Foreword:

Forms of Life, Human and Non-human

Han-yu Huang

Modern continental philosophy under the impact of the “linguistic turn” has often been accused of a reduction to analyses of texts, discourses, representations, structures of consciousness or subjectivity, cultures and social practices at the expense of material conditions and even authentic political action. In reaction to this, an “ontological turn” has been taken by contemporary theory. This ontological turn, or whatever name one may want to give it, seeks to reinvigorate materialism or object-oriented ontology and, accordingly, to invent new ways of thinking matter, objects, life and the real which escape the grasp of language and thought and vibrate beyond socially and symbolically constructed realities.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their co-authored works had already set forth just such a new ontological vision. By drawing on such tropes as rhizome, assemblage, intensity and machine, to name only a few, Deleuze and Guattari have pursued a totally different route toward a positive ontology of pure becoming, one that moves beyond the anemic Western humanist and metaphysical models of subjectivity, body, perception, society and history. For example, an assemblage (agencement in French), according to Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation, does not designate any set of predetermined entities; nor does it mean a chaotic collection of things. Rather, an assemblage in the Deleuzean/Guattarian sense brings into being a dynamic, complex aggregation of heterogeneous elements which can be, figuratively put, “the becoming-animal of men, packs of animals, elephants and rats, winds and tempests, bacteria sowing contagion” (A Thousand Plateaus 243), human and non-human, material and immaterial, organic and inorganic. Such assemblages and becomings transform the perceptible coordinates of space and time and bring to bear on the “universe of microperceptions” (248). Thus, for example, the experience of perceiving the movement of butterflies in Ming-yi Wu’s Die Dao (The Paths of Butterflies) no longer has to do with “butterflies” but with speed, vibration, particles of light and color, and so on: namely, with non-substantial, asubjective, accidental and
undetermined forms which resist reduction to constant properties and unities. Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of pure becoming, like Donna Haraway’s “cyborg manifesto” which announces the hybridization of machine and organism, so that now impure, fractured and denaturalized identities become our ontology, also helps us to grasp the central significance of Bruno Latour, whose actor-network theory argues for inclusion of nonhuman actors corporeal or incorporeal in our thinking of forms of life, society and reality, and more generally to come to terms with the ontological turn of contemporary theory.

Slavoj Žižek is another, if not the most vociferous and provocative, exemplar of this new materialistic trend. In radicalizing the Lacanian notion of the gaze, which keeps circling around but never reaches its impossible object and thus exposes the subject’s ontological lack, Žižek conceptualizes the materialization of the gaze as a “surplus of the Real over the Symbolic” (“In His Bold Gaze” 235; emphasis in original), a stain that sticks out of and deforms the Symbolic, transfixes the subject and resists intersubjective identification (“In His Bold Gaze” 255). The parallax gap, according to Žižek’s own formulation, is by no means concerned with the juxtaposition, displacement or synthetic mediation of multiple perspectives; rather, it unsettles perspective as such on an ontological level for it “separates the One from itself” (The Parallax View 7). That is, the parallax gap engenders the inherent, constitutive negativity in the order of Being, and to theorize such a gap Žižek calls for the rehabilitation of dialectical materialism, a move also suggested by his preoccupation with quantum physics. As a matter of fact, it is mainly by way of his Hegelian-Lacanian appropriation of dialectical materialism, quantum physics and Schelling’s pre-Hegelian dialectical idealism that Žižek intervenes in contemporary political and ontological debates. For him the material real is “non-all,” split in itself and characterized by forces that are always in conflict with one another. It is not any higher normative, causal and teleological principles but just such material conditions that make possible authentic acts and events (Žižek, “Toward a Materialist Theology” 24). What has been ontologized, reified and determined emerges only when we impose measuring scales or epistemological categories on the undetermined potentials of the material real.

As Žižek’s long-term and loyal opponent, Alain Badiou has also intervened in contemporary debates regarding materialism and realism with his epochal, albeit controversial equation of mathematics and ontology (Being and Event 6) and his ontological (re)turn to the subject, the event, Truth and radical politics. For Badiou, Being belongs to the positivized ontological order of knowledge imposed on the multiplicity of being, while the event brings a new subject and new truth into
existence: an event, in Badiou’s words, marks a point of rupture at which “the ontological field is detotalized or caught in an impasse” (Theoretical Writings 100). To be more precise, a true political event disrupts the state of the situation or the metastructure that “[exercises] the power of counting over all the subsets of the situation” (Metapolitics 143). On the other hand, a political event has a universal impact, not in the sense of numericality—for it is not susceptible to counting—nor in the name of any common destiny and monumental history (Metapolitics 97), but in summoning subjects as the militants of Truth, subjects who subtract themselves from conceptual, identitarian categorizations or systems of counting, and who are loyal to the event in the post-evental truth procedure. In a radical break with the State, a truth procedure ultimately proceeds by establishing a measure for the excessive power of the State and liberating the infinity of singularity (Metapolitics 150). With such signature notions as that of the event, fidelity, sites, genericity and the non-existent, reiterated in his intervention in recent “Occupy” movements on a global scale, Badiou is making a remarkable contribution to reformulating the political in ontological terms.

It is, nevertheless, a group of philosophers associated with the movement of speculative realism, including Ian Hamilton Grant, Levi Bryant and Graham Harman, who have brought the ontological debate to the foreground of contemporary theory and into new philosophical terrain. Contributions to The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism (2011) have put forth critical responses to Quentin Meillassoux’s Après la finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence (2006)\(^1\), to Meillassoux’s reintroduction of idealism into ontology and his confusion of metaphysical with natural necessity. These essays are mostly preoccupied with the limitations of critical thought and attempt to envision absolute contingency in relation to transformation. Though they have their own specific contentions, the contributors to The Speculative Turn all pose life as an essential problem for philosophy. The book taken as a whole helps us to think life beyond religious and biopolitical rigidities, life with its own spatial-temporal complexity and vitality, life as something both human and nonhuman and thus as other than itself.

Since its inception, Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies has been dedicated to transcultural, interdisciplinary intellectual dialogues. Several of our special topics have been concerned with “life” and thus have promoted discussions of this issue from different perspectives: “disease” (January 2004), “animals”

\(^1\) English translation After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency is translated by Ray Brassier and published by Continuum in 2008.
Concentric 41.1 March 2015

(January 2006), “the humans today” (September 2006), water (March 2008), “affect” (March 2009), “bios” (March 2011), and “Agamben in transcultural perspective” (March 2014). The current special issue emerged from a symposium at National Taiwan Normal University on 23rd June 2014, a fantastic event made possible by my colleague Chun-yen Chen’s brilliant ideas and the teamwork of the organizing committee members, including Joan Chiung-huei Chang, Sun-chieh Liang, Yen-bin Chiu and Han-yu Huang. Special thanks go to our speakers: Fan-fan Chen, Kai-lin Yang, Shu-ling Tsai, Kuan-min Huang, Chao-yang Liao, Joyce C. H. Liu, Tsung-huei Huang, Thomas Carl Wall, Steven DeCaroli and Chien-heng Wu. In the symposium, we discussed Agambenian form-of-life in relation to the ideas of Ricoeur, Deleuze, Bataille, Nietzsche and Spinoza.

A key issue was and is that “forms” need to be seen not only as norms and rules, but also as narratives, praxes, dynamics, rhythms, and so on. A form-of-life resists or, in Agambenian terms, profanes the political-ontological distinction between zoë and bios, the proper and improper body; it is a life of potentiality and becoming, a life that lives up to its own form; it goes beyond the sovereign decision on life and death and beyond the sovereign production of bare life. To embrace this form-of-life is to recognize, or even to celebrate, the inward void of life. But this void does not mean non-being in its ordinary, nihilistic sense. I would suggest that we can see it as being congenial to a working-through and to subjective destitution in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms: if redemption has any meaning in psychoanalysis, it will be a kind of recognition of what is already beyond redemption. Now, the void in question means life emptied of predetermined purposes or a predetermined telos; it is life now seen as means without ends, life that unsettles the calculation of means in proportion to ends. Form-of-life understood in this way is concerned with an antonymic logic: it involves a process of becoming-less, which is at the same time a process of becoming-more and of becoming more authentic. Thus, the concept of form-of-life also challenges us to rethink the meanings of active and passive: if a life of potentiality means a kind of passivity, it is a very unique kind of passivity which may even be seen as an active passivity.

Based on the above concepts, then, we could argue about the political-ethical significance of the/a form-of-life. This term, after all, opens up a space that could include various forms of life, values, intensities or singularities in tension with each other; the total domain or economy of “life” lies beyond calculation and management. Here one might also refer to Karatani’s embrace of the mode of “exchange” in his The Structure of World History, where we see that form-of-life is congenial to a mode of exchange between beings, bodies, affects, self and other, be
they organic or inorganic, material or immaterial, human or nonhuman. All these ideas, of course, have significant implications for ecological discourses and politics as well as for geopolitics and international finance. When we conceive and live life not from the perspective of a telos but from that of life as it is, we seem to move from the realm of the for itself back to that of the in itself which, of course, has nothing to do with any transcendental entity. This form-of-life suspends or makes inoperative the so-called anthropological machine; it is the power of life itself rather than a power over life. However, we may still speculate as to whether such a notion of form-of-life can help us to do away with humanist metaphysical presuppositions. Eugene Thacker in his In the Dust of the Planet imagines a world that is radically Other, absolutely non-human, a world that resists any possibility of human intervention. Is it possible to imagine having any sort of ethical or aesthetic relation (or even non-relational relation) to a world that is totally devoid of human beings, of the trace of human beings?

The authors of the essays in this special issue present various itineraries for thinking life in its ontological, political and aesthetic aspects. Chien-heng Wu situates Agamben’s form-of-life in the larger context of his political philosophy and aims at an integration of radical ontological politics based on the idea of a potentiality which allows for political dissensus. Joyce C. H. Liu puts forth an Agambenian critical analysis of the neo-liberal capitalist aestheticization of people’s bodies and of their daily lives. Kuan-min Huang undertakes a genealogical survey of the concept of form of life and explores the ways in which “landscape” speaks to us about life as a potentiality and a vital force. Tsung-huei Huang looks at how animal “art” reframes our thinking about life, and more particularly about how non-human animals’ carcases remain to challenge our gaze at, and our ethical relation to, the Other. These authors’ contributions indeed give form to the life of this special issue, a form and a life that may hopefully spark future dialogues and discussions.

Works Cited


