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Fields of Sense and Formal Things: The Ontologies of Tristan Garcia and Markus Gabriel

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Abstract: A striking feature of the relatively new philosophical genre of speculative realism is that it includes theories that explicitly seek to bridge or overcome the divide between analytic and continental philosophy. Two such theories are Markus Gabriel's ontology of fields of sense and Tristan Garcia's ontology of formal things. Both theories hold that all entities – be they physical, mental, fictional, technical, or otherwise – are equally and irreducibly real. This article first describes the core features of these ontologies. This provides insight into these theories themselves and also gives us a glimpse of what philosophy 'beyond the divide' might look like. In addition, both theories are shown to be examples of what I will call 'relational' philosophy, or philosophy that exhaustively defines entities in terms of how they appear to or feature in other entities. I argue that all such philosophies are haunted by the 'infinite deferral of specification,' a specific problem that I argue renders them inconsistent. Finally, I oppose such 'relationist' philosophies to 'substantialist' ones, and suggest that this distinction might one day succeed the division between analytic and continental philosophy.

Keywords: Tristan Garcia, Markus Gabriel, Form and Object, Fields of Sense, Speculative Realism, Relationism, Substantialism

1 Introduction: Beyond the divide

The recent emergence of speculative realism marks an interesting development in contemporary philosophy.¹ Speculative realism is a diverse genre of metaphysical theories that are united by their rejection of 'correlationism.'² Correlationism is the idea that we cannot have meaningful thoughts about reality as such, but only about the correlate between thinking and being. A philosophy is correlationist if it limits itself to theorizing what entities (of whatever kind) are and do in relation to human beings, thereby remaining silent on what such entities are in themselves and how they affect each other when humans are not on the scene. Correlationism is a central feature of, for instance, many strands of phenomenology.³ Speculative realists reject this constraint and offer various ways to theorize reality in and of itself – while of course fiercely disagreeing on what that reality actually is.

Remarkably, several theories in this genre are equally influenced by analytic and continental philosophy, such that it no longer seems possible to classify them as belonging to either type. Two such theories are the ontologies proposed by Markus Gabriel and Tristan Garcia.⁴ As we will see, Gabriel and Garcia both argue that everything is equally real, meaning that nothing is a mere derivative or representation that could be

¹ See Bryant et al., *The Speculative Turn* for an introduction.

² See Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

³ As discussed in Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology*.

⁴ Another example is Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound* (2007), but his work is beyond the scope of this article.

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reduced to a presumably more fundamental and real substance, process, or structure.⁵ Both theories grant disparate entities such as thoughts, atoms, continents, Han Solo, chainsaws, perceptions, and fingernails the exact same ontological status.

Gabriel explicitly situates his ontology beyond the analytic/continental divide, which he regards as a merely sociological division that does not reflect substantial philosophical differences.⁶ The ontology presented in his *Fields of Sense* certainly provides support for this view. Gabriel develops his arguments in polemical engagements with thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Alain Badiou, Bruno Latour, Gottlob Frege, and Saul Kripke – and the result is a clearly articulated theory rather than strained associations between impossible schools of thought. Garcia also has a background in both styles of philosophy, and he writes that the ontology in *Form and Object* was “born from a personal tension between the analytical and dialectical ways of thinking.” The resulting theory, Garcia tells his readers, is no longer structured by either method.⁷ In an extensive analysis of Garcia’s ontology, Jon Cogburn agrees that despite drawing from both traditions, Garcia’s philosophy can no longer be defined as either ‘analytic’ or ‘dialectic’ (i.e. continental).⁸ Garcia’s and Gabriel’s theories, then, are serious and refreshing attempts to construct new ontologies that draw inspiration from analytic as well as continental philosophy, without belonging to either camp.

One response to these ontologies would be to investigate how they (attempt to) bridge the traditional divisions between analytic and continental philosophy. This would entail tracing their elements back to pre-existing theories in either camp and reverse-engineering how Gabriel and Garcia have conjoined and transformed concepts and arguments that others would perhaps never try to combine. Another response, however, is to simply (if perhaps naively) accept that these theories do indeed bridge the divide, and focus our attention on what the result looks like. This second type of response is what I will attempt here. First, because both theories are sufficiently complex and interesting to warrant such attention. Second, because they are fascinating prototypes of what philosophy might be once the analytic/continental divide is no longer in play. Outlining their key features, strengths, and weaknesses will not just increase our understanding of these two theories, but also of what philosophy beyond the divide might be.

Sections 2 and 3 reconstruct the main features of Gabriel’s and Garcia’s respective ontologies. Section 4 briefly discusses some of their distinctive strengths and points of overlap. Most of the section, however, is dedicated to a major problem that haunts them, which I call the ‘infinite deferral of specification’ (a neologism explained later on).⁹ This problem is also my reason to discuss both theories, instead of just either one. Infinite deferral is not merely problematic for one particular philosophy, but for a wider type of philosophy that Gabriel and Garcia both exemplify and that I call ‘relationism.’ This is discussed in section 5, where I also contrast relationism to ‘substantialist’ theories. If, hypothetically, Garcia and Gabriel are at the vanguard of a generation of philosophers that will overcome (or simply ignore) the analytic/continental divide, then perhaps its successor will be a division between relationist philosophers on one side and substantialist ones on the other.

2 Gabriel’s fields of sense

Gabriel starts by distinguishing ontology from metaphysics. He defines ontology as the study of the meaning of ‘existence,’ which does not mean studying how entities exist in relation to us, but rather inquiring into

⁵ Garcia, “Crossing Ways of Thinking,” 15; Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 10.

⁶ “Graham Harman Interviews Markus Gabriel,” 2; Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, xii–xiii.

⁷ Garcia, “Crossing Ways of Thinking,” 24; *Form and Object*, 7.

⁸ See the titles of chapter 2 and 3 in Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations*. Graham Harman also mentions Garcia’s “strange analytic-dialectical standpoint”. Harman, “Tristan Garcia and the Thing-In-Itself,” 27.

⁹ How the infinite deferral of specification haunts positions such as those of Gabriel and Garcia is also discussed in my *Against Continuity*. There, however, the context is a brief comparison of Gabriel’s and Garcia’s ontologies to Gilles Deleuze’s metaphysics, the goal being to show that the latter has superior explanatory power. The current text aims to show that Gabriel’s and Garcia’s ontologies are worth considering in their own right, plus that it is fruitful to discuss the problem of infinite deferral of specification outside the narrow context of Deleuze’s particular philosophy.

existence full stop.¹⁰ Conversely, a metaphysics is a theory positing some unified total reality or domain such that everything co-exists within that domain (such as ‘Nature’ or ‘the Universe’). We will soon see why Gabriel’s theory of ‘existence’ leads him to reject the very possibility of metaphysics.

Gabriel starts by asking what kind of property ‘existence’ is and assesses whether it can be a ‘proper property.’ A proper property is “any property reference that puts one in a position to distinguish some object in the world from some other object or objects in the world.”¹¹ Proper properties serve a discriminatory function within a specific domain. For example, ‘...is yellow’ picks out objects within the domain of entities with colors. Gabriel argues that ‘...exists’ cannot be such a property.¹² It cannot distinguish some objects from others in the domain of cars, for example, because all cars in the domain obviously exist. It cannot even distinguish existing from non-existing objects, because proper properties discriminate objects *within a domain*. If there is a domain containing existing and non-existing objects, then there is a minimal sense in which non-existing objects exist, namely that they appear within that domain. Moreover, if ‘...exists’ were a proper property, then the domain required for the relevant individuals could not exist.¹³ If existence would, for example, be a property of cars within a domain (the domain of cars), then the domain itself would have to be a car in order to exist. This is absurd, because all cars evidently do not exist within an overarching car.¹⁴

The next question is whether existence is instead a ‘metaphysical property.’¹⁵ A metaphysical property is a property that all individuals in a domain have in common, or a property anything must have “in order to belong to the world.”¹⁶ For example, ‘...is blue’ is a metaphysical property in a hypothetical world where everything is blue. If existence is a metaphysical property, then the domain in which entities exist must obviously exist in some sense. But if existence is a property of entities *within* a domain, then the domain *in which* entities exist cannot exist.¹⁷ If existence were a metaphysical property, we would face the absurdity of a non-existing domain that must exist so that entities can exist, such that entities cannot exist because the domain needed to exist does not exist.¹⁸ This is also why Gabriel rejects the very possibility of metaphysics. There cannot be a unified total domain in which everything exists, because such a domain would lack the very property ‘...exists’ that all individuals within it have in common.

This rules out existence being a property of either some or all individuals within a domain. Gabriel concludes that existence is therefore a property of *domains* instead of individuals, and renames domains ‘fields of sense:’ “to exist is to appear in a field of sense, which I take to be a property of the fields, but not of the elements appearing within them.”¹⁹ For example, I exist as a Dutch citizen insofar as I feature in a field of sense (the Dutch legal system) that determines me as such, the number six exists by virtue of appearing in the field of natural numbers, and my computer exists insofar as it features in the field of my perception, my office, and countless other fields besides. This means that entities have no private properties or substantial attributes. Any entity exists solely by virtue of senses bestowed by the fields in which it appears: “To exist is to appear in specific fields of sense where the fields of sense *characterize* what

¹⁰ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 37.

¹¹ Gabriel, “The Meaning of ‘Existence’,” 76, cf. *Fields of Sense*, 43, 49, 55.

¹² Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 55.

¹³ Ibid., 77-78.

¹⁴ Ibid., 140 argues this using the domain of chemical objects as an example.

¹⁵ Gabriel also considers the possibility of existence being a ‘logical property,’ which is a property anything has to have “in order to be an object at all” (Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 43). I do not discuss his rejection of this option here, because his rejection of existence as a proper or metaphysical property already suffices to arrive at his own account of existence.

¹⁶ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 43, cf. 55.

¹⁷ Gabriel dismisses the option of such a domain featuring in itself in a chapter on Badiou’s set-theoretical ontology (*Fields of Sense*, 116-135).

¹⁸ Note that Gabriel’s dismissal of existence being a metaphysical property relies on a so-called inclosure paradox, such as described by Graham Priest in *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. A comparison of Gabriel and Priest on this point would be interesting, but lies beyond the scope of this paper. For those interested, the third chapter of Cogburn’s *Garcian Meditations* discusses Priest’s work in relation to the object-oriented branch of speculative realism (to which both Gabriel and Garcia arguably belong).

¹⁹ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 65, cf. 60, 75, 80, 158, 166.

exactly it is for something to appear in them.”²⁰ This is also the root of Gabriel’s anti-reductionism. For example, it is impossible to reduce all entities to microphysical particles, because such particles are simply one mode of appearance in one specific field (the physical universe) among many. The unicorn in the movie *The Last Unicorn*, a fictional and immaterial entity, exists no less than physical entities, precisely because it appears in the equally real field of the movie.²¹

Senses, then, are “rules of individuation that turn a domain into a domain and distinguish it from other domains.”²² They do not refer to the members of a field, but to “*a way* objects appear in a field.”²³ Take, for example, a blue, a white, and a red cube on a table.²⁴ How many objects are there and what are they like? For Gabriel, they are three cubes in one field of sense (such as a person’s perception) while simultaneously being billions of atoms in the field of physical entities, and possibly also a single unified object in the field of art. How different fields make them appear is simply everything that the cubes are: “it is important to think of those rules not generally as something projected onto the cubes or raw subtractive material à la thing in itself.”²⁵ All existence is existence relative to a domain, so that “to be an object is not to have a specific nature” and so that reality “is indeed appearances all the way down.”²⁶

It follows that there are indefinitely many fields. After all, existence is appearance in a field. If objects appear in a field, then this field must exist. This means that there must be a second field in which the field appears, and so on.²⁷ If even one thing exists, an indefinite plurality of other things also exist. Also note that there is never bare existence, but only “existence as this or that.”²⁸ This is because appearing in a field of sense is all there is to existence. If fields of sense made objects appear as bare particulars, then nothing else would be left to make them *this* or *that* specific object. Appearing in a field of sense must therefore always stipulate existence in a specific sense.²⁹

The objects in fields of sense must be understood as “bundles of senses.”³⁰ Yet the previous example of cubes existing in the three fields of cubes, physical entities, and art is somewhat misleading, because Gabriel holds that the number of senses per object is more often than not “infinite in quantity,” such that “objects appear in indefinitely many fields of sense at the same time.”³¹ As with fields, appearance is all there is to objects. There are “no substances metaphysically hidden behind their appearances.”³² Yet it is not the case that reality consists of two different types of entities: fields and objects. Instead, entities are functionally defined in that each is an object as well as a field.³³ Consider the play *Faust*.³⁴ Faust is an object that appears in libraries that own copies of Faust, the field of literary studies, and various other fields of sense. At the same time, Faust is also a field of sense in which objects appear, such as witches, mountains, and the demon Mephistopheles.

Gabriel’s ontology raises the question of what warrants the identity of entities. If objects are bundles of senses, then what makes *this* object remain *this* rather than *that* over the course of its appearances in various fields? Gabriel answers that “there is governing sense, as it were, that holds the various senses of an object together, and it depends on the object in question what kind of governing sense might play this role.”³⁵ As he also puts it:

²⁰ Ibid., 44 (emphasis added).

²¹ Gabriel, “The Meaning of ‘Existence’,” 76.

²² Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 139.

²³ Gabriel, “The Meaning of ‘Existence’,” 75 (emphasis added).

²⁴ Cf. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 224.

²⁵ Gabriel, “The Meaning of ‘Existence’,” 80.

²⁶ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 167, 168.

²⁷ Ibid., 159, 225.

²⁸ Ibid., 61.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 230.

³¹ Ibid., 230, 160.

³² Ibid., 346, cf. 299.

³³ Ibid., 233, cf. 167, 245.

³⁴ Ibid., 255.

³⁵ Ibid., 231, cf. 232.

[T]he identity of an object across the plurality of descriptions holding of it does not consist in the fact that the object is a substance to which we then ascribe properties, but rather in the fact that there is a governing sense unifying the various senses in which the object is presented.³⁶

To demonstrate the point, Gabriel uses the example of the governor of California.³⁷ ‘The governor of California’ is a field in which new objects (the relevant officials) appear after elections, and it is also an object appearing in other fields. The identity of ‘the governor of California’ is warranted by its governing field of sense, which are the electoral laws of California. The field of electoral laws guarantees that the governor will in fact always be a governor, and never suddenly a prince, baron, or pope.

If we consider a specific governor like Arnold Schwarzenegger, the same principle applies: “Arnold Schwarzenegger exists beyond any reasonable doubt. There is a relation between him and all the fields in which he appears that make him actual.”³⁸ If the Arnold born in 1947 is indeed the same entity that dies in, say, 2047, there must be a governing sense in which he constantly appears and that retains his identity as he traverses countless other fields. That the same Arnold has appeared as an actor in *The Terminator*, a husband in a marriage with Maria Shriver, and a governor in California is then warranted by his continuous appearance in some governing field A. Yet this field will also depend on some further governing sense B that ensures the identity over time of A. Otherwise, Arnold’s governing field could change into something else, resulting in Arnold one day waking up as another individual. Of course, B then relies on a further governing sense C, and so on *ad infinitum*. This leads to the strange conclusion that an infinitely large stack of governing fields that govern governing fields is required for Arnold to remain the same individual during the simple act of leaving his living room and walking into his kitchen. Gabriel might claim that the governing sense for any individual can vary depending on the situation, such that the relevant sense in this case is simply ‘Arnold’s house,’ but this changes nothing. The question then becomes what makes Arnold remain the same individual that traverses different governing senses, and an infinite stack of further governing senses is once again required.

Another strange feature of this ontology is that it seems unable to account for change, despite Gabriel’s remark that “there is change and creativity.”³⁹ Recall that fields of sense merely stipulate how objects appear in them, and that objects have no properties beyond such appearance. It follows that at this very moment, every existing entity simply *is* its appearance in countless fields, and the same is true for these fields qua objects. How, then, could Arnold ever leave his living room and walk into his kitchen? To be more specific, there is certainly nothing in Gabriel’s ontology that *prevents* this, because the ‘kitchen’ field can obviously accommodate Arnold’s appearance. The problem, however, is that nothing can *cause* Arnold to move from one field to another. For Gabriel, everything is fully actual in that it currently appears in its relevant fields.⁴⁰ If everything exhaustively *is* its current and actual appearance, nothing can ever move. If Arnold has no private properties and if ‘his’ fields merely stipulate his appearance within *them*, then there is simply nothing else left that could cause him to change by moving into *others*. Section four will argue that the awkward status of identity and change in Gabriel’s ontology is symptomatic of the deeper-lying problem of infinite deferral. For now, therefore let us move on to Garcia’s ontology.

3 Garcia’s formal things

Garcia’s ontology also grants entities a double aspect, albeit in a different way than Gabriel’s ontology of fields and objects. Garcia captures entities in their ‘formal’ being on the one hand and their ‘objective’ being on the other hand: “we must learn to see double, formally and objectively.”⁴¹ As we will see, entities

³⁶ Ibid., 237, cf. 264, 267.

³⁷ F.i. Ibid., 267.

³⁸ Ibid., 297.

³⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 81, 264.

⁴¹ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 15.

are formally equal yet objectively different. Formally, volcanoes, perceptions, rocks, splashes of color, and galaxies are strictly equal in that each of them is neither more nor less than a ‘thing.’ Simultaneously, each of those is objectively unequal to the others in that their existence is cashed out differently.

To understand this distinction between things and objects, we start with what Garcia calls “de-determination.”⁴² De-determining a tree, for example, disassociates it from its components, its properties, its past and future states, its effects on its surroundings, its being perceived by others, its evolutionary history, and so on. Briefly put, Garcia’s reason for doing this is that a thing can never be what is in it (its content) or what it is in (its containers). Bark and leaves are in the tree, but the tree itself is not. The tree is not a part of itself. Likewise, the tree might be in a street or in someone’s perception, but the street or the perception is not the tree. De-determination serves to ward off “compactness.”⁴³ There is compactness if an entity is posited as a thing *in itself*, which for Garcia always implies the absurd idea that an entity could simultaneously be a part and the whole in which this part is a part.

De-determination establishes the formal equality of all things. Any entity, whether a city, a sound, a person, or even a festival, is disassociated from its components, properties, actions, and surroundings, such that all that remains is simply a highly indeterminate thing. Thinghood is the alternative to reducing entities to “less-than-things” or “more-than-things,” to reducing them to their own parts or environment and thereby engendering compactness.⁴⁴

Yet if a thing cannot be a compact thing in itself, then what can it be? Garcia answers by defining being as “being in” or “entering.”⁴⁵ If a thing’s being cannot be being in itself, then being must be being in something else: “to be in something and to be something are equivalent.”⁴⁶ This allows Garcia to define a thing as “precisely the difference between *that which is in the thing* and *that which the thing is*.”⁴⁷ Note that the proper way to read this is that a thing is a difference between what is in the thing and what the thing is *in*. Also note that what we usually regard as properties of things are here simply more entities that something can be in. For example, if a peony is red, ‘red’ is something that the peony is in. This makes sense in Garcia’s philosophy, because de-determination does not leave us with any properties based on which we could argue that some peony is a thing whereas some red is not.⁴⁸

A de-determined tree, then, is the difference between that which is in the tree and that which the tree is in. This difference has no positive content. It is not a form, substance, or structure. We might be tempted to imagine a Garcian thing as a bag that separates its contents from its exterior, but that is a mistaken metaphor: “a thing is not exactly like a bag, for a thing is not a thin skin or a layer. Rather a thing is equivalent to an immaterial bag without layers. A thing is nothing other than the *difference* between that which is this thing and that which this thing is – between content and container.”⁴⁹ This difference is negative and merely refers to the fact that a thing is not (reducible to) whatever is in it and whatever it is in.

If we take the de-determined tree, what could be in it and what could it be in? There can no longer be bark and leaves in it or a forest around it. This is because de-determination yields a thing that is formally equal to all other things. Formally, a de-determined tree is equal to a de-determined car. Saying that there would be bark in the de-determined tree would amount to the absurdity that there is also bark in the de-determined car. That which is in a thing must therefore be de-determined as well. Could what is in a thing be another de-determined thing? This is impossible. As all things are formally equivalent, a thing in a thing engenders compactness. There would once again be a thing in itself. Garcia instead defines what is in a thing as “no-matter-what,”⁵⁰ ‘No-matter-what’ is not nothing, but rather “equally this *or* that *or* any

⁴² Garcia, “Crossing Ways of Thinking,” 20.

⁴³ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 61.

⁴⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 38–40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 118, cf. 13.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

other thing”⁵¹ This does not mean that ‘no-matter-what’ is everything, but rather that it is anything, in the sense of ‘whatever’ or ‘whatever it may be.’ No matter what there is, it must be in some thing, since being was defined as being in. ‘No-matter-what’ is therefore simply the ontological refusal of an *a priori* exclusion of anything from being in something and thereby existing.⁵²

That in which a thing is cannot be a thing either. The formal equivalence of things would again engender a compact thing in itself. Instead, Garcia defines that in which a thing is as its “form” or the “world.”⁵³ A form or world starts where a thing ends, but a form does not end in turn. Garcia explains this with the example of placing one’s hand on a wall and then starting to cover the space around it with paint.⁵⁴ In principle, one could continue painting indefinitely. This illustrates the idea of a form as the negative of a thing, a background of everything that is not the thing and against which the thing stands out.⁵⁵ As Garcia puts it, “that which a thing is [in] is its form. Matter is [in] a thing as much as a thing is [in] a form.”⁵⁶

Ontologically, only one type of relation therefore prevails: “the relation between a thing that comprehends and a comprehended thing.”⁵⁷ Comprehension is the opposite sense of being. To be a thing is to be *in* something, which means being comprehended by something.⁵⁸ A thing is a difference between what it comprehends and what comprehends it. This once again emphasizes that there is no such thing as a thing in itself: “no thing is a substance, an identity in itself.” Or as Garcia remarks elsewhere: “a thing in itself is meaningless for me.”⁵⁹

Yet entities have two configurations. In addition to things, they are also objects.⁶⁰ All things are formally equal, but objectively different. Garcia gives the example of the primitive sponges that some primates construct from leaves and twigs.⁶¹ Formally, the sponge, leaves, and twigs are equals: neither more nor less than a thing. Objectively, each of them is different. For example, it is clear that there are leaves in the sponge object, but there are no leaves in the leave objects. Unlike things, objects do not comprehend no-matter-what and are not comprehended by the world. The sponge comprehends specific leaves and twigs and is comprehended by a primate’s hands and perceptions. ‘That which is in an object’ and ‘that in which an object is’ are always other objects.

Like things, objects do not have any properties, substance, or structure in and of themselves. The rule that being is being-in also applies to objects. Consider the example of a table: “the table, neither as a thing nor as an object, is not in-itself. As a thing the table is in the world, and as an object the table is in other objects that give it *all its determinations and qualities*.”⁶² An object’s identity depends on “what the object is in or what one makes this object be in.”⁶³ What, for example, makes something a cloud rather than something else? According to Garcia, “because there are other clouds, it is a cloud in the sky – that is, in another thing, embedded, for instance in meteorological relationships of atmospheric pressure and depression, condensation and movement.”⁶⁴ A cloud is a cloud only because what comprehends it makes it so. It is always a ‘bigger’ object that makes an object what it is: “from an objective standpoint, being is having a relation to a thing [...] which has the same relation to other things.”⁶⁵ A cloud is a cloud because of a bigger object that literally *makes* it one cloud among others.

51 Ibid., 23.

52 Ibid., 21.

53 Ibid., 144.

54 Ibid., 142.

55 Ibid., 19.

56 Ibid., 143.

57 Garcia, “Crossing Ways of Thinking,” 18.

58 Ibid.

59 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 115; “Crossing Ways of Thinking,” 19.

60 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 78.

61 Ibid., 86.

62 Garcia, “Crossing Ways of Thinking,” 19 (emphasis added).

63 Garcia, *Form and Object*, 117, cf. 144.

64 Ibid., 146.

65 Ibid., 112.

But how does a cloud *remain* a cloud? As with Gabriel, exhaustively defining entities in terms of appearing or entering raises the problem of identity over time. If a thing is the difference between its contents and containers, then even the slightest shift in either of those generates a new difference and therefore a new thing. And if an object's identity depends on what comprehends it, then every new context that it enters generates a new object to replace it. Here, Garcia simply bites the bullet by denying the possibility of identity over time. He holds that "each instance of something, each event, and each part of each thing are so many things."⁶⁶ A tree at time t is one thing and the 'same' tree at $t-1$ is another thing, formally equal to yet ontologically distinct from the tree at t . The same goes for objects: "in reality, the chair of a second ago is something other than the chair now before my eyes."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it is obviously not meaningless to associate the chair of a second ago with the chair right now, whereas it is pointless to associate the chair right now with Botswana a second ago. Garcia therefore introduces a third object to 'unify' the two chairs: "the chair before and the chair after, not as *things* alone, but as *objects*, belong to a 'big thing,' in this case *the chair that becomes*."⁶⁸ But if the 'chair that becomes' is to retain this same type of 'minimal' (or rather: outsourced) identity in order to keep associating the 'chair before' with the 'chair after,' then a further object à la 'the chair that becomes that becomes' is needed, and so on *ad infinitum*. This results in the same proliferation that we encountered with Gabriel's governing senses.

Moreover, it is strange to introduce objects 'that become,' because Garcia defined being as nothing more than being-in. If there are objects whose being includes a becoming, then their being does not just comprise what they are in, but also what they will be and have been. If objects can be objects 'that become,' then they must retain some reference to past states and anticipate future states (and they must do so *in themselves*, one might add). Yet this is precisely what being as being comprehended forbids. In fact, Garcia's ontology seems just as unable to account for change as Gabriel's. Take the universe one second ago. Nothing in existence had private properties or substantial attributes. Every thing was exhaustively defined as the difference between that which was in it and that in which it was. Every object was exhaustively defined by its relation to whatever object or objects it was in. The being of everything was to be precisely where it was. There was, in other words, no friction, tension, motion, non-belonging or animation. Everything was in place. One second ago, the 'chair that becomes' comprehended the chair of one second ago. Currently, it comprehends the chair of one second ago and the new, present chair. Yet if everything was firmly in place, then where on earth did the current chair come from? Garcia holds that any object at any given moment is its comprehension by another object, full stop. If we survey Garcia's reality, there is simply no sufficient reason (not even just *a* reason) for anything to happen. Some readers of *Form and Object*, however, might argue that Garcia's notion of 'intensity' allows him to account of change and (minimal) identity, and the next section will discuss this option.

4 The infinite deferral of specification

Gabriel's and Garcia's ontologies have several highly appealing features, two of which I would like to mention here. First, their mobilization of both analytic and continental resources sets an example for all philosophers. There is no reason for any philosophical project to pre-emptively dismiss theories based on nothing more than a label. It is astonishingly foolish to work on a problem while assuming that decades upon decades of work in the neighboring camp has yielded nothing of relevance.

Second, their anti-reductionist ontologies offer an alternative to the strain of facile reductionism that runs through analytic as well as continental philosophy. In analytic philosophy, this manifests in reductions of swaths of reality to physical particles or neural activity. In continental philosophy, it takes the form of explaining everything in terms of power relations, linguistic or cultural determinations, and political oppression. Instead of claiming *a priori* knowledge about the causes of the world's problems and

⁶⁶ Garcia, "Crossing Ways of Thinking," 21-22.

⁶⁷ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 115.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

how to solve them (brains and more brain science! oppression and more political action!), Garcia and Gabriel remain agnostic about how thing/object or field/object pairs are cashed out in reality. In my view, this encourages curiosity, a willingness to learn, and a receptivity to surprises, which is a more productive attitude than entering any situation with preformatted plans.

Now, the field/object and thing/object distinctions are obviously not identical. Gabriel's ontology is at odds with Garcia's formally equal things, because the former refuses the notion of bare existence. Gabriel would dismiss Garcia's formal world of equivalent things as an unnecessary duplication of reality. Garcia's ontology is incommensurable with Gabriel's definition of objects as appearances in fields, because the former defines them as differences between what comprehends them *and* what they comprehend. For Gabriel, something like 'world' cannot exist.⁶⁹ In his theory, 'world' stands for the metaphysical impossibility of an all-encompassing domain. In Garcia's ontology, however, 'world' is the negative of a thing (everything that the thing is not). Garcia defines the universe as the "biggest possible thing," or that in which all objects are.⁷⁰ Conversely, Gabriel's ontology defines the universe as the field of physical entities, outside of which indefinitely many other fields exist.⁷¹

Yet there are also striking similarities between Garcia and Gabriel, and I consider those to be more fundamental to their ontologies than the discrepancies just mentioned. For both thinkers, there is no such thing as a thing in itself. Entities have no private substance, structure, properties, attributes or quiddity by which they could be and do anything qua themselves. Consequently, both authors define being or existence as being or existing *in* something else. In both theories, an object is therefore *this* rather than *that* because of how it features in another entity. 'What the object is' is exhaustively determined by what it features in. This is where the infinite deferral of specification comes in.

We have seen that change and identity have an awkward status in Gabriel's and Garcia's ontologies, but did not follow up on either issue. This is because in both cases, the awkwardness is symptomatic of a deeper-lying problem. Let's first recall that both ontologies are anti-reductionist theories in which cars, governors, electoral laws, trees, peonies, and chairs really exist as such. If there is to be identity and change for any such entity, then it must be specific. By 'specific,' I simply and exclusively mean that it must be *this* rather than *that* entity.⁷² If I embark on my ten minute bike ride to the university, the bike's identity is that I ride this specific bike for ten minutes, instead of suddenly riding my friend Tim's bike in the fifth minute and a rhinoceros in the seventh. Meanwhile, if my other bike is rusting away in my backyard, then what is rusting is this specific bike and not Tim's bike (let alone a rhinoceros).

Neither Gabriel nor Garcia grants a bike any properties, attributes, structure, or quiddity by which it would be this specific bike. For Gabriel, the bike's identity depends on its appearance in a governing field of sense. If the bike changes, this means that it traverses various other fields while still appearing in its governing field. For Garcia, every moment of the bike's existence is in fact an ontologically distinct thing. There is only a minimal sense of identity in that all these things feature in a 'bigger' entity: the bike-that-becomes. Change in the bike then simply signifies that yesterday's bike is "less present" than today's bike (which is to say: less present in the 'bigger' object).⁷³ This hinges on Garcia's theory of time, which is too elaborate to fully discuss here. Its basic outline, however, is easily understood.⁷⁴

For Garcia, entities cannot stop existing. The past does not refer to entities that are no longer around. The past refers to entities that still exist, but do so less *intensively*.⁷⁵ The Ottoman Empire, Christine de Pizan, and dodo birds still exist alongside the United States, Judith Butler, and parakeets. The only difference is that the former are less intensively present than the latter. This can be compared to how many of us experience their personal identity. We are what we are today, but there is also a sense in which we are what we were yesterday or years ago. We are fully immersed in what we are today, but at the same time our

⁶⁹ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 128.

⁷⁰ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 155.

⁷¹ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 105.

⁷² So I am *not* using 'specific' in the sense of being a species determined by a genus.

⁷³ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 182.

⁷⁴ Cf. Garcia, "Another Order of Time."

⁷⁵ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 182.

past selves are still ‘there’ and have an impact on our identity. There is a sense in which they keep featuring in us. All Garcia asks is that we also grant this to any entity whatsoever. Again, there is no room here to reconstruct the argument for this view, but the general idea should be clear.

The point of all this is that both ontologies establish the specificity of objects (and thereby account for identity and change) by a single-step deferral of this specificity to another field or object in which they appear. Let’s call such a field or object a ‘specifier.’ For Gabriel, a bike is only this bike because of its appearance in its governing field. For Garcia, the bike-that-becomes is what associates the bike now with the bike one second ago. Better yet, the-bike-that-becomes is also the only thing ensuring that the bike one second ago is the bike one second ago and not a rhinoceros one second ago, because no entity (not even one in the past) is accorded private properties by which it can be itself. All this hinges, then, on whether an entity can actually *be* a specifier according to either ontology, and this might not be the case. In fact, specification only *seems* possible as long as we merely focus on the specified object and *ignore* that the presumed specifier has the same ontological status as the specified object.

Let’s start with Gabriel. The bike is nothing in itself. Its entire existence is reducible to how fields of sense make it appear. It follows that whatever the bike *does* cannot be traced to the bike, because the bike has no private properties. Everything the bike does *is* in fact an appearance in one or several other fields which exhaustively “characterize” the bike.⁷⁶ The bike in itself can do nothing. But what if we look at one of the fields to which the specification of the sense ‘bike’ is deferred? This field A is also nothing in itself. It exists, but if we follow Gabriel’s definition of existence, its existence *is* A’s appearance in yet another field B full stop. By this very definition, there is simply no way that A can make an entity appear as a bike rather than a rhinoceros. Field A is neither a mold nor an agent that can *do* something to other entities. It is merely an appearance in field B and countless other fields besides. The same applies if we now focus on field B. It is not an entity that can *make* field A into something that makes bikes appear. Field B is nothing in itself and can therefore do nothing by itself. It can merely appear in field C, and so on *ad infinitum*. Specification is infinitely deferred to other fields, but one never arrives at a field with the features and agency required to actually make something appear as *this* rather than *that*.

Gabriel is aware of this objection and responds with two counterarguments. Starting with the first, he thinks that the objection comes down to the problem of infinite regress:

The question to be answered is whether the ontology of fields of sense triggers an infinite regress of fields such that there is only an object if it exists in a field if this field exists in a field and this field in turn exists in a field, and so on.⁷⁷

For Gabriel, an infinite regress is “the never-ending reapplication of a rule triggered by its forced activation for a particular mode of information processing.”⁷⁸ He gives the example of adding 1 to any natural number bigger than 0.⁷⁹ The rule is that if there is a natural number bigger than 0, we must add 1. Every application of the rule yields a natural number above 0, so that another 1 must be added, and so on *ad infinitum*. We never arrive at 0 or a lower number to which the rule would not apply. It is true that Gabriel’s fields of sense do not trigger such a regress, because they do not require the indefinite application of the *same* rule. Take cobbles that appear in a street that appears in a city. The street specifies the sense of the cobbles (‘rule’ 1), but a *different* sense, that of the city, specifies the street (‘rule’ 2). Briefly put, not all fields use the same ‘rule’ or sense to determine their objects.

Yet infinite deferral is not the same thing as infinite regress. The objection is not that cobbles would require a street *and* a city *and* infinitely many other fields (a country, a nation, and so on) to be cobbles. I am not objecting to the notion that the street (or some other governing field) would suffice to ensure that cobbles are in fact cobbles. One could relocate the street to some other field (say, an archeology museum) and cobbles would still appear in the street. The real objection is that the street simply does not have the ability to make things appear as they do, because by Gabriel’s definition the existence of the street is its

⁷⁶ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 44.

⁷⁷ Gabriel, “The Meaning of ‘Existence’,” 81.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

appearance in other fields and not its making-things-appear. Throughout *Fields of Sense*, Gabriel insists that fields are sense-makers, entities that bestow a specific character on what appears in them. But if the definition of existence is appearing in some other field *full stop*, then ‘making appear’ is simply not on the table. Hence the infinite deferral of specification. Differently put: cobbles can only be cobbles if one focuses exclusively on the cobbles and momentarily ignores that their relevant fields have the same ontological status as the cobbles: entities that do nothing but appear in further fields, which do nothing but appear in turn. The inevitable conclusion is that nothing ever really appears as anything, because nothing is specific enough to make this so.

This also shows why Gabriel’s second counter-argument does not work. He suggests that we never have to ‘wait’ for an infinity of fields to determine an object, because we can always simply ‘start’ by using a specific object as the point of departure for any inquiry. Such points of departure “will already appear in a determinate setting or other.”⁸⁰ Gabriel uses the example of starting with a hand, which might appear in a perception, which might appear in a movie, and so on. Yet this simply amounts to cheating, because according to what we have just seen the hand could never have become *this* specific entity that we stumble upon. Rather than supporting Gabriel’s theory, this example merely emphasizes the point that reality such as we encounter it is incommensurable with his ontology.

Garcia’s ontology is haunted by the same problem. What makes a bike a bike? It cannot be its formal status as a thing, because all things are formally equivalent. One could argue that a formal bike-thing is nevertheless different from a formal car-thing, because their worlds are different. After all, everything the bike is not includes the car, whereas everything the car is not does not include the car. Yet this does not work. As Garcia writes, “the world is not a reality that pre-exists things [...]”⁸¹ It is not the case that countless worlds are lying around in *a priori* fashion, like molds waiting to apply the pressure of everything except some soon to be created thing to precisely that thing. A de-determined car and a de-determined bike have different worlds *because* one is a de-determined *car* and the other a de-determined *bike*. Specificity logically precedes worlds. If this specificity of an object cannot be due to its formal aspect and if an object has no private properties, then it must be derived from another object. This is exactly what Garcia argues. We already saw how a cloud is a cloud only because it enters into a ‘bigger’ object (such as the atmosphere) that makes it one cloud among others. What an object is depends on another object that comprehends it:

Comprehending objectively is having the same relation to several things which cannot share this relation among themselves [...]. Comprehending is having an effect of identity from a plurality of things, an effect of identity that these things cannot have on each other, and that one cannot have on oneself.⁸²

A cloud does not make itself a cloud. Instead, a cloud is only a cloud insofar as a bigger object comprehends it as such. At times, however, Garcia suggests that objectivity derives from the other side of objects, from that which they themselves comprehend: “objectively, [...] the sponge and its leaves are unequal. The sponge only exists through the leaves that compose it.”⁸³ There are also moments when he defines objectivity similarly to thinghood, as a difference between contents and containers: “the chair makes sense [...] only *between* what is a chair and what a chair is.”⁸⁴

All three options engender the infinite deferral of specification. In each case, we are asked to accept that an object is nothing in itself. It follows that it can also do nothing by itself (unless one wants to defend the absurdity that an object can do something without being anything). This seems fine for as long as we merely focus on one object such as a chair, because we can then defer the chair’s specificity to its components or its environment (or both at the same time). Yet that only works if we tacitly assume that these components or environment are something *substantial*, something with properties such that it can feature in the engendering of a chair. There can only be a sponge if leaves are comprehended, and not, say,

⁸⁰ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 278.

⁸¹ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 56.

⁸² Ibid., 112.

⁸³ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 114.

the People's Republic of China. There can only be a cloud if it is in an atmosphere and not in the heart of a sun. Yet this is precisely what Garcia denies. The leaves are nothing beyond what they comprehend and what comprehends them. They have no specific features. This triggers the exact same infinite deferral of specification that haunts Gabriel's ontology. There are no sponges, because there are only leaves and the hands of primates. The sponge is nothing over and above these. It is merely a negative difference, which is to say an empty reference to what it is not. Unfortunately, there are also no leaves and hands, but only cells and apes, which do not exist as those specific beings either.⁸⁵

Garcia's notion of intensity cannot remedy this. Intensities are neither intrinsic to things nor to objects.⁸⁶ Intensity is exclusively defined in terms of 'more and less' and 'bigger and smaller.'⁸⁷ It refers to a relation between objects that are already specified, in which the more intense object is more relevant or present than the less intense one. For example, if some objects are judged more beautiful, true, or good than others, then the former are more intense than the latter.⁸⁸ Intensities are not specific features of objects, but rather differences in how other entities relate to those objects. They are attributed to objects, but that does not make them the properties of these objects. This is the sense of the statement that "*intensities [are] situated in the objects without the intensities being there.*"⁸⁹

Cogburn suggests that if the ontology in *Form and Object* seems inconsistent, it is because he and Mark Allan Ohm (who are its English translators) were mistaken in calling things a 'difference' between their content and container. Instead, they should have gone for 'differentiator'.⁹⁰ This is an interesting idea. A car could be a car and a chair could be a chair, because a car-differentiator would separate its components from its environment in one way and a chair-differentiator in some other way. Yet I doubt that Garcia really means 'differentiator,' because the French text simply says '*différence*' and not '*différentiateur*.' More importantly, if 'differentiator' is to mean that an object is and does things by itself, rather than by virtue of comprehending or being comprehended, this would be inconsistent with Garcia's insistence that objects are nothing in themselves. It would also be inconsistent with Garcia's idea that any shift in an entity's contents or containers engenders a new entity. If a chair would be differentiator, then the chair at *t* and the chair at *t-1* would not be two ontologically distinct entities only associated by the chair-that-becomes, but rather two different states of one and the same chair-differentiator.

5 Conclusion: Relational and substantialist philosophy

Exclusively defining being as 'being in' only seems to work as long as one focuses on a single entity or a small group of entities. It then seems as if specification can be outsourced to other objects in which an entity enters or appears. Yet as soon as we take a wider view, we realize these objects, too, are nothing but an appearance in further objects. This triggers the infinite deferral of specification, because we never arrive at an entity that has real, substantial features by which it could determine objects that appear in it. This is why Gabriel's and Garcia's accounts of identity and change felt awkward. Specificity is a prerequisite to identity and change, and if the former is lacking, no accounting for the latter can ever be satisfactory.

This problem is not specific to Gabriel's and Garcia's respective ontologies. Both theories are examples of a wider type of philosophy that we can call 'relationism.' A philosophy is relationist if it holds that entities are nothing more than how they appear *in* or *to* other entities, which is to hold that entities are

⁸⁵ Throughout *Form and Object*, Garcia insists that entities qua *things* are constitutively 'alone' and 'solitary'. Things do not dwell among things, but rather between the 'no-matter-what' which is in them and the 'world' in which they are. It is tempting to think that such solitude would in some way bring infinite specification to a halt, because there is nothing substantial 'to which' one could 'move' once one arrives at a thing. The problem, however, is that one never arrives at a de-determined thing *in the first place*, precisely because de-determination is an abstraction from specific features that are offered no sufficient ground for existence in Garcia's ontology.

⁸⁶ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 335.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 331.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 335.

⁹⁰ Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations*, 180.

exhaustively defined by how they feature in their relations with other entities. Any such philosophy denies that entities have specific, substantial features over and above their relations with their components and environments. I suspect that every relationism falls prey to the infinite deferral of specification as described in the previous sections. The traditional solution to relationism's problem is the introduction of some entity (a substance, subject, or God) that is always already specified, thereby providing a solid ground to prevent infinite deferral. It is doubtful that either Garcia or Gabriel would opt for this. Hence, we will have to see if they can devise a new solution, or, of course, show how infinite deferral can be warded off with the resources already present in their ontologies.

As things stand, however, Gabriel's and Garcia's ontologies undeniably rank as major accomplishments in recent philosophy. First, their bridging of the divide between analytic and continental philosophy is, in both cases, a *tour de force* that others would do well to emulate. It is simply embarrassing that many of us still merely draw on the resources of just one side of the divide. Second, and perhaps more specifically from the perspective of continental philosophy, they rigorously show that philosophy can be far more than mere (variations on) the type of critical theory that perpetually restricts itself to the same and by now predictable hermeneutics of suspicion. One could even wager the speculative hypothesis that Garcia and Gabriel (together with other speculative realists) might be at the vanguard of a generation of philosophers that overcomes (or simply ignores) the analytic/continental divide and that produces the kind of systematic and perhaps even encyclopedic philosophies that some might no longer have thought possible.

Should this happen, the 'new' philosophical divide might be a rift between 'relationist' and what we could call 'substantialist' philosophies. We already saw that the primary relationist axiom is that entities are reducible to their appearances in or manifestations to others. Relationism denies that entities are anything in themselves, precisely because they exhaustively *are* how they feature in or to others. Conversely, the primary substantialist axiom would be that entities *do* have an 'in itself' which is different in kind from their contents and containers, as well as irreducible to how they manifest to other entities. Precisely *what* this substantial X is thought to be can vary per philosophy. Whereas relationism holds that the being of entities is captured by their relations with or appearances to others, substantialism holds that the being of entities, however construed, is located outside and thereby irreducible to their engagements with others. (Note again that the 'thing' in Garcia's ontology is emphatically not such a substance, precisely because Garcia denies that things have any positive content or specific features in and of themselves.) If Garcia and Gabriel rank as prime examples of relationism, hypothetical members or inspirations of the substantialist camp can also easily be identified. There are, among others, Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology where each real object has irreducible 'real qualities' in and of itself, and Nancy Cartwright's philosophy in which entities have powers that are irreducible to how they are made to manifest in interactions.⁹¹ Substantialist philosophies might be immune to the infinite deferral of specification, but they will of course face major challenges of their own. But to use a turn of phrase that Gabriel likes to employ in his work: thereby hangs a tale.

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⁹¹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object* 28; Cartwright, *The Dappled World*, 50, 59.

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