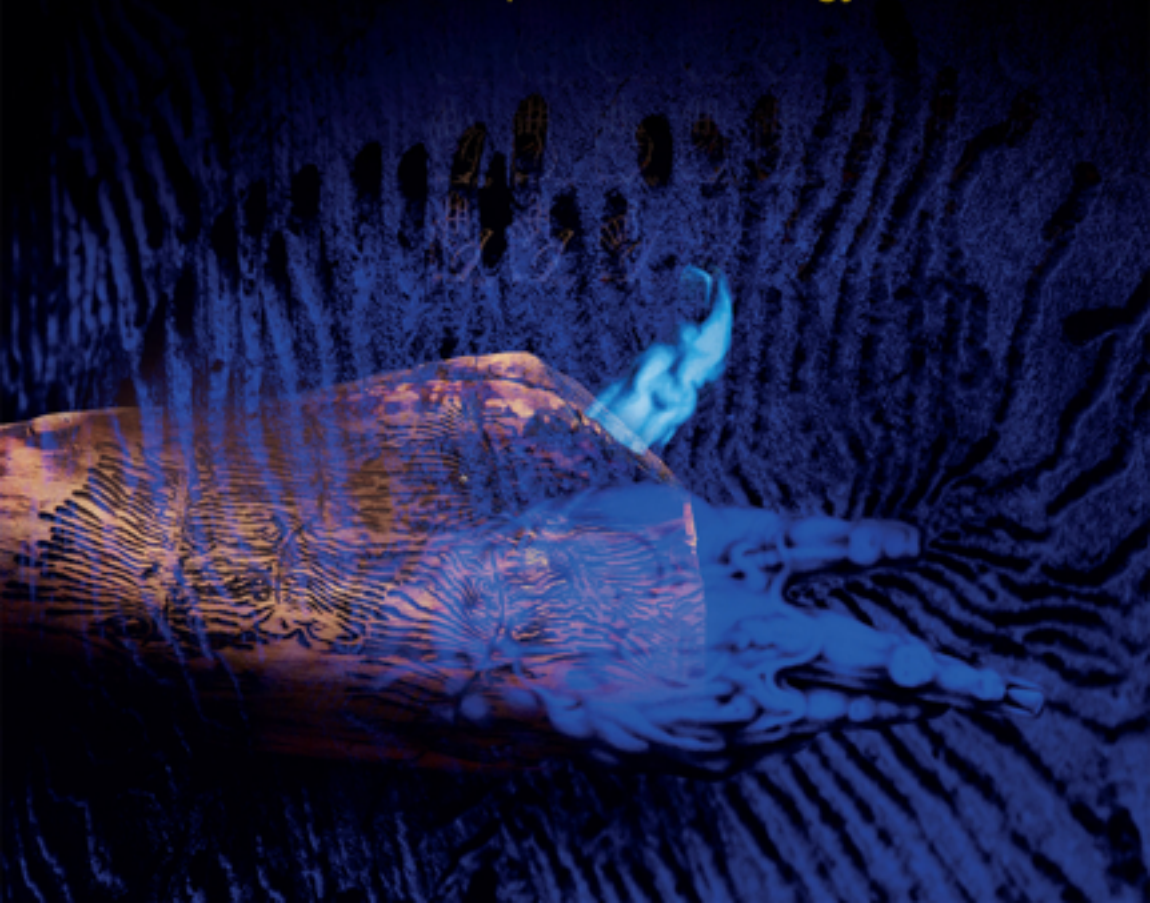# REIN RAUD

Being in Flux

A Post-Anthropocentric Ontology of the Self

Being in Flux

Being in Flux

A Post-Anthropocentric Ontology of the Self

Rein Raud

polity

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book started out as a few explanatory sentences at the beginning of an article, as it seemed necessary for me to clarify my ontological views. Sentences developed into paragraphs, then into passages and chapters. This is the result: the article remains to be written.

My sincere thanks go to Michael Krämer, Vanina Leschziner, Graham Parkes, Chiara Robbiano and Fernando Vidal, who read and commented on previous versions of the book or sections of it – the argument has benefited so much from your input! A deep bow is also due to the anonymous reviewer of the book for Polity, who found only praise for it, despite acknowledging that they disagree with me on all philosophical counts – I am very glad to know that such breadth of mind is still to be found in this world.

I am also truly grateful to John Thompson for hosting me as a visiting scholar in Cambridge in the spring of 2019, as quite a few among the central ideas of the book came to maturation during that period, and to everyone at Polity for their usual excellence and dedication in helping this book to see the light of day. Special thanks are due to Sarah Dancy for her sensitive and precise copy-editing.

My soul is a hidden orchestra. I know not what instruments, what fiddlestrings and harps, drums and tambours I sound and clash inside myself. All I hear is a symphony.

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* (1991: 8)

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most pressing task standing before the philosophy of our times is to articulate a worldview that would not have human beings at its centre, as the ongoing ecological catastrophe, on the one hand, and the emergence of artificial intelligence, on the other, are raising the need to rethink the role of humans in the bigger picture with increasing urgency. At the same time, ground-breaking discoveries in the natural sciences have shattered the very fundamentals of the way in which we think about being as such. It is therefore no wonder that ontological and epistemological debates have again acquired a resonance reaching a much broader audience than the circle of professional philosophers, and have started to engage intellectuals whose primary domain of work is something else, such as social theory, ecology, economy, or even health.

The need to rethink the basics of our ontology is also the primary motivation behind this book. Its aim is to provide a rational discursive framework for a post-anthropocentric[1] view of human subjectivity, its ways of manifesting itself in sociocultural identities

---

[1] I take the distinction between the terms 'posthuman' and 'post-anthropocentric' from Rosi Braidotti's work (2013), but I will be attributing a slightly different sense to them. For Braidotti, 'posthuman' signifies the rejection of the traditional 'humanist' paradigm based on a restricted, Eurocentric and male-centred view of what counts as human (2013: 13–16), while post-anthropocentrism is the upgraded version of this critique that extends, mostly by technological means, its perspective beyond that of the human species, integrating the dimensions of 'becoming-animal' (2013: 67ff.) and 'becoming-machine' (2013: 89ff.). The two thus form concentric conceptual circles, with posthumanism as the core. For me, 'human' signifies broadly all the specifically human contributions to the current state of the world, both good and bad, while 'post-anthropocentric' designates an order in which the human point of view no longer forms the natural centre of gravity. Thus, for example, the idea of 'animal rights' cannot be a part of the posthuman paradigm, because the idea of 'rights' as such is specifically human, but it is nonetheless

1

and ethical responsibilities – a view that would not postulate humans as discrete, strictly bounded individuals, whose perspective on reality would be established as the proverbial measure of all things. My goal is nonetheless to provide the prolegomena, so to speak, for a *social* philosophy first of all – a discourse and context in which we can discuss primarily human interaction, but without divorcing it from the broader environment, parts of which we are.

I have tried to pursue this goal by developing my theories of subjectivity and culture (Bauman and Raud 2015; Raud 2016), supplementing and contrasting them with ideas coming from various different schools and disciplines of thought.

In other words, this inquiry aims to present a systematic and thoroughgoing philosophical groundwork for the processual/relational turn in social science, advocated over the recent decades by many theorists (see, e.g., Abbott 2016; Crossley 2011; Dépelteau 2018; Dépelteau and Powell 2013; Donati 2010; Donati and Archer 2015; Emirbayer 1997; López and Scott 2000; Powell and Dépelteau 2013; White 2008). This turn has its roots in such discourses as Ernst Cassirer's 'relational concepts' (1953: 309ff.), the theory of 'trans-action' formulated by John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1949: 107ff.) as well as Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, and in particular his concept of 'relationism', which he opposes to relativism (1985: 239–44). Coupled with the embodied/enacted approach that has recently risen to prominence in cognitive sciences (see, e.g., Clark and Chalmers 1998; Fuchs 2018b; Gallagher 2017, 2020; Haugeland 1998; Johnson 2017; Thompson 2007; Varela et al. 1992), this view of social phenomena distances itself from the postulation of self-identical and continuous entities as the primary building blocks and participants of the dynamism of social reality. Together, these approaches have already made a significant contribution to how social processes and the individual person can be described and analysed.

In this book, I have tried to integrate and develop these views into a discourse that places both the self and the social into a still broader dynamic and relational context. What I am going to propose is a processual ontology of selfhood, seen as a momentarily existing field of constitutive tensions that refracts a multitude of heterogeneous causal chains, which are coming together to produce it, into a range of possible futures. This, as I hope will become clear in due course,

post-anthropocentric in that it has extended the domain where rights apply beyond the borders of the human species.

2

is not as complicated as it sounds. We are real in every moment of the present, and only in the moment, but we are what our past has made us, and what our relations with others let us be. Our being acts as a prism, in which the various paths coming from the past and the multiple links to our others converge and act together to transform the sum of all these circumstances into a cone of possible futures, from which one will happen, and if all is well, we have a share in choosing which one of them is going to be the actually taken road. This prism of our instantaneous being is itself also in constant movement from one moment to the next, as various forces on the field of our selfhood are struggling with each other in order to increase their influence on the decision of picking the most appropriate future from those available. A self is never in complete balance, but neither is it ever completely unstable and still a self.

However, in a more basic sense, this way of being is not unique to the human subject. If there is one central thesis to this book, it is this: on every level, 'being' consists in fluctuating tensions that constitute relational patterns, and the imagined stability of entities is derived from flattened images of such tensions observed from an outside perspective. This does not mean that entities are somehow 'not real', if by 'real' we mean the capacity to participate in causal linkages. Nonetheless relations never occur between self-same and continuous things, stable objects, or egocentric particulars, but only between fields of constitutive tensions, and they are always formed on many different bandwidths simultaneously. While I hold this to be true on all possible levels of observation, this is of particular importance for the study of social, cultural and political phenomena. In those domains, the proposed theory will suggest a new way to approach the classic antagonism between the determining supra-individual forces ('structure') and the pre-social egocentric particulars ('agency' in the traditional sense of the word). Current literature seems to offer only two main alternatives to their dichotomy: either to solve the binary opposition in favour of either side, or to move them so close to each other that they end in a dialectical confluence, co-determining or mutually comprising each other to the extent that neither 'structure' nor 'agency' can be really identified any longer. But a third option emerges from a field model of causality. If action is taken to ensue from the discharge of tensions, which always occurs on several relatively independent levels simultaneously – for example, when the judgements passed in court depend not only on the legal details of the cases, but also on whether the judges are hungry, as shown in a study undertaken by Danziger et al. (2011) – we can dismiss

the antagonism altogether and say that identifiable 'structures' and 'agents' only emerge as a result of conceptual extraction.[2] But this does not imply that processes just go on of their own accord in one great and smooth flow. Differences are ubiquitous and tensions evolve from them constantly. Causal linkages emerge from these tensions and the momentary attainment of a relatively stable state at one point always upsets the balance or creates new tensions for another. It is natural that we 'zoom in' only on those states and circumstances that are relevant for our own circumstances and agendas, but we should not forget it is our perspective that this relevance depends upon.

Thus, regardless of whether we are talking about nations or cultures, large corporations or small groups, or individual persons, bacteria, stones, stars, galaxies or, conversely, the minimal 'particles' of elementary physics – none of these ever abides in a stable balance, even if the speed of their change may be either too quick or too slow to be noticed from the limited human point of view. This limitedness is also the reason why we tend to impute an objectively existing structure to the outside world – this helps us to navigate it with the least cognitive costs. It is simpler to live amidst flat and mostly solid surfaces as well as abstractions of a mostly black-or-white, yes/no type. The feeling that these structures are mind-independently real is the more persistent because it is possible to construe narratives with their help that have quite formidable explanatory power. And yet there is a limit to this power that is much narrower than the reach of abstract thinking that the human mind is capable of. More importantly, the belief in the self-sufficient existence of such mind-constructed structures makes it impossible for us to emancipate ourselves from the anthropocentric perspective they tacitly imply.

Throughout this inquiry, my quarrel is therefore not with the assertion, correctly identified as realist, that there is a reality which

---

[2] Christopher Powell formulated a similar solution to this problem when he proposed that 'the concepts of "agency" and "structure" be understood as opposed yet complementary ways of parsing the same phenomena … This is not to say that any given phenomenon has both structural and agential qualities, mixed together. It is to say that any given phenomenon is entirely, completely structured, and at the same time entirely, completely agential' (2013: 198). However, in his radically relationalist vision, which is very close to mine in most aspects, this dichotomy is not really abandoned, but only reconceptualized in a less explicit form as the opposition between 'actual' and 'potential' relations, where the latter pre-exist the former and determine the scope of the possible – 'a relation exists as a potentiality prior to its being actualized through interaction', Powell writes (2013: 193). Thus, all of what happens has existed previously in virtual form, but not all of what exists virtually will happen. With this, I have to disagree, as it could be argued that a certain order surely has to reign on the plane of potential relations, and that can easily be extracted as a modified idea of 'structure'.

exists, as it is, independently of any observers. Nor do I doubt the fact that science provides us with the most adequate possible tools of gathering data about this reality. The problems start with the further claim that reality is structured in a way that approximately corresponds to our ideas about it, although, according to its proponents, this is a necessary characteristic of any realist worldview. This, I would say, is nonetheless not realism in the fundamental sense, but only in the sense given to the term by medieval scholastic philosophers. In the present context it should be more appropriately called 'idealism', because such an objective logical structure is an ideal thing claimed to exist independently of our minds.

Against this view, I will follow feminist philosophers of science such as Donna Haraway who maintain that the world is disclosed in a multitude of ways to different potential vantage points, regardless of whether there actually exists an observer who is physically present in these points and able to assemble the data available to it into a systematic vision. In other words, I hold that the claim of entities being real[3] and existing in the world as 'objects' roughly in the way we perceive them cannot be substantiated without taking it for granted that our view of the world necessarily has to be the standard one. Therefore, I will argue that whatever we know about our world is actually conceptual extractions[4] from it that have been formulated in a language that is particular to us. Neglecting this, I will try to show, has undesired and mostly unnoticed consequences, one of which is precisely that the structures we form in our mind, which often consist of clear-cut binary oppositions on different levels of abstraction, are projected onto the real world and thereafter perceived to be the reality that our minds and languages are imperfectly reflecting. A paradigmatic case of this is the tendency to credit anything that can be an object in the *syntactic* sense of the word, that is, appear in a sentence as the target of an action or observation, also with being an 'object' in the *ontological* sense of the word. It is quite

---

[3] Throughout this inquiry, the term 'real' will be used in two connected senses: (1) to be real is to be an indispensable part of a causal linkage; (2) to be real is to take place even if unobserved by parties that are affected by that particular causal linkage. This is not to say that airwaves are real, but sounds are not; the claim is that sounds only become real as 'sounds' when they reach someone's ear and elicit a response. Thus, the same happening in the world can be 'real' in several different ways, as a part of different causal linkages, depending on the vantage point.

[4] I will be using the term in a way similar to that of Robert A. Wilson, who constantly emphasizes that a cognitive procedure is not something that spontaneously reflects the world, but 'an activity that individuals perform in extracting and deploying information that is used in their further actions. It involves an agent enmeshed with the world not prior to or following but in the very act of representing' (2004: 183–4).

legitimate to say 'I can see the sky', but it does not follow from this that a thing called 'the sky' objectively[5] exists.

One of the methodical cornerstones of the discourse articulated here is the replacement of all distinctions of a black-or-white, yes/no type with gradients wherever possible. Such gradients may indeed have distinct, clearly definable situations (phases, stages) at either of their conceivable ends, or in the middle, as well as thresholds of significant transformation, but nonetheless they also contain grey areas, vague states, and intermittent becomings, and these arguably often form the bigger part of their existence span and/or are the parts of it where most significant changes are likely to happen. As the endpoint of this inquiry I would like to arrive at a discursive framework that bases human society and culture on a continuum not only with other life-forms, but also with things, natural phenomena, and any other way of existence, because only this, and not the premise of cutting us off from all other types of entities,[6] makes it possible to describe what are the specifics, if any, of being 'human' in this world.

It should be clear by now that I am going to reject the set of methodological axioms of 'hard' physicalism ('everything that is real can be most adequately described in the language of physics'), which is considered to be the prerequisite of scientific thought by a large number of philosophers. At the same time, however, I will admit the possibility of 'weak' physicalism ('everything that is real can also be described in the language of physics'), without, however, considering it to be very informative. The problem with 'hard' physicalism consists in its self-centredness – I am going to argue that there are real phenomena with real causal powers that cannot be adequately accounted for by their reduction to underlying specific physical processes, while a physical description, albeit often a clumsy one with little or no explanatory power, can nonetheless be constructed for them.

In other words, I will argue that the mental and physical vocabularies

---

[5] The privilege accorded to the human perspective has caused a shift in the meaning of the word 'objective', from 'what exists unperceived' to 'what exists as perceived by humans also when not perceived by any human'. Needless to say, I will not be using the word in this latter sense.

[6] I use the word 'entity' to refer to singular things extracted from the reality process by something or someone external to them and forming a relationship with them through this act, while the word 'object' is reserved for the traditional view of stable, self-identical and continuous things that exist as they are in the world independent of any mind and gaze. As said, I think that discourses relying on the existence of pre-given objects impose a structure on the world that is not really there, but which reifies and naturalizes the human perspective of things as the only correct one.

we normally use need not match each other on a one-to-one basis. Moreover, we need to be very wary about the tacit conceptual luggage the opposite view often brings with itself. For example, we may freely admit that all mental processes that we can think of are somehow also physical processes that occur in the brain – that is, *individual* mental events have an equivalent in the physical structures of the brain. But this fact does not mean that we are entitled to posit a self-same 'neural correlate' for any occurrence of a (similarly reified) particular 'mental state' or experience processed by the mind. More importantly, it does not follow from this that each aspect of the mental process we are accustomed to identify as one of its recurring elements has a precise, always co-occurring neural correlate across individuals – so that all fans of a specific football team, for example, have a number of neurons of exactly the same type associated with one another in exactly the same way located in exactly the same area in their brains. A claim of this type, put forward in the nineteenth century by the amateur physiologist and philosopher George Henry Lewes (1877: 313) as a conjecture, has indeed not been substantiated by neuroscience, and yet the impression one often gets from neuro-centrically oriented philosophical literature is that this is how things really are.[7]

Another often-met presupposition that the present inquiry will do its best to avoid is the Aristotelian view that any particular individual, thing or object as such pre-exists any relations it may enter into and should therefore be most adequately analysed on its own, removed from the context that entangles it in contexts that compromise the purity of its being.[8] I will be joining those who advocate the opposite view, according to which things without context are like the

---

[7] Alva Noë, introducing his highly convincing critique of this view, formulates as the doctrinal consensus of most neuroscientists the claim that 'for every experience there is a neural structure or substrate whose activation is sufficient for the experience' and therefore 'experience supervenes on the brain' (2006: 209). He goes on to show how this view is produced by an unwarranted shift from claiming that experience as a whole is partially dependent on the brain as a whole.

[8] This is reflected in Aristotle's theory of change, which is the actualization of a potentiality a thing has in itself that comes about as a result of a contact with an agent of change (*Physics* III, A201a9–202a13). Consequently, 'only in a fixed thing-like substratum, which must first be given, can the logical and grammatical varieties of being in general find their ground and real application … The category of relation especially is forced into a dependent and subordinate position by this fundamental metaphysical doctrine of Aristotle' (Cassirer 1953: 8). While Cassirer (as well as many others) has gone on to point out the incompatibility of this view with modern mathematics and natural science (1953: 36ff.), the Aristotelian view has proved to be remarkably resilient. Thus, Graham Harman, for example, formulates the 'Rule No. 1' of his ontology as 'Things pre-exist their activity rather than being created by it' (2016: 114).

unstable chemical elements that can be extracted from compounds in laboratory circumstances, but are not actually met in nature. Or, from another angle, they are like words in a dictionary, which can be supplied with definitions, but which only acquire real, functional meaning in phrases that are actually uttered and interpreted. A cleansing of contexts is not providing us with more clarity, but, on the contrary, obscuring our view. 'Things', in other words, should be viewed not as independent entities by themselves, but as elements of processes, where they are determined by their relations with other things, which they determine in turn. A theory that strives to account for things as they actually occur in reality cannot cast aside the embedded nature of their being in their world. Nor can we do that to ours.

A person, it follows from this, does not need to be continuous in time as a substance or 'thing', or even as a pattern, which persists even when the parts it arranges are replaced one by one, until nothing from the original remains. The only kind of ongoing stability that selfhood must have, on this view, is what I have called 'processual continuity', or significant overlap with immediately preceding and immediately following stages. The significance of this overlap, as I will be arguing in Chapter 1, is for any process inevitably bound to a vantage point, from which it can be observed and conceptualized. Such a vantage point, comprising the parameters according to which we can call something – a segment of a process, a part of the reality flux – an entity in the first place, need not be occupied by a real observer. It can be completely heuristic, such as the imaginary gaze that moves around among quarks and bosons, or travels in space at nearly the speed of light, or describes to us from the inside the life in an anthill or a bee swarm. Nonetheless, we need to conjure it as the perspective from which certain phenomena can in principle be observed and evaluated. To repeat: one of the central claims of this book is precisely that the human perspective – complete with the speeds, sizes and observed differences between, say, solid and liquid things – is just one of such perspectives among many, and the reality in which we are inextricably immersed can, in theory, legitimately be described from an infinite multitude of vantage points and not just the one our perceptual apparatus is suggesting to us. Moreover, it is our immense privilege that our mind enables us to transcend the boundaries of our own conceptually structured environment and at least wonder what is it like to be a different kind of creature or entity, as Thomas Nagel (1974) and David Chalmers (1996: 293) have famously done for bats and thermostats, respectively.

It is perhaps trivial to observe that things do not, in fact, pre-exist the reality that they are a part of, and should therefore not be described as standing still in an imaginary vacuum. Nonetheless, this is a circumstance often acknowledged and then immediately forgotten. It has been my ambition to present an argument that would consistently adhere to the habit of seeing things in flux, as parts of processes, frozen into bounded entities not prior to, but during their interaction with other parts of their reality, which come to appear as continuous things to them in turn. A process ontology, discussed in detail in Chapter 2, is also more compatible with contemporary theoretical physics than our common-sense view of material thingness as the paradigmatic case of 'being'. We know that, at the ground level of being, physics no longer claims to see indivisible, but nonetheless material and graspable, object-like building blocks, and philosophy should not so so either.

Building up from that base level, and always emphasizing the vectorial character of minimal instances of being as well as their selective openness towards some, but not all, of their others, I introduce a version of process ontology that develops certain insights of Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson, Nicholas Rescher and other process theorists into a broader discourse that includes accounts of internality, individuality, temporality, causality and other relevant phenomena. This discourse credits only the immeasurable 'now' with absolutely real, material existence, which nonetheless contains the past as traces of causal processes and the future as a range of possibilities. From any perspective, this 'now' is disclosed not as an organized structure, but as a field of constitutive tensions – a field without a stable centre, but with a multitude of points vying for this role. Just as, in the cultural semiotics of Yuri Lotman, a work of art cannot be captured in full by any particular reading of it, but exists as a space of multiple contradictory interpretations (1970: 86–7), the momentary state of any entity always consists in both striving for balance and falling out of it at the same time.

Process ontology has a long-standing association with theories of selfhood, as our own subjectivity can be seen as a process, the only process to which we have privileged access from the inside (Seibt 2018). Selfhood is thus the topic that I will address in Chapters 3 and 4, first turning to some presently widespread views of the mind, in particular its relation with the physical brain. Following the critical, but currently still minority, view that rejects the physicalist theories of mind and advocates a broader perspective, I present a number of arguments in defence of this position, while also claiming that

a process-ontological stance is better equipped to account for the various phenomena collectively called 'the mind' in the first place. I then move to briefly discuss several recent theories of selfhood and subjectivity in the context of the present discourse, showing how these, too, can be constructively read in dialogue with it. I conclude the chapter by summarizing the idea of self/subject as a field in constant transformation.

The final chapter of the book is dedicated to the problematic of agency and decision-making, which is viewed as taking place in an extended network comprising not only the whole body, but also its outreach into the environment and the significant others to which it binds itself. I will be joining the theorists who argue that the selfhood of real people is always embodied, embedded and enacted, as well as a part of an extended network, in the spirit of the '4E' cognitive theory (Newen et al. 2018). True to the process-ontological principles of my account, I see the existence of things taking place only in a context of dynamism, viewing instances of standstill simply as movement at zero speed. This is also the background against which, I suggest, an account of agency needs to be formulated – an embedded selfhood torn between different trajectories and motivations, rather than an isolated, sovereign mind forming intents and acting on them. In my view, agency consists ultimately in the capacity to stray from seemingly predestined courses of action (so that consciously staying on them also becomes an agentic choice), and I provide an account of mental causation to support the argument about how this can happen. The final sections of Chapter 4 turn to group theory, and I will argue, contrary to the prevalent view, that it is feasible to see individual selves as structurally similar to groups in which the members relatively strongly relate to one another, to the point even when we can say that individual selfhood, with its internal dynamic, is a particular case of collective self, simply encapsulated in one human being.

Before moving on to the actual inquiry, I need to apologize to those (most appreciated) readers of this book who are taking it on from the beginning to (it is hoped) the end, for I will be somewhat repetitive and occasionally come back to some of my most central claims for the benefit of those who only have time for separate chapters or sections. I will indeed also take it for granted that many readers, especially those accustomed to view these topics in the terms of the analytical philosophy of mind, may have disagreements with my argument already on the very axiomatic level, or in the way problems have here been formulated. But the world is changing at an

incredible speed and our efforts to keep up with it may often require adapting to or adopting the unexpected, so that alternatives to the habitual may potentially turn out to have more explanatory power than the received view, while being just as consistent and coherent, and possibly even in a better accord with the views of frontline hard sciences.

Moreover, what I have to say is a contribution to an emerging and ever stronger, even if polyphonic and not always harmonized, choir of voices. The main influences on this book will be easy to discern and include the classical process metaphysics of Bergson and Whitehead, the proponents of actor-network theory, primarily Bruno Latour (1993, 2005); feminist philosophy, in particular new views of materiality and the body (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; Grosz 1994); interdisciplinary comparative philosophical studies with a strong theoretical bent (Culliney and Jones 2018; Kasulis 2002); new approaches to ontology and epistemology (Bryant 2011; Gabriel 2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2018; Harman 2011, 2016, 2017); some advances of recent cognitive science and related philosophical analyses of selfhood (Chalmers 1996; Gallagher 2017, 2020; Korsgaard 2009; Noë 2006, 2012; Rovane 1997; Thompson 2007; Zahavi 2005, 2014); and, in particular, theories of extended mind (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Haugeland 1998; Menary 2007). The argument has further been significantly shaped by efforts at a dialogue between philosophy and 'hard' sciences. Last, but quite definitely not least, this inquiry is heavily indebted to recent work done in the field of social ontology, in particular the 'Cambridge School' (Elder-Vass 2010, 2012; Lawson 2019; Lawson et al. 2007; Pratten 2014), but also other theorists of similar topics (Jaeggi 2018; List and Pettit 2011; Tollefsen 2015; Tuomela 2013; Wilson 2004). Needless to say, my debt to Jeffrey Alexander, Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Umberto Eco and Yuri Lotman has been carried over from my previous work to this book as well. As readers more familiar with Asian thought will no doubt immediately notice, this inquiry also bears traces with my long-time involvement with various streams of it, and particularly the thought of the thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist philosopher Dōgen, to the engagement with whom I owe many of my central insights. Nonetheless, for fear of diminishing the intelligibility of the text for the Western reader, I have kept the discussion of non-Western thought traditions to the absolute minimum.

— 1 —

ONTOLOGY: SOME OF THE STORY SO FAR

The main aim of this opening chapter is to establish a working relationship with those sets of terms and views that have been most influential for the discussions of selfhood. I will start with an investigation of the fundamental and close-to-consensual assumptions that the majority of philosophers of mind share with one another, and proceed from there to other ontological discourses. Process philosophies, with which I will side, are treated rather cursorily in this chapter, however, because they will be the topic of the next one. In general, this chapter is not dealing with the ideas of particular thinkers and schools, but mainly points of view shared between them, with one exception: the 'object-oriented ontology' of the group of speculative realists receives more attention here, because it has raised a similar objective of providing a non-anthropocentric framework on which further theoretical speculations might rely. I will, however, try to show that the ontological premises of the theory place serious limitations onto what it can accomplish in this respect.

The argument will proceed from a look at how 'objects' have been traditionally understood and some problems this metaphysical discourse entails, namely difficulties in dealing with change and vagueness without resorting to essentialism. I will propose a double view of existential continuity in time, proposing that it may rely either on the substance (matter) of which the entity consists, or the pattern of how this substance is arranged. After a brief look at alternative views I will turn to a new and influential formulation of the primacy of objects, proposed by the school of speculative realists, who are my main opponents in this chapter, in spite of our sharing a common goal, that of displacing the centrality of the human viewpoint in metaphysical discourse – a goal which, I argue, they fail

to attain precisely because of their strong attachment to ontologically self-same objects. The last sections of the chapter discuss varieties of perspectivism and gaze, mainly relying on insights borrowed from feminist philosophy, as well as the theory of assemblages formulated by Manuel DeLanda.

My own position here is that of methodological perspectivism, which takes note of the fact that all entities appear as they are only to particularly cognitive architectures, and refuses to universalize the human viewpoint as the true measure of things – but this move is precisely what the belief in objects entails.

Objects and properties

A large part of twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy has been a critique of traditional ontology, even though attempts to defend it continue to be occasionally undertaken as well. In the analytical tradition, however, the ontological debate has mostly concerned details, while the foundational principles are mostly accepted as common sense. It is normally accepted that the world consists of objects, which have properties, or characteristics in the broad sense of the word. Objects can relate to each other and participate in events and processes. An object, naively defined, is something that has an existence independently of our perceptions of it, is self-identical and continuous in time; in other words, it can be claimed to be the same even if it occurs in different contexts at different moments. Objects are captured in concepts, which relate to the words we use about them as types to tokens. Although there has been, predictably, quite a bit of debate about the ontological status of objects, in the 'wide sense 'object' approximates to 'thing', though usually, when the 'independent existence' meaning is dominant, objects are limited to particulars' as opposed to universals (Lacey 1996: 234).

A classic formulation of these latter principles has been given by Bertrand Russell:

We have thus a division of all entities into two classes: (1) particulars, which enter into complexes only as the subjects of predicates or the terms of relations, and, if they belong to the world of which we have experience, exist in time, and cannot occupy more than one place at one time in the space to which they belong; (2) universals, which can occur as predicates or relations in complexes, do not exist in time, and have no relation to one place which they may not simultaneously have

to another. The ground for regarding such a division as unavoidable is the self-evident fact that certain spatial relations imply diversity of their terms, together with the self-evident fact that it is logically possible for entities having, such spatial relations to be wholly indistinguishable as to predicates. (1911: 23–4)

But universals, too, come in many guises – for example, metaphysicians often make a distinction between properties and kinds. As one of them puts it:

> Kinds are things like the various biological species and genera. Whereas objects exemplify properties by *possessing* them, things exemplify kinds by *belonging* to them. Philosophers who draw this distinction frequently tell us that while kinds constitute the particulars that exemplify them as what they are, properties merely modify or characterize particulars antecedently so marked out; and they often claim that kinds are *individuative* universals. What is meant is that kinds constitute their members as individuals distinct from other individuals of the same kind as well as from individuals of other kinds. (Loux 2001: 20)

What the theory tacitly assumes most of the time is that this description corresponds to the way in which the world is structured, independently from our minds and from the way our minds see it – in other words, that the way in which things are distributed among kinds from our point of view is the only relevant way for this to happen, and is therefore also valid for any other putative point of view. This is one assumption that will be rejected throughout this inquiry.

However, the scheme just described entails several other important and well-known difficulties. In particular, the view of change entailed by this position presumes some metaphysical commitments we might not necessarily be ready to make. The classic formulation of change comes from Aristotle (*Physics* I 7), who argues that a thing can remain itself and change, because some of its properties are essential (such that it must absolutely have them), while others are 'accidental' or contingent.[1]

But essentialism, were we to endorse and develop it, raises more questions than it solves. First of all, there is the matter of vagueness. An essentialist needs to be able to say how many trees form a forest, as simply 'many' is too ambiguous a property to qualify as essential

---

[1] In Aristotle's own words, 'there must always be an underlying something, namely the thing that becomes, and though this thing is one in number, it is not one whole structurally' (*Physics* I, 7, 190a13).

to define 'forest'. An essentialist also needs to be able to say at which exact moment a tadpole becomes a frog, or an acorn an oak, because a 'tadpole' and a 'frog' are defined by different sets of essential properties, as are 'acorn' and 'oak'. This is notoriously impossible and constitutes the problem of vagueness (see Keefe and Smith 1997). Moreover, an essentialist needs to counter examples that show how an object changes even while remaining 'itself', so to say. A carrot can be grated and boiled, as a result of which it has changed its shape, colour and taste, and to some extent also its chemical composition, so that presumably the only remaining property that it without doubt has in common with its initial form is its Platonic 'carrotness', whatever that means – and that is not accessible to perception. We can add a second floor and a terrace to our house while demolishing parts of the previous structure in the process, and it still remains our house. Similarly, there is the famous paradox of the ships of Theseus. In a tale, they were replaced detail by detail until nothing from the initial ships remained and it became no longer possible to say that these were the ships that had sailed to Crete. But at which point did that happen? The cells of a living organism are constantly replaced by new ones – and yet we do not question whether we are dealing with the same individual. How can it be said that there is a difference? Andrew Abbott's ingenious suggestion that the nature of a thing is that which changes most slowly (2016: 25) may provide a good framing for the concept in conventional discourse, but ultimately this view, too, entails a rejection of essentialism as an accurate view of reality.

Essentialism thus has a reifying effect on our view of things, imposing strict borders and clear-cut categories on phenomena that should more appropriately be seen as a flux. As objects are, on this view, entirely 'out there', essentialism naturalizes the distinction between contingent and essential properties of things, joining the latter in bundles that allegedly form mind-independent structures of reality. However, in addition to the ones listed above, there are many more reasons for rejecting the division of the characteristics of a thing into essential and contingent properties. For example, some properties of a thing can appear essential from one particular perspective and not from another. Food gone bad may look quite appetizing to a fly. On the other hand, a property considered accidental might, at a certain moment, acquire a decisive role in changing the existential trajectory of that thing. A minor technical issue in the engine of an airplane can cause a major accident. Of course, there are different

metaphysical strategies available for clarifying these issues, but they would not be needed at all if we abandoned essentialism altogether.

Two kinds of essentialism

If we don't want to do that just yet, we might as well distinguish between two kinds of essentialism, as one can, in theory, be endorsed without the other. A *particularist* essentialism is the view that the properties of a singular object can be divided into essential, or constitutive, properties on the one hand, and contingent, or transient, properties on the other. All of these properties need to be present if we are to claim that something corresponds to its individualizing label. It may share some of these properties with other objects, but an individual object has a unique list of constitutive properties that does not completely overlap with any other object. This list is maintained by the object through any changes. As opposed to this view, *reductive* or *sortal* essentialism is not concerned with the unique individuality of anything, but only considers properties shared between the members of a set, or class, as defining them. Reductive essentialism is what makes it possible for us to use terms such as 'house', 'dog', or 'book' for a large variety of objects – the 'prototypes' of Eleanor Rosch (1978) – that share only a certain number of properties with one another.

However, let me state this clearly: realism does not entail essentialism. I completely disagree with DeLanda's assertion that 'not believing in objects with an enduring identity … is unacceptable to a realist' (DeLanda and Harman 2017: 75). On the contrary: such an assertion of the fundamental correctness of the view how reality appears to our very particular perspective – endowing Husserl's intentional objects with an intrinsic, natural permanence of their own, if you wish – is going even beyond idealism. In no way does the admittance of a mind-independent reality imply that our descriptions of it can ever be gaze-independent.[2] Therefore, a view of reality, which is not already intrinsically structured into objects, properties, and relations as we encounter it, is completely compatible with realism in the primary sense of the word. I can fully believe in the existence of a mind-independent reality – that is, agree with the science fiction

---

[2] These terms, as used here, are not synonymous. 'Mind-independence' is an *ontological* characteristic pertaining to, or claimed of, the way reality is, while 'gaze-independence' is an *epistemological* notion referring to, or claimed of, certain representations of that reality.