysics: a solitary, unique, and equivalent thing that the ontology obtains is related to no other thing, but only related to “something-other-than-a-thing” (the world). And this thing consists in the minimal relation between *that which is the thing* and *that which the thing is*. The ontology remains metaphysical in some way, since it conceives of *the* minimal relation, the weakest possible relation: thinghood.

Conversely, the metaphysics deployed in the second book assigns objective determinations to the ontology of things via an order of relations between each thing and other things, and between each thing and itself – an *object*, for me, is something in relation to another thing (something else or itself). This allows me to reconstruct orders of relations, extensive and intensive differences, and to redefine time, living things, animality, humanity, representations, values, and so on.

I believe that it is possible to practice metaphysics through the assignment of determinations. But unlike with Hegelians, the ontology can short-circuit this assignment at each stage of its construction, wherein parts and whole, *small* things and *big* things, are equally something.

Ontology could be described as flat, like a measuring line of metaphysics, rather than its foundation or ground. Metaphysics redefines the order of groundless and boundless entities. Objects are only ordered *between each other*. A world, or

a whole, exists, but it only contains one thing at a time. Objects are some objects in other objects; things are alone and in the world. Objects are in the metaphysical domain (the second part: “Objectively”). Things are in the ontological domain (the first part: “Formally”). Ontology is the possible weakening of metaphysics at each moment of its development; it is both what makes metaphysics possible and prevents it from completion. No metaphysical world exists; no cosmos contains the totality of objects. A world only exists with each thing. The first part of the book conceives of this “mere thing,” and develops a minimal and impoverished ontology. Both parts are equally important, though the second part happens to be more encyclopedic, and more interested in the baroque wealth of relations between objects.

The book involves a twofold configuration: first, to conceive of a solitary, unique, and equivalent thing; and, second, to demonstrate that nothing is outside the world, that anything is “something” in the world, and to order objects in each other.

Imagine a two-dimensional plane. The vertical axis, the metaphysical axis, pertains to the order of objects, their determinations and relations, from parts to whole, from simples to composites. The horizontal axis, the ontological axis, pertains to the distinction of each thing, which allows some guarantee that no entity, as valueless as it may be, is nothing, and that no entity, as important as it may be, is everything.

The aim of *Form and Object* is to proceed from this distinction between an ontology of things in the world and a metaphysics of objects in the universe: ontology is the flattening of metaphysics.

**Graham – Your “flat ontology” is even flatter than most, since you not only allow for discussions of all objects, but even of parts of objects and of instantaneous events. One obvious influence here is Alexius Meinong, who is now read more widely among analytic philosophers despite coming from the same Austrian school of philosophy as Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. What do you take from Meinong’s position?**

**Tristan** – My aim is indeed to flatten metaphysics. But it is also to obtain the biggest possible world without excluding *a priori* any entity. I consider any entity like any other entity, and assign the most minimal possible determination to each. I read your work while finishing *Form and Object*, and it seemed that from this perspective at least, our projects were similar.

Like you, I am a reader of Meinong, but not a Meinongian, since my reading of Meinong is rather unorthodox. What interests me in Meinong is the modern discovery of what I call a way of thinking *with a weak ontological constraint*. To better understand what I mean by this, a *strong ontological constraint* must first be defined. Take a strong ontological constraint, like the law of non-contradiction: if an object both is (if it is something) and is not (if it is an object 'which is not'), then a contradiction follows. Therefore, an object *is necessarily an object*.

Strong ontological constraints consist, then, in claiming that the ontological priority of being (or of one of its determinations, depending on the force of the applied constraint – being real, being material, being concrete...) over the object: no object exists without first being. The more being has some determination, the more the constraint reinforces itself: no object exists without *being real* (realist ontological constraint); no object exists without *being natural* (naturalist ontological constraint); no object exists without *being material* (materialist ontological constraint).

The analytic ontological constraint often consists in determining being through non-contradictoriness: no object exists without *being non-contradictory*.

Yet Meinong's philosophy is not interesting because of this, but rather because his work marks the emergence of the modern idea of a *weak* ontological constraint. His problem is different. By "object" or "something," he just means *any phenomenon*, whatever its determination. Otherwise, some things are "less-than-things," entities necessarily denied as being "something" robustly and completely determined. How is it possible to deny something the role of being something?

Between the strong and weak ontological constraints, I believe that a fundamental dilemma takes shape – it appears as early as the *Parmenides*, but continues to this day. In both cases, we find contradictions. By applying a strong ontological constraint, we produce *nonexistent things*. By applying a weak

ontological constraint, we produce *things both nonexistent and existent*. Either the contradiction undermines being, or the contradiction undermines entities.

It's a choice between the two constraints.

What I draw from Meinong (as you do, I believe) is the conviction that we must carve up the world in favor of a weak ontological constraint. We must take thinghood rather than being as primitive, and conceive of entities beyond being and non-being, because from an ontological point of view, the weakest ontology is paradoxically the strongest.

“Something” is the weakest.

I think that the concept of “thing” is in reality so *weak* that something less is immediately something more. When you try to conceive of anything which cannot be something, you conceive of something; when you want to exclude this or that from the domain of things, you make something more of this or that. The singular potential of things that holds to this configuration of extreme weakness is counterintuitive.

But we could in this way redefine *something* as that which, when one negates it, one equally affirms it, neither more nor less than when one affirms it.

“Thinghood” is therefore a determination of being that is so weak that its negation turns into its affirmation.

I believe that thinghood just is the weakest determination of being, but is not absolutely indeterminate.

By discovering this extraordinary potential of the weakness of something, beyond being and non-being, Meinong put to rest claims grounded on a strong ontological constraint, which continue to hold that only that which is material, real, non-contradictory... exists.

**Graham – So, why do you ultimately move away from the Meinongian position?**

**Tristan** – First, Meinong talks of a “something” which is even more determinate than “something” in my ontology. In some way he draws from Brentano, and accepts the intentional structure of consciousness, in such a way that the object

is first defined in relation to consciousness, through its “intentional inexistence.” An object has no intentionality.

This is crucial because Meinong does not really ever get out of this Brentanian structure by postulating a separation between *consciousness* and *objects*. A table can relate to a glass of water; but this relation is always mediated by and for an intentional act – it so happens, for Meinong, that “knowledge” (*Erkenntnis*) is taken in the widest possible sense. In my own terms, Meinongian objects have a strong epistemological constraint. By contrast, in *Form and Object*, I defend a concept of thinghood that abstracts from our knowledge of things.

Far from defining an object by its non-intentionality or making an object an *a priori* privilege of consciousness, I believe that it is possible to extend the ecstatic property of intentionality to all things. In Sartre’s beautiful work on Husserlian intentionality, he claims that, if it is possible that I enter into a consciousness, since every consciousness is a “consciousness of” something, then I would also be outside of consciousness, since consciousness is not in itself, but outside itself.

Now, this “transcendental topology,” common to all of the direct or indirect students of Brentano, reproduces the modern schema that distinguishes between non-human (contained within itself) and human (this “animal contained outside itself,” writes Paul Valéry). If this *a priori* constraint that anthropology applies to beings is implausible, there is still no reason to believe that only humans or consciousness or *Dasein* are outside themselves: each thing is also outside itself.

Entering into a thing is going outside it. The table is not in the table, but outside itself, in its environment. Ultimately, the table is in everything except itself, in the world. Each thing is therefore emptied of itself, and exiled outside itself. And a thing, whether it is known or unknown, just is the difference between *what enters into the thing* and *that into which the thing enters*.

My aim is to yield a concept of thing with even weaker determinations than Meinong’s.

From this point of view, the task of ontology is not, as it was for Leibniz, to conceive of the *ens perfectissimum*, so perfect that nothing more perfect could be conceived, but to conceive of the *ens infirmissimum*, a being so weak that nothing weaker could be conceived.

**Graham – The same analytic philosophers who read Meinong often assume that Bertrand Russell was victorious in their famous dispute. You apparently do not agree. In what way does Russell’s critique fail?**

**Tristan** – I believe that Russell’s reading is erroneous due to power struggles in modern thought. Russell and those who followed him, like other thinkers of other philosophical traditions, believed that the force of arguments could definitively carry the day, by ontologically determining possible objects of thought. But I believe that modernity consists precisely in our discovery of weaker possibilities, which systematically led to a weakening of ontological constraints. How I define thinghood is a continuation of this weakening.

Our contemporary infatuation with “things” means that we are confronted on a daily basis with possibilities which defy us by their extreme weakness: any thing can be equally something. While arguments may defend the impermissibility that this or that is something, assigning determinations only to that which is *actually* or *concretely* something, we are nonetheless overwhelmed by things, and passively submit to them, rather than actively being something among things.

The aim of my work is to actively realize reification, rather than endure reification as if it were some kind of permanent alienation.

**Graham – You have said in the past that the Frankfurt School had a strong early influence on you. But this is not immediately obvious from the names and themes mentioned in *Form and Object*. Have you put the Frankfurt School behind you, or has the influence of this tradition been sublimated in subtler form in the book? Where, in *Form and Object*, can we find the Frankfurt imprint if we look closely enough?**

**Tristan** – The idea of critique is still attractive to me. But my work rests on the intuition that critical philosophy, no more than analytic philosophy after Frege and Russell, fails with respect to things

Today, critical philosophers stand at a crossroads of influences (Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Bataille, Adorno). The outcry is always the same: “I am not a thing among things!” Let’s define the critical philosopher, committed to the *crisis* of modern philosophy, as she who defends and pursues exceptionalism, who tries to wrest

from things (from the common singularity of everything that is) something which is not a thing, whether it is negativity, Evil, the sacred, expenditure – it doesn't matter. The critical position consists in arguments against so-called positivism by excluding from things something indeterminable and irreparable: negativity, an absolute, some infinite, a "remnant" (for Agamben)... Some refuge must be allocated for subjectivity, protecting the latter from the positivity of things.

But critical philosophy, from Adorno's *Kulturkritik* and Debord's critique of the spectacle to Bourdieu's distinction and Rancière's emancipated spectator, insists that everything that is *excluded* is *included*, everything excepted is "incepted." Critical philosophers part company with things, aiming to distinguish themselves as subjects, as something more than things.

This is the problem of the "fetish character of the commodity and its secret" in Marx's *Capital*, and of reification in Lukács. One too quickly reduced this question to reflections on commodification; I believe that reification has a much wider significance in the critical and dialectical tradition. Let us say that it is the subjective discovery of an ontological possibility *weaker* than the constraints of subjectivity; this possibility is that of the "something."

So, while modern analytic philosophy rules out the possibility of something threatening to invalidate logic and rationality, modern critical philosophy quarantines the epidemic potential of reification threatening subjectivity.

The intuition of critics of reification is that a subject, by believing herself sufficiently capable of determining objects, is actually determined by the objects themselves. Critical philosophers like Lukács, Adorno, and Debord, experience the birth of a kind of "liberal ontology" which includes everything that is excluded from the domain of things: the sacred, taboo, the transcendental, the Absolute, the subject... Hegelians believed in the work of negativity. And modern Hegelians realized that this work made negativity, on the flip side, "something more than a thing."

Liberal ontology may for this reason appear truly *irresistible*. By affirming the movement of reification of anything that occurs, it is enough to swallow the thing-like status of no-matter-what, and to liberally welcome at the borders of the world everything that is by confirming that "it is something," anything (*what it is* not being the problem). Liberal ontology accepts equally as things both

what is affirmed and what is negated, and defends the extremely weak potential of somethingness.

However, every critical motivation aims to distinguish and discriminate among entities, in order to show that “this or that is not something.” But critique appears condemned to failure, due not to excessive *weakness*, but to excessive *force*. The critical spirit is too strong to carry the day against this liberal ontology, which succeeds through its own weakening.

Let’s put it this way: liberalism necessarily succeeds through the *weakening* of the cognitive constraints; critical philosophy necessarily fails through the *reinforcement* of the cognitive constraints.

Liberal ontology is more acceptable because it is weaker and more open. It accepts as so many singular things everything that is, whether it is true, false, good, bad, beautiful, ugly, individual, or collective – *it doesn’t matter*.

I am preoccupied with the following problem: at the end of modernity, the critical philosopher seems to condemn herself to failure through a lack of weakness. The critic’s constraints are always too strong with respect to something at work in history, which succeeds systematically through weakness, openness, and liberality.

The critical philosopher can surely persist in his denial of reification, in pursuit of some value, whether transcendental, Absolute, or negative. But negativity soon turns into positivity; it is because of this that I believe that the critical philosopher makes a strategic error. He believes in his success, as before, with strong ontological constraints; but a weak ontology that affords an epidemic propagation of things catches him off-guard and outflanks him.

The underlying problem is the following: how can we avoid choosing between two defeats? Either by adopting a (modern) critical spirit, which sets itself against the irresistible, or by adopting a (postmodern) liberal spirit, which capitulates before the multiplication of things?

**Graham – Many contemporary philosophers are quite demonstrative in putting political questions at the center of their work. Though your book is not entirely lacking in political themes, it would not occur to readers to call**

***Form and Object* a book of political philosophy. What is your view on the relation between philosophy and politics?**

**Tristan** – I don't pretend to be giving any lessons to my readers, and I'm suspicious of any ontology that tries to defend a determinate politics, as if my political beliefs needed to be grounded on the very being of things in order to have some kind of greater significance.

My ontology has no political *content*, but it may have some political meaning.

By presupposing that there exists no apparent liberal promise, which is not merely political, economic, or legal, at the foundation of modernity, liberalism falls prey to conflict, if not to a contradiction between ontological liberality and strong ontological constraints. By "ontological liberality," I mean the desire to conceive of the most extensive, most open possible world, which *a priori* excludes no entity, and would be composed of wholly equivalent entities. But, on the other hand, Locke's belief in the necessity of grounding the legal subject and property involves making impermissible the total distribution of entities, and guarantees (1) the distinction between subject and object (otherwise the object could possess the subject, which drives the Marxist critique of reification), and (2) the identification and re-identification of the object and of the subject (otherwise the subject who buys something would no longer be the owner of it a second later).

My claim is therefore that modern liberalism both accelerates and decelerates reification. It accelerates reification because it promises the endless multiplication of singularities, and gives equal ontological dignity to all things. And it decelerates reification because it requires subjects identical to themselves and objects (commodities, in this case) identical to themselves.

*Form and Object's* theoretical gesture may be considered as political insofar as it refuses to be critical, that is, to decelerate liberal reification, and insofar as it refuses to be liberal, that is, to accept the world of things as it appears to us. Fundamentally, I believe in the mind's capacity for *speculation* as intensification or acceleration, and I try to be more liberal than the most liberal of liberals, to be an ultra-liberal. I treat anything as a thing, but acknowledge the limits of such a liberal ontology.

What are these many distinct things that I consider? The thing that I am, the thing that I was, the table yesterday, the table today, each part of the table... In

order to arrive at the limits of reification, spatiality, temporality, and unity are insufficiently weak ontological constraints.

Flatness is the sole limit of liberal ontology. In contemporary debates, troubling caricatures of flatness are presented to us endlessly: the loss of values, horizontalization, the levelling of everything, reification, the ominous “everything is equally valid.” The aim of my work is to clearly conceive of something in which all these expressions are merely somewhat vulgar approximations of the belief that anything is equally something, neither more nor less.

I present an egalitarian way of thinking.

I claim that this flatness is the limit of all ontological liberality, and that one cannot go any further. Once this limit is reached, nothing (politically, economically, or legally) liberal appears to us sufficiently (ontologically) liberal enough.

If my project has a political meaning, it is therefore the following: not to reduce speculative thinking to a critical endeavor, but to commit the former to an *intensification* of ontological vagueness, a condition under which we live, in order to reach its limit, and allow us to conceive of new conditions. The function of thinking is not for me to resist reality, but to arrive at the limits of what reality is only partially, and not to merely live as contained within it.

**Graham – I’ve saved the hardest question for last, and it concerns your concept of *intensity*, which you don’t seem to mean in the Deleuzian sense. Please say a few words about the role played in your philosophy by intensity.**

**Tristan** – The position that I defend in my current research is the following: intensity is the constraint that ensures that an object related to itself cannot be itself (since nothing is in itself) and cannot be another object (otherwise nothing would be identifiable). An object can only be *more or less* what it is. An object related to itself is not an extensive part of itself, and it is not a substance in itself that corresponds absolutely to itself. Rather, an object is the minimal tension and variation of self to self.

But the concept defended by Bergsonians, Simondonians, and Deleuzians, according to which the world is merely composed of variable intensities, rather than entities, doesn't seem plausible.

I propose to break away from both the classical idea according to which identity is neutral and the contemporary idea according to which intensity is pure difference; rather, I claim that intensity is *the minimal form of the identity of objects*. Intensity is the minimal relation of the self to self of an entity in a world without substance.

Intensity is the constraint which from two things make a single object. For this reason, intensity is not a primitive element that can abstract away from.

The first part of *Form and Object* consists therefore in making conceivable a world without intensity and without identity, in order to understand that the world is not intense, and that intensity is a relation between objects, or, more precisely, between an object and itself.

Today, we are often promised a world and a life of pure intensity. Listen to the language of advertisements or personal development. The aim is to live *intensely*. Why? To feel oneself, to give ourselves a new identity... Otherwise, we drift away and lose our bearings, as things among things. Everything is necessarily intense.

But if everything is necessarily intense, then so too nothing is intense. The absolute necessity of intensity is its annihilation. I thus conceive of an ontologically flat world, stripped of all intensity, in order to have at my disposal something to *evaluate* the intensities of matter, time, life, animals, humans, beauty, truth, and goodness.

Ontology is in some way *depressing* because from things we can obtain some variable intensities continually presented to us.

Sometimes depression is the symptom of liberal modernity, since liberalism promises us this life of pure intensity, but ends in nothing, and has no referential point or line to measure it. "Mere things" are the best referential line of intensity, since it is impossible that they are more or less, and since they have no identity and are identical to nothing. Things just are the equivalence operation on everything.

In a way, the first part of the book conceives of this depression (or flatness) to avoid suffering from it; what it provides us with is not an affect, but a concept. Psychological depression might correspond to the fact that we only catch a glimpse of a world where everything has equal value, where everything is equivalent, where the individual, what she experiences, and what she thinks are things among things; but since depression is only an experience of flatness, this flatness remains rather vague.

I believe that by clearly showing that anything is equally something, the curse of modernity will be exorcized. Henceforth, we have at our disposal the absence of intensity as a measuring line of variable intensities of everything that matters to us.