# In Defense of Hierarchy: A Response to Levi Bryant's 'A Logic of Multiplicities: Deleuze, Immanence, and Onticology'[1]

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The present author is sympathetic with the goal of Levi Bryant's "A Logic of Multiplicities: Deleuze, Immanence, and Onticology." I too would like to get back to objects, that is, back to a philosophy of nature freed from the narrow and dogmatic structures of the anthropocentric, sociological, philosophical, and psychological theories that try to contain the cosmos within the rigid confines of a particular paradigm. Bryant, however, wrongly sees hierarchy as the enemy in his crusade against anthropocentrism, when in fact, it ought to be his companion. Bryant does not level any arguments against what he describes as 'vertical ontology,' and ontological hierarchies are never explicitly attacked by any of his claims beyond his admonition that they should be avoided. Bryant's explicit purpose is not to argue his position, but to suggest it as an alternative approach. Because in his estimation ontological hierarchy does not coincide with the political view he wants, it must be abandoned, regardless of whether or not it is truer, more logical, and indeed more obvious and common sensical than what he proposes.[2] In fact, the vertical ontology which Bryant flees is more suited to achieve the kind of political position he advocates than is the replacement that he provides.

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[1] I would like to thank the editors and Dr. Peter Gratton for their helpful and thoughtful comments on and corrections to the various drafts of this article.

[2] In *The Democracy of Objects*, Bryant is explicit that "[t]he democracy of objects is not a *political* thesis to the effect that all objects ought to be treated equally or that all objects ought to participate in human affairs. The democracy of objects is the *ontological* thesis that all objects, as Ian Bogost has so nicely put it, equally exist while they do not exist equally. The claim that all objects equally exist is the claim that no object can be treated as constructed by another object. The claim that objects do not exist equally is the claim that objects contribute to collectives or assemblages to a greater and lesser degree." Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbour: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 19. The present author, however, does not see how Bryant can maintain that he is not advocating that "all objects ought to be treated equally," since once one has done away with hierarchy, there no longer remains any objective measure according to which things should be treated at all. Further, if all Bryant wants to say is that things "equally exist while they do not exist equally," not only is this obvious, but it is unintelligible or unexplainable without hierarchy.

Bryant starts with what he does not want: hierarchy. His scorched-earth approach towards hierarchy is destructive and chaotic to the point of destroying even the objects to which he wants to return. Within his description of his position, Bryant does not treat the objects that he wants to recover, which might have lead to a positive standpoint which could say something definitive about objects; rather, the reader is left with a Deleuze-inspired mishmash of self-differentiating relations. It is not clear why one should care about bits of assemblages differentiating themselves from one another, as opposed to the children, dogs, sunsets, and trees that Bryant inadvertently denies. Also, Bryant does not explain where assemblages begin or end and takes for granted the objects they comprise. Even the vague way in which he describes an 'assemblage' relies on the concepts he rejects: unity, essences, and natures, that is, the integral concepts of philosophical hierarchies.

Bryant does away with essences, natures, forms, god, etc., the very things that vertical ontologies proposed in order to account for the relative logical stability of concepts and relative ontological stability of things, without understanding what they were doing in the first place. All the while, however, he continues to talk about individual things and even universals such as human, animal, and DNA as if there are no consequences to his abatement. He does not like the possibility that the hierarchy within depends upon the hierarchy without—the latter explains the former. It is true that in every pursuit, certain things must be taken for granted: the chemist in a lab takes it on faith that his vision corresponds to the way things are in a way that a phenomenologist never would, just as the phenomenologist takes it on faith, without ever 'experiencing' the blockage in his heart, that his cardiologist knows something about his condition. But Bryant's paper is not just starting from a different place from those of philosophers who were and are concerned about how the things that Bryant takes for granted exist; rather, Bryant's description of his approach progresses by continual glancing attacks on, and brief dismissals of vertical ontology and hierarchy. Bryant's arguments are all aimed at straw-man versions of hierarchy that no one believes in and that exist nowhere outside of Bryant's characterization.

Bryant's conclusion is in fact the starting point from which the Ancients *begin* philosophical enquiry. Yes, things both affect things and are affected by things—this everyone knows. This observation is the basis from which the philosopher asks the real questions: how is change possible? What maintains the identity of a thing throughout its change? What maintains a thing's unity in its difference? Not only does Bryant not explore why 'the transcendent' was invoked to respond to these questions in the first place, but further, Bryant often assumes and takes for granted precisely what he denies whenever his own position hits upon the truth. This leads to two kinds of claims: 1) unsupported claims which are incoherent because the position throws out all of the concepts that make things and claims coherent, and 2) true claims which are only clear because Bryant sometimes relies upon the concepts like essences and natures despite his explicit denial of them. Throughout the paper

Bryant plays a kind of shell game with natures, wherein he explicitly hides them away only to implicitly rely on them when they are needed.[3]

Finally, a conflict emerges between Bryant's admirable desire to get back to objects and away from the narcissism that takes the human to be the centre of the universe, and his lamentable political, anti human, Deleuze-inspired approach that is in fact opposed to the very things he claims to want to explain. He simply flattens out what actually needs to be expanded. In his attempt to correct one false view that any human individual is the absolutely autonomous apex of the cosmos, Bryant proposes a second, and perhaps worse, false view which flattens the entire hierarchy and equates humans with worms. The application of Bryant's 'onticology' either avoids anthropocentrism to the point of being timidly trite, or it leads to the anthropomorphism of objects to the point of being patently false.

The present author is not interested in defending the "styles of theorizing" that 'sneak in' vertical ontologies, such as Husserl's 'consciousness,' Marx's 'capital,' Adorno's "position above and beyond culture," and Kant's "transcendental unity of apperception," which Bryant does well to expose, not simply because they are "premised on a hidden or disguised verticality," but because these versions of verticality are, as Bryant rightly points out, anthropocentric to the point of being able to say little about the way the world really is. Rather, the present author is more interested in the Platonic/Aristotelian and Scholastic approaches which move beyond naïve realism yet claim to address real features of the world. By 'philosophy of nature,' the present author means that realm of philosophy between, yet overlapping metaphysics and empirical science, which reasons about what must be true of any world in which there is change, regardless of what the particular empirical data might turn out to be: in other words, Aristotelian 'physics' or 'natural philosophy.'

Thus, Bryant's paper is useful for showing how the historical legacy of hierarchy in its many philosophical forms is still present, important, and required even by those who would seek to deconstruct or ignore it. The following response will discuss Bryant's presentation of his alternative position and throughout point out: a) the straw-man versions of hierarchy that Bryant employs; b) why what Bryant claims to be inherent negatively in hierarchy is not the case; c) how Bryant's position actually relies upon hierarchy for its own explication, and finally; d) the various principles of hierarchical metaphysics that are required in order to make

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[3] Étienne Gilson describes the problem thus: ". . . our naturalist encounters here one of the most ancient constants in the philosophy of nature, a constant whose sense philosophy has never succeeded in clarifying. Aristotle already thought that only individuals exist, and therefore there ought not to be species; yet they exist. There are species which, such as they are, appear to be quite real, but which, since individual substances alone are real, do not exist. . . . The modern response presupposes the negation of the notion of 'substantial form,' which ought logically to entail in effect the negation of species, and it does deny them, but it unscrupulously calls them back each time it has need of them; and the only means of getting beyond the issue is to deny absolutely the legitimacy of all classification. This agrees poorly with common sense, but petrography, mineralogy, botany, zoology agree with it no better. How could one find intermediaries between classes if the notion of classes corresponded to nothing real?" Étienne Gilson, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution*, Trans. John Lyon (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984).

sense of experience and reality. These latter include the notions that i) there are many kinds of hierarchy; ii) Being and Unity are prior to Multiplicity; iii) relation without substance is incoherent; iv) hierarchy is not inherently tyrannical; v) the distinction between essentially and accidentally ordered causal series is a real and useful one; and vi) the existence of hierarchy is more self evident than is flat ontology. Certainly such principles can be found throughout the history of philosophy, though for the sake of convenience and consistency, the present author will generally turn to Aristotle for explication and examples.

**The Many Kinds of Hierarchies**

There are many different types of hierarchies and senses of priority which the philosopher must keep in mind and be careful to distinguish. For example, in Book IX.8 of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle argues that there are three senses in which actuality is prior to potentiality. First, one can consider epistemological priority: for one to understand the potential for sight, one must first know the actuality of seeing. Knowing, Aristotle claims, involves a hierarchy of ideas. One can also consider temporal priority: all potentialities are actualized by something that is already actual and temporally prior, as when the seed is prior to the corn. Third, that which Aristotle refers to as substantial priority, the end towards which something is directed is prior to the directing. For example, the goal of sight is seeing: animals do not see in order to have sight, but have sight in order to see. Here, the goal, seeing, explains why animals have sight. Note that the order or priority in this third type is actually the reverse of the temporal order. Certainly one can disagree with Aristotle's teleology and his order of knowing, but his general distinction is philosophically important: if one is going to discuss the hierarchical relation of priority between potency and actuality, one must clarify the kind of priority that one means. Temporally the seed is prior to the tree, but in terms of understanding and of explaining ends, the tree is prior to the seed. This distinction introduces, or perhaps even better, *identifies* a hierarchical order among reasons, things, and time.

The present author does not intend to provide an exhaustive list of kinds of hierarchies, but the following types will illustrate the point that they are many and distinct. First, one may speak of causal hierarchies, which consider causes as temporally prior to their effects (one kicks a ball and then it moves), or one might observe the simultaneity of cause and effect (one wearing a coat while running) whereby the effect has a dependence on the cause (the coat only moves because the wearer too is moving). Here, the wearer of the coat could be considered as a sustaining cause. Second, one can consider purely temporal hierarchies whereby one thing is prior to another in time, or compare the eternal and necessary to the finite and contingent. Third, as explained above, there are logical or explanatory hierarchies whereby a concept, thing, or explanation logically presupposes or requires a prior or higher concept, thing, or explanation. One cannot understand an eclipse while being ignorant of the sun and light, nor can one understand the concept of a multiplicity without first knowing what a unity is. Fourth, there are epistemological hierarchies. As Plato and Aristotle argue, some things, such as

numbers and mathematical formulae, are more knowable than other things, such as moving and changing finite particulars like Socrates or Heraclitus's river. Plato's Line Analogy, for example, distinguishes between four kinds of knowing which depend on the objects of thought. Fifth, there are ontological hierarchies wherein some things have more power, being, or independence than do other things: the movement of the paintbrush requires the artist, and the blue of my shirt depends on the existence of the shirt. Finally, though certainly not exhaustively, there are hierarchies of value. One might consider the theory of gravity itself as having greater value than knowing that if I drop my pen right now it will fall (or vice versa), or argue that a child is more valuable than an ant. All of these hierarchies assume a kind of verticality or priority, whether it be causal, temporal, explanatory, epistemological, ontological or substantial, or axiological. While all of these types can be considered together, a given thing might be prior to another according to one kind of hierarchy and posterior according to another. As Aristotle agues, we come to know scientific principles moving from what is less knowable but more familiar to us (this rock falls to the ground) to what is more knowable but less familiar (the theory of gravity). In the order of our knowing, finite particulars are temporally prior, but explanatorily posterior to the scientific principles by which they are governed.[4] Not only is distinguishing between kinds of hierarchies useful for explanation and description, but many, the present author included, argue that they describe the world as it really is. That is, hierarchy, in its many forms, is a real feature of the world; neither is hierarchy illusory, nor is it mere anthropocentric imposition of particularly human thought, language, or culture upon the world.

Bryant, however, advocates an abandonment of what he indiscriminately refers to as 'vertical ontology' and 'ontological hierarchy,' and proposes that we replace it with a 'flat ontology' or 'philosophy of immanence.' He distinguishes what he means by immanent and transcendent: "Within this framework, the immanent will refer to those entities or creatures of the world that mutually interact with one another and are capable of modifying one another."[5] For example, Bryant explains that when an acorn falls on the ground, the acorn affects the ground and the ground in turn affects the acorn. He states: "Worldly or immanent entities populate a plain, a field, in which it is possible for them to interact with one another."[6] Notice that in Bryant's terminology, the 'plain' and 'field' are flat, that is, there is no verticality in the cause-effect relation whereby one entity could remain unaffected. The truth in his paper can be summed up in what Bryant has pointed out here: things can affect and can be affected by other things.

Bryant's initial definition of the transcendent, however, is too oversimplified to be of any use throughout the rest of his paper. He writes: "By contrast, the transcendent refers to that which is beyond or outside of these worldly or creaturely interactions."[7] Bryant is simply against anything transcendent: "Platonic forms, God

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[4] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I.2, 982a20-982b25.
[5] Levi R. Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities: Deleuze, Immanence, and Onticology," *Analecta Hermeneutica*, vol. 3 (2011): 1-20, 1-2.
[6] Ibid., 2.
[7] Ibid., 2.

as conceived within theistic traditions, and essences would all be instances of the transcendent in this sense."[8] Many, if not all, of Bryant's slights against transcendence miss their mark because he fails to distinguish between the many and various vertical ontologies that claim to say something about the world as it is; transcendence is too large to be treated in the sweeping way in which Bryant dismisses it, and further, the transcendent is generally invoked to explain 'creaturely interactions' through a relation, and is not completely separate. For example, what does it mean to say that the transcendent is "beyond or outside of worldly creaturely interactions"? Bryant points to Platonic forms, but even these relate to one another: Being is *different* from Not-Being, Being is the *same* as itself, etc. In fact, for Plato, these are the conditions for there being any "worldly or creaturely interactions." That the lower "participate" (*methexis*) the forms, to use Plato's term, shows that there is a relation between these. The whole notion of participation is meant to show how the lower relates to the higher, that the higher precisely is *not* completely separated from the world. Bryant's reading of Plato is an unfortunately common one which erroneously regards Platonism as some sort of two-world dualism. Further, God, for many theists, is not *simply* transcendent. For Thomas, God is a creating and sustaining cause, without which there could be no 'creaturely interactions.' Bryant overlooks prayer, free will, providence, etc., and suggests that any notion of the transcendent completely removes and separates it from the world.

Bryant sharpens his generalization of the transcendent further however: "Here the point is not that there is no interaction between the creatures of the world and the transcendent, but that whatever the interaction that interaction is *unilateral*."[9] Bryant adds: "Put a bit differently, the transcendent *conditions* other entities in the world without itself being *conditioned* by these other entities. Moreover, the transcendent is so transcendent that it *cannot* be conditioned by other entities. Condition moves in one direction only."[10] Here is Bryant's real concern with the transcendent, but he does not argue against this feature of vertical ontology. Rather, he just does not like the possibility that it could be used to support inequality. Again, while it is generally true for Plato that the lower does not affect the higher, this is not universally true of all vertical ontologies, nor is it simply the case for Plato. For example, such a claim is completely false for Plotinus, for whom the lower can affect the higher. In Plotinus' doctrine of matter, matter pulls the soul down; it is not a mere occasion for sin, but is actively opposed to the higher soul's natural activity.[11] For Aristotle, the infinite is precisely in the finite: form and matter are always together.[12]

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[8] Ibid., 2.

[9] Ibid., 2.

[10] Ibid., 2.

[11] On this cf. Jean-Marc Narbonne, "A Doctrinal Evolution in Plotinus? The Weakness of the Soul in its Relation to Evil," *Dionysius* 25 (2007): 77-92, and Ibid., "La controverse à propos de la génération de la matière chez Plotin: l'énigme résolue?" *Quaestio* 7 (2007): 123-63.

[12] It is unfortunate that Bryant has tended towards Deleuze and away from Aristotle given his adoption and excellent summary of certain parts of Aristotle's conception of substance in the second chapter of his *The Democracy of Objects*. One notices, however, that in explaining Aristotle, Bryant says little about 'potency' and 'actuality' and *never once* mentions the crucial distinction between 'matter' and 'form' which is essential for having Aristotelian substances in the first place. The cherry-picked

While one might claim that the absolutely first in some transcendent hierarchies remains completely unaffected by the lower, this principle is not what Bryant explores in his examples. Typically, he points as an example to Platonic forms, "a striking example of a vertical ontology."[13] It is not exactly correct to claim that "the form of 'Beauty' in Platonic ontology is an entity that exists in its own right."[14] As Plato's *Sophist* argues, a form such as Beauty also must have a relation to Being if Beauty is to be: that is, Beauty participates in Being. Further, Beauty is not the same as Sameness, but nevertheless, Beauty is the same as Itself. Also, Beauty is different from Being and is not Motion. Thus, Beauty somehow needs Being, Sameness, Difference, and Not-Being: forms participate each other, and perhaps even affect each other.[15] Thus, a Platonic form is not as dependent and unaffected as Bryant might want us to believe; it is simply not the case that "condition moves in one direction only," because the movement is lateral as well as vertical.[16] Plato might not be right about all this (and what Plato himself thought is not always exactly clear), but nevertheless, it is clear that Bryant oversimplifies and grabs names and ideas here and there to stand as straw men and foils against his own position. Aristotle's position causes many more problems for Bryant. Not only did Plato (and many before him) already make Bryant's observation that things affect and are affected (the forms were introduced precisely to account for *how* and *why* this occurred), but further, Plato was already solving the problem Bryant is raising here about the limits of Platonism, the separation of the forms from the world. Plato was concerned with how the higher can be an efficient cause at all, and apparently, Socrates had the same problem with Anaxagoras.[17] Aristotle, dissatisfied with Plato's 'participation,' believed that the answer was not to discard Plato's hierarchy, or transcendence, God, essences, forms, etc., but rather to show how the infinite is intimately related to and within the finite. Bryant appeals to Deleuze for support, but Deleuze is not much help.[18] The crucial point is that for these thinkers there are *levels* of transcendence, and many kinds of transcendent entities, and types of

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elements taken from the similarly cherry-picked thinkers never seem to cohere into a position that remains at the same time grounded and consistent. Further, Bryant is begging the question regarding how one has objects to begin with in order to avoid the indispensable Aristotelian/Platonic conception of 'form' which would reintroduce hierarchy back into his flat ontology.

[13] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 3.

[14] Ibid., 2.

[15] For a summary of Plato's conclusions, see *Sophist* 259a-b.

[16] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 2.

[17] On this, see Giovanni Reale, *Plato and Aristotle*, trans. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 37-45.

[18] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 2. Bryant quotes Deleuze who writes: "The participated does not in fact enter into what participates in it." Bryant says that this is true "in the context of Neoplatonism." As is usual with many scholars unfamiliar with the doctrines of the Neoplatonists, Bryant lumps these figures together. Generally, when scholars who do not study the Neoplatonists speak about them, they generally just mean Plotinus. But here, Plotinus is whom Bryant precisely cannot mean, given that his doctrine of matter and its relation to the higher is much more complicated than what Bryant's generalisation suggests.

hierarchies. There is also the further complication that immanent entities might themselves have transcendent elements![19]

One requires something that is in principle different than the changing individuals in sensible experience, and yet unites them, in order to explain change and stability. Hence hierarchy—at least a fundamental and categorical difference and division between kinds of being. This is what the defenders of vertical ontology claim, and they provide sensible reasons for proposing it.[20] One cannot explain the stability required to have individuals if all one has to work with is differentiation and contingency, for these themselves are in constant motion. Once one introduces a stable hierarchy, one has also introduced fundamental difference between the changing universe (which everyone observes) wherein things affect and are affected by others to different degrees, and a thing that can affect, but cannot in principle be affected. If affectation were not unilateral, which Bryant seems to advocate, then the stability of the transcendent elements, whatever they may be according to the many versions of hierarchy, would become themselves like the finite things whose motion and change the stable and transcendent elements were invoked in order to explain. One would require further transcendent, stable, and unaffected principles to explain these now affected transcendent principles.

The paper abounds with generalizations. Bryant states: "Here immanence will refer to whatever is present or given to consciousness or experience, while the transcendent will refer to that which is outside or beyond consciousness."[21] Certainly no Neoplatonist, for example, would dare to say that the transcendent is beyond or outside of experience; rather, experience and consciousness are the only means we have to relate to the transcendent. Plotinian *henosis* with the One-Beyond-Being is neither material nor rational, but it is experienced.

It turns out that Bryant's problem with the transcendent has nothing philosophically or ontologically to do with being 'outside,' 'beyond,' or separated from what he otherwise understands to be 'the world.' Rather, his concern with what he lumps together as the transcendent has everything to do with power and control. It does not matter where the power and control are coming from—beyond, outside, or even within: power and control are bad. This, as we shall see, is the root of the problem with Bryant's analogies and his simplification of the many views of the transcendent. His analogies, which arguably make sense among material realities, simply have no correlation to any philosophically respectable understanding of the transcendent: not to Plato's nor Plotinus's, nor to Aristotle's nor Thomas's, nor to Augustine's nor Descartes's.

Each step of Bryant's refinement of his position pulls back from an obvious overstatement that there is no hierarchy at all, while at the same time pressing on towards his foregone conclusion that hierarchy is bad. He states: "It is not the idea of hierarchy *as such* that marks the essence of vertical ontologies, but rather the idea of

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[19] As an example, see Aristotle's comments regarding *nous* as an activity of the soul: *De Anima* iii.4.
[20] This realisation that one cannot explain the natural naturally or account for the finite finitely was the impetus for Plato's 'Second Voyage,' On this point, see Reale's *Plato and Aristotle*.
[21] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 1.

hierarchy treated as a metaphysical essence of being as such."[22] Whatever Bryant precisely means by "a metaphysical essence of being as such" is unclear, but from what has gone before one can surmise his point. No one can deny that there is hierarchy in the world, even if one denies transcendent hierarchy (which Bryant never mentions), or transcendence at all (which Bryant explicitly denies.) Bryant wants to claim that all the hierarchies, inequalities, and unequal cause/effect relations, are not woven into the fabric of Being as such, but rather are the results of unjust politics, or social relations, or merely narcissistic and anthropocentric fictions. Bryant writes,

> Clearly we live in a world riddled with hierarchies or inequalities. Some classes enjoy greater privileges than others, men enjoy greater privilege than women, whites enjoy greater privilege than other minorities, the sun influences the earth more profoundly than a single plant. Yet all of these hierarchies remain ontic insofar as all of those entities that enjoy a lower degree of power and influence nonetheless, in principle, posses the power to affect those entities that enjoy a greater degree of power. Ontological hierarchy, by contrast, inscribes 'patriarchy' in the very fabric of being, transforming a contingent inequality of powers into an essential and ineradicable feature of existence. So vertical, so transcendent, is the 'father' within ontological hierarchies that it enjoys the absolutely sovereign power to condition and survey without any worldly entities being capable of affecting it in any way whatsoever.[23]

Although the present author is curious to know exactly how the single weed in his yard affects the sun, there are a number of other, more immediate problems with such a view. Bryant must recognize the hierarchies and inequalities in the world. He calls these inequalities not ontological (for that would give them some real hold on things), but rather, 'ontic.' While Bryant is not clear about what ontic inequality is, other than the idea that there is mutual affectation between contingent things, why it is less real than ontological inequality, and how or why ontic inequalities exist at all, he is absolutely explicit that he does not believe that they are real features of the world, nor the result of anything transcending the world. Bryant's distinction, however, does not seem to add or clarify anything: 'ontic inequalities' are the unequal cause/effect relations that we observe, and 'ontic equality' perhaps never exists; 'ontological equality' is the claim that being is univocal and all existing things exist, and 'ontological inequality' according to Bryant is not real because all inequality is 'ontic.'

One suspects that ontic inequality must be mentioned to account for what is really ontological inequality, yet without what Bryant takes to be an unfair, overdetermining hierarchy. For Bryant, we cannot have inequality, yet we all know

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[22] Ibid., 3.
[23] Ibid., 3.

it is real. Therefore, he names it something else instead: 'ontic', that is, it is not as real as it would be if it were ontological or to use Plato's phrase, 'really real.'[24] For Bryant, underneath it all, all things are equal in being: you and I, the tree, the sun, the dead rat, the Big Mac wrapper, etc. For Bryant, the hierarchy must have the same status as that which Parmenides gave to plurality: they are illusions. Whether they be political or social, they are certainly not ontological, for then, Bryant worries, the higher remains unscathed by the lower. Yet if inequalities are constructed by us, they can be deconstructed by us because everything now is vulnerable.

It is odd that such an 'object-oriented philosophy' is so disinclined to examine the real natures of objects. But it is essential to Bryant's political vision that the obvious inequalities in the world are not really real, essential, or fundamental, because if they are not real, they can more easily be altered or destroyed. The problem, however, is that not all hierarchies are political or social or anthropocentric.[25] Whether one likes it or not, the world seems to display regularities that are not 'fair,' though it seems unusual to think that the sun is 'overdetermining' the plant and that this inequality should be leveled. In fact, the most anthropomorphic thing there is, the human, is *himself* a hierarchy. That there is a hierarchy of importance inscribed into the ontological order of the parts of the human body is self evident. Who would not sacrifice his own foot to save his head? And surely one would do this because one recognizes a hierarchy of importance that is evident in the ends towards which our bodies are directed, which might be better pursued footless than headless.

Note, too, that all the examples Bryant provides are relations between contingent, finite things: men and women, whites and minorities, the sun and plants. He takes the immanent/transcendent distinction and works it into 'the world' using all immanent examples. Bryant makes a category mistake and conflates the changing world with the transcendent world introduced by the 'vertical ontologists.' No vertical ontology claims that among contingent entities, the higher remain unaffected by the lower. Yet this is precisely what Bryant accuses them of in the above quote, implying that according to vertical ontologies white men and the sun are 'above' black women and plants, which later are unable to affect the former in any way whatsoever because of some inherent ontological feature of their beings. This, of course, is false. All vertical ontology allows, even demands mutual affectation between contingent beings.

Moreover, Bryant does not provide an explanation of the hierarchy among the changing things that he grants and just moves the question back a step. Why are

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[24] Though the term has been used in many ways, Bryant is not explicitly clear about how he is using the term 'ontic,' though it appears as though he means something like 'that which we observe prior to any reference to any ontological theories.' But this simply takes ontic inequality for granted and begs the question as to its origin, nature, and status. Further, it punts the ball back to those who are doing ontology who argue that ontological hierarchy is required in order to explain ontic inequality.

[25] While some are, the present author is in general agreement with Bryant concerning the problems associated with the imposition of anthropocentric hierarchies upon the world according to cramped theoretical paradigms.

there ontic inequalities? One suspects that the origin of these is left unexplained because to do so, he would need to do what Plato and Aristotle did and appeal to the very things that he repudiates: forms, *telos*, essence, potency and actuality, and real ontological difference. Instead, Bryant just appeals to clever and amusing distractions, such as the empire that falls when the emperor chokes on a pebble, or politically correct and misplaced comparisons between women's rights and racial equality to the divine hierarchy of Being. The assumption is that the reader will believe that Bryant's onticology must be true in order to fix the inequalities that supposedly proceed from hierarchical positions. Bryant's approach *must* now appeal more to emotion, amusement, and the political than to the physical and metaphysical because Bryant rejects the real bases of distinction and resemblance required to do ontology: natures and essences.

If one wishes to discuss and critique political hierarchies, one needs precisely the kinds of ontological hierarchies that Bryant denies. Why are racial and sexual inequalities unjust? One might suggest that it is because the fundamental essence or nature of human beings, common to each sex and to all races, transcendent and stable, yet immanent, is shared by all humans and makes them be what they are. Despite the differences between sexes and races, and so on, there is a common element that humans share that other things like stones and institutions lack. Bryant cannot appeal to natures however, but gives us no other recourse; in fact, if Bryant is correct, we should not recognize the injustice to begin with. On what other grounds could our outrage at racial inequalities be based? We learn about these relations by discovering the natures of these bodies, not by standing up for pretend rights of the oppressed plant over and against the tyrannical sun. The point is this: vertical ontology was never 'inscribed' into the world by advocates of vertical ontologies. Rather, these natures, essences, powers (whether transcendent or immanent) are discovered as real features of the world which allow us to understand the differences and similarities between things and thereby to recognize political and social inequalities. Bryant misses this because he does not explore the question as to why what he describes as 'transcendent' entities were ever introduced into philosophy from the start. For all that Darwin's disciples have done to reduce humanity to "regularities and generalities," and in spite of Bryant's claims that "[w]ithin a flat ontology, being is composed entirely of individual entities" and "such an ontology consists of individuals alone," Bryant does a lot of talking about *human* beings. That children and dogs alike are capable of distinguishing with ease human beings from hound beings suggests that there is more to nature than anthropocentrically constricted individuals on the one hand and flaccid generalities on the other.

## Bryant's 'Onticology', or 'Flat Ontology'

Bryant states, "'Onticology' is my variant of object-oriented ontology," though he does not argue his position.[26] His paper reads rather like a manifesto or description of an ideal world, which ignores entirely the way the world really is. Granted,

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[26] Ibid., 4.

Bryant explicitly states that his aim "is not to *demonstrate* that being is characterized by immanence, but to articulate what immanence is and the consequences that follow from it in the work of philosophy."[27] Unfortunately, Bryant gives no reasons why we should accept that the world is characterized by immanence, especially when reason and experience seem to show that it is not. Bryant begs the questions as to whether or not vertical ontology is true or false, good or bad, desirable or to be avoided. Further, Bryant's explanation of immanence is inconsistent within itself, and the things that he leaves out and gets rid of are the very things that the tradition has introduced in order to explain what he wants to keep: individual objects that result from processes. Why should one care about a description of reality that has little bearing on reason or experience and lacks all the explanatory force of the opposed positions that he denies?

Bryant writes:

> In short, within a flat ontology there are no 'unmoved movers' or entities that condition without themselves being conditioned. Here there are no ultimate grounds or 'firsts' that contain everything and out of which everything grows like a plant from a seed. Consequently, any entities or qualities that exist within being must be the result of a genesis or a production. Finally, insofar as such an ontology consists of individuals alone, there are no forms or essences over and above entities.[28]

These things that Bryant wants to jettison—'essences,' 'grounds,' 'firsts'—are the very things that philosophy has introduced in order to explain why we have "entities or qualities" and "individuals" at all. Essences, forms, and natures, need not "contain everything" or act as seeds "out of which everything grows." Certainly most of the pre-Christian thinkers argued that the world is eternal, and even Aquinas's conception of the first cause has much more to do with sustaining all things in being than it does with being the first thing in a long series. Further, there is nothing inherent in vertical ontologies that precludes or problematizes qualities being the result of "a genesis or a production." Aristotle, for example, bases his entire philosophy of nature, with its forms and first cause, on the primary observations of changing things. For Plato and Aristotle, the non-material apparatus of explanation is required to understand individual objects and processes. And perhaps even more extraordinary, is that Bryant supplies us with nothing else to do this work: just the non-sequitur dictum that "there are no forms or essences over and above entities."[29]

Bryant claims that "[a]t the heart of flat ontology is thus a principle of *ontological* equality."[30] Throughout the paper Bryant stubbornly tries to claim that his conception of fairness trumps reality, otherwise, everything is bullied by natures and essences: a powerful rhetorical approach given that bullying is a hot topic these

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[27] Ibid., 3-4.
[28] Ibid., 5.
[29] Ibid., 5.
[30] Ibid., 5.

days. Before he explains further what he means by this ontological equality, Bryant recognizes that there are "all sorts of inequalities among entities, substances, or things. Some beings affect other beings to a greater degree than other beings [and, one supposes, 'than *do* other beings']."[31] While Bryant wants to downplay these differences in powers between beings, these real differences never really go away. His 'ontic' distinction, as the present author has suggested, neither adds nor explains anything. Bryant continues: "Ontological equality, by contrast, asserts that whatever ontic inequalities might exist between substances or things, these things are equally beings and therefore, in principle, have the capacity or power to interact with other beings."[32] The kernel of truth here is that all things that exist exist. The fact remains, however, that they are *not* equally beings because things *are* in different ways.

Bryant is right to draw attention to the problems with some of the claims of Foucault and Massumi, though he does not criticize them because they are wrong, but because they clandestinely smuggle verticality within anthropocentric theories. Bryant explains that the general idea is that we project onto the world as real features of it things, traits, and qualities that really come not from the things, but from us: "What these theoretical orientations strive to show again and again is how something we take to be a feature of the *world* in fact issues from *our* language, concepts, intentions, meanings, uses, and values."[33] Thus, extraordinarily, all the differences and inequalities that we see between things are attributed not to the things, but to theoretical stances and anthropocentrism. Of course things like our human language, concepts, values, and meanings must be human, but to think that they are *only* human, that humans cannot form them in relation to the real features of the objects that they observe with their senses and the logic that restricts their minds not only seems false on the face of it, but it is an unnecessary and crippling move. Bryant's problem is not the obvious fact that such positions exaggerate exceptions into rules, but that he senses the presence of a vertical ontology that sneaks in an unaffected human subject. The theoretical stance that eating too much chocolate cake and cookies is bad for my waistline seems true *despite* what I would like to impose upon the poor sweets. This observation is neither anthropocentric imposition à la Foucault, nor does it disguise the surveillance of an unaffected human subject à la Bryant: it just states something true about my real relation to cake.[34]

Bryant's own stance is unclear because he seems less interested in finding out about objects as they really are as he is in avoiding hierarchy. Despite his concerns with what Foucault brings to light, he agrees that the anthropocentric problem remains: when we believe that the features we observe to be the features of things in themselves, Bryant thinks that we *necessarily* then, "hopefully gain the power to take charge over these things and change them."[35] It is rather odd that Bryant seems to agree with Baudrillard's attribution of such psychosis to the whole of humanity, and it reveals more about how they view the human than about what people really

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[31] Ibid., 5.

[32] Ibid., 5.

[33] Ibid., 12.

[34] Insofar as this is generally true of all human beings, it suggests the existence of a human nature.

[35] Ibid., 12.

are like. No doubt this occurs, but Bryant similarly exaggerates exceptions into rules.[36] One does not require a flat ontology of immanence in order to decry the evils of believing ourselves to be able to use anything in the world according to our own whims with impunity. But the reason why we cannot do so is not because all things are on equal ontological footing with human beings, but rather, because there are real features of the world that exist despite our anthropocentrism, that is, the real features that Bryant eschews along with his aversion to hierarchy. To hide our heads in the sand about the natures and essences of the things in the world (including, if it is not too anthropocentric of me, ourselves) and perpetrate some myth about equal ontological footing is an unnecessary, self-imposed barrier to scientific inquiry.

The most that Bryant gives the reader by way of support or arguments are some analogies between his 'logic of multiplicities' and certain observations about various experiments that happen to be going on today. What he writes about DNA is a case in point: "In her work in developmental systems theory (DST), Susan Oyama refers to the principle behind this logic of multiplicities as 'parity,' and speaks of a 'democracy of causes.'"[37] Of course the principle behind DST turns out to be neither parity nor democracy, because the factors involved in the examples are neither on par nor equal, or whatever other feel-good adjective its proponents want to use. That is, there is a hierarchy evident in the very examples Bryant provides in order to flatten the hierarchy. Bryant explains:

> Oyama's target is the manner in which biologists tend to talk about DNA as already containing all the information that presides over the development of the phenotype of the individual. Her point is not that DNA does not contribute to the form the phenotype of the individual will take, but that DNA is only one developmental factor or variable among others.[38]

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[36] One finds that Bryant is perfectly comfortable with certain theories that try to apply a particular paradigm to all people—as long as they are not hierarchical. Even a quick perusal of Bryant's blog, *Larval Subjects*, confirms this. For example, he writes: "First, what do I mean by transcendence? I refer to transcendence as any system that erects some term to a master-term that attempts to disavow the flux and immanence of the world." He continues: "Ethnic identities try to do this by positing an ahistorical essence of their being. Nationalisms do something similar. Group movements do the same thing. Theistic concepts of God do this. Etc. It's not an issue whether or not one believes in the supernatural, it's an issue of *identity* and *identification*. Basically it's the structure of Oedipus or patriarchy. My thesis is that the greater our push to form an identity and the greater our identification, the greater our tendency to form an enemy, an excluded other, an outsider, etc., that is seen as *attacking* the community, and preventing its harmony. These structures necessarily generate violence and this is well attested to by history, the social sciences, and psychology. This is because, as Lacan liked to say, identity or the ego is *necessarily* paranoid. It *necessarily* experiences itself as persecuted and tries to lash out at what it believes persecutes it. The *tragedy* is that this violence results not from a real other that persecutes it, but rather from the very nature of trying to form an identity" (http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/08/18/transcendence-and-the-problem-of-boundaries-a-confession/ Accessed 31 August, 2012).
[37] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 13.
[38] Ibid., 13.

Now the present author is no scientist, (though neither are Oyama or Bryant, it seems) but one imagines that DNA is a rather important developmental factor in the growth of an individual. Just how important, I'm happy to leave to the scientists. Nor does one imagine that there is much of a democracy between an unborn child's DNA and his pregnant mother's decision on Monday to wear the blue blouse rather than the red. I suspect the former has more of a role to play on the hierarchy of causal importance in the child's development.

While it might be the case that "there is no centralized agency presiding over the development of the individual that contains, as if in a reservoir, information providing a map of what the individual will come to be," no amount of environmental factors will cause the human child to grow up to be a cat.[39] Nor does it matter much how strongly he desires to be a cat, or how unfair and undemocratic he believes his situation to be. He can influence his development all he likes by drinking milk every day, and perhaps the social class of his parents gives him exposure to all kinds of exotic strings with which to play. But regardless, his tyrannical DNA forces him to be a human. The obvious fact here is that nature is precisely not democratic: there is a hierarchy of causes. One's DNA has a greater say over the development of a human being than does an infinitude of other causes and to attempt to isolate causes in the first place is to realize that there are things that are not causes. One need not throw out the hierarchy of causal importance in order to recognize that there are multiple causes at work. DNA is certainly not the only cause, as there are all sorts of environmental and social factors that contribute to how a child develops: this is known by everyone, even by proponents of vertical and hierarchical ontologies. But a child is a child and a cat is a cat. To equivocate between the causes that make a thing be what it is is misleading, to say the least. Bryant's claim here is either trite (that there are many causes at work that determine the being of a being) or false (that there is no hierarchy of importance and all causes are equal).

In fact, if everything has an equal say regarding its ability to act as an efficient cause within an 'assemblage,' we could never understand the notion of a cause at all, let alone determine one. Yet this is obviously not the case: we determine causes all the time. Bryant's own examples continue to show that his position is false. He continues his explanation by describing the scientific process itself, asserting that the geneticist errs when she isolates causes because she fails to take into account the contributions of the factors within the controlled environment.[40] But this is not true. That the geneticist tries to keep certain variables the same shows that she understands that there are many causes; if she failed to control a certain one of them, it could alter the outcome. To isolate a certain cause in empirical science requires that one controls all the other causes of which one might be aware. The geneticist, or the primary school student wondering what kind of light is best for plants, is not ignorant of such causes—if she were, she would never try to control them in the first place, a fact known by every child at the science fair. Bryant wants us to make the

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[39] Ibid., 13.
[40] Ibid., 14.

assumption that the proponent of vertical ontology, having altered the sources of light while controlling the type of soil and kinds of seeds, will proclaim at the end of her experiment that 'Only light causes plant growth!'

Another example Bryant provides again shows the lack of clarity and understanding that ensues when one disposes of hierarchy, again in this case the hierarchy of causal importance. Bryant quotes with approval Bruno Latour, who points out that when a chimpanzee uses a stick to reach banana, "The chimp plus the sharp stick reach (not reaches) the banana. The attribution to one actor of the role of prime mover in no way weakens the necessity of a composition of forces to explain the action. It is by mistake, or unfairness, that our headlines read 'Man flies,' 'Woman goes into outer space.' "[41] Of course again there is a basic truth here, one recognized by all vertical ontologies. In fact, this is all dealt with much better by Aristotle and Aquinas, who point to the important distinction between accidentally and essentially ordered series. To take the classic example, a son has the ability himself to have a son, which ability he gets from his father and mother. According to Bryant and Latour, like the woman and the monkey, the son should not get all the credit when his own son is born. No one denies this. This causal series is accidental or ordered *per accidens*: the son's parents can pass away and the son still retains this capacity. Granted, the stick plays a role as an *instrumental* cause, and again, no vertical ontology or hierarchy denies this. But take away the monkey, and the stick cannot move itself. This causal series is essentially ordered, or ordered *per se*. Now this is a simple explanation of the point, but see how it takes up the obvious truth that there is a causal series with a number of causes, but makes an important distinction. Does not this realization tell us something important about the essential natures of fathers and sons, monkeys and sticks? Some things move themselves and some things do not. The monkey possesses the power of self motion; the stick could never obtain the banana on its own. So while there is an ordered series, there are also causal, temporal, and ontological hierarchies.[42]

We are better grounded and prepared to do what Bryant wants us to do—to realize our dependence on many things and causes, *with* the hierarchy, essences, and natures, than we are without them. Ontology is done in a more sophisticated way when we take seriously natures, essences, and the hierarchical relation between kinds of causes, and when we make distinctions without concern for political correctness. The kinds of distinctions that Aristotle makes, all the while maintaining the truth that Latour advances, tell us more about sticks and monkeys. Our understanding of monkeys and sticks, women and rocketships would not get very far if we are so wrapped up in anthropocentric notions of fairness that we are no longer allowed to differentiate and negate. We do not need to anthropomorphize sticks and rocket ships, as though they could care what credit they get in the papers, in order to recognize their roles within a causal order. Suppose a man needs insulin injections in order to survive. Supposedly we cannot privilege insulin in this assemblage of

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[41] Ibid., 17.

[42] One observes here the result of the modern simplification and even eradication of the complex, yet common sense Aristotelian and Scholastic distinctions between kinds of causes.

needle, nurse, the nurse's lunch, her husband who made it, and the cow from which it is made, because that, according to flat ontology, is unfair. Clearly insulin enjoys a privileged position in the causal series of agents that restores health to the diabetic. To cease to acknowledge this is to cease to recognize causes at all. If the assemblage becomes so flooded with such minute causes, details, and relations that the real and more important causes become lost in the crowd, the mere idea of a cause or an agent becomes meaningless. If everything is a cause, nothing is.

If the point of these examples is just to call attention to the reality that there are many contingent factors involved in the being of a contingent being, this is true, but it is commonplace and innocuous. Nor does this oppose anything in any hierarchical or vertical ontologies. But further, and what is damaging, to exaggerate the importance of these other factors over and above the higher, more important factors in a causal hierarchy obfuscates the truth that the examples illustrate. To take refuge in the thought that everything makes a difference and that it's a small world after all might make one feel good, but to insinuate that every cause makes an *equal* difference is grossly to oversimplify and overlook the differences in the powers and natures among the hierarchy of beings. Exceptions to norms imply the norms, and both notions assume a hierarchy of importance. We can search for and debate what constitutes the natures of things, but simply to deny them is a dead end, for to deny them is to recognize them, and to cease to recognize them is to cease to see the differences between a pencil and Prince Edward Island, a child and a tree, a dog and a god.

**Being, Unity, and Multiplicity**

There is a fundamental problem with Bryant's two categories: transcendent and immanent. He argues as though these positions are somehow opposed, as if he, Spinoza, Deleuze, and a handful of pseudo-scientists are the only ones fighting against a universal army of adherents to transcendence threatening the mutual affectation among contingent beings. But just as God, forms, essences, and the like cannot be simply transcendent, and must therefore have some relation to the material world, so too is immanence without these incapable of explaining the stability and regularity within the world insofar as we experience it.

Bryant oscillates between the errors of both Parmenides and Heraclitus, the two pillars of thought between which Plato and his successors attempted to navigate. Both Parmenides and Heraclitus, while approaching the world by different methods, the former through thought alone and the latter through sensation, come to the same conclusion: there are no things. Sometimes, when Bryant is advocating the univocity of Being, he commits the error of Parmenides, whose absurd monism does not allow for there being grades or a hierarchy of Being: things simply are or are not. Whether it be Plato's forms and participation, or Aristotle's distinction between act and potency, these thinkers were trying to account for the obvious fact that while in a certain sense all that exists is and all that does not exist is not, this is not the complete picture. Things *are* in different ways: they have different potencies and powers, essences and natures. If one agrees with Bryant that Being is univocal, and

all that exists does so equally, then we can ask him the very same question that every freshman asks of Parmenides: why, then, do I experience *things*? The best that Parmenides can say is that this is some kind of illusion: thought tells us that Being is one, and that Not-Being simply is not. Bryant does not deal with this however: he simply takes individuals for granted and ignores the brute fact of hierarchy and natures, and for no other reason than he seems not to like them, says we must do without them.

For example, he claims:

> A multiplicity—and here it should be noted that it is used as a substantive or noun—is not a unity of the One and the Many, but is rather a 'heterosynthesis,' an assemblage, of the many *as such*. A multiplicity is an organization of the heterogeneous, of different individuals and thereby consists of these discrete individuals plus their external relations to one another.[43]

Bryant seems to have no idea what is traditionally meant by the One or the Many, or the ways in which their relation was argued to account for the very individuals that Bryant takes for granted, since the One and the Many (or the One over Many) were introduced into philosophy to explain what Bryant is assuming. He speaks of "a multiplicity," implying that there could be other, distinct multiplicities. Somehow, each multiplicity is itself a one. That is, it is an individual thing—it has unity, or oneness. Further, a multiplicity comprises distinct individuals. What are these units? What are the unities? Something must unify the individuals. Each bundle of relations (both external and internal) has unity—otherwise we would not recognize them as individuals in the first place. Aristotle, for example, introduces the notion of matter as the underlying substratum—the principle that contains the movements between contraries, form and privation.[44] But of course Aristotle appeals to a kind of hierarchy and universal principles in order to account for the unity of a thing.[45] How does Bryant distinguish between one bundle of relations as one individual as distinct from some other bundle of relations as a second? Bryant either assumes these entities or he does not raise these questions.

Further, Bryant insists, "[t]here is no unity in a multiplicity over and above these relations among the many, but rather, these external relations between the many are just the multiplicity."[46] Bryant denies unity 'over and above' yet wants to maintain the many within the multiplicity. He does not seem to realize how self-defeating this all is. It is like maintaining that 'there is no such thing as red over and above the relations between red things, but rather, the relations between red things are just the things!' One cannot understand what a red thing is unless one has some conception of red. One cannot determine which relations relate to a thing without the things. Similarly, one cannot understand what a many is unless one has some

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[43] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 9.
[44] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII.3, 7-9, VIII.1.
[45] For a useful summary, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII.4.
[46] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 9.

conception of the unities of the individual things whereby they constitute a many rather than a one. Maintaining the existence of a many without unity is like maintaining the existence of a square without sides. One can debate about what unities and multiplicities are, and one can argue about their relations, but Bryant does not seem to realize that his (and his reader's) ability to conceive the notions that he describes depends on the notions he despises. If Bryant were right, he could never say what he says, nor could one read what he writes. One could not even say *a* multiplicity, or recognize it as a thing without such unity or oneness. Just what does the relating within Bryant's multiplicity? Surely unities. What unites the relations that constitute a thing?[47] Surely its nature.

In addition to the notion of a multiplicity without unity, the term 'assemblage' is similarly problematic: it leaves unquestioned what is involved within it and it already assumes the things that cannot be supported by one who denies the priority of unity to multiplicity, all the while depending, on yet pretending to do away with, the very hierarchical ontologies it struggles to avoid. Bryant writes:

> A multiplicity is thus an organization that belongs to the many such that the terms or individuals that compose this organization retain their independence or the exteriority of their relations. Here there is no supplemental term that overdetermines the multiplicity by subsuming it under a concept, form, or essence, nor is being a milieu or transcendent medium in which substances inhere. Being just is these assemblages.[48]

Assemblages of what, exactly? one must ask. Unities? How do these individuals "retain their independence"? What unites them within themselves? One can write these words, but one struggles to understand what they could possibly mean. Form, essence, concepts, etc. are the very things that allow for the stability, being, unity, and oneness that Bryant takes advantage of and assumes in order to see his individual discrete entities. Yet, he denies these explanatory notions and puts nothing in their stead, as if they had no philosophical or explanatory role to play. Rather it seems that Bryant just does not like them because he has some peculiar conception of them being 'over and above' and 'surveying.' The traditions Bryant is casting aside were asking how could there be ones at all. The multifarious versions of hierarchy and vertical ontologies were meant to address this among other questions which stemmed from the realization that there must be a ground that unifies things. How are individuals possible? How do we have unity in change? What is change? How does it occur?

In other places, Bryant sounds like Heraclitus. This is the more common position, for Bryant consciously wants to hang his hat on the Deleuzean rack. For

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[47] Bryant begs this question in *The Democracy of Objects* as well. There he argues that "objects are withdrawn from all relation," though it is a mystery how an object can be a discrete entity without relations either to itself, such as identity, being, unity, or to anything else, such as difference or otherness (26). Bryant simply takes the being of objects for granted. His is indeed, as he himself calls it, a "strange thesis."

[48] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 9.

Heraclitus, the constant motion, change, and flux of perception does not allow for the stability required for any*thing* to exist. According to the other side of Bryant's view, there are no stable natures, no beings or individuals: just relations and difference. Nevertheless, we are able to recognize our cars in parking lots, see our mothers on the weekends, and use words and have ideas. All of this should not be possible unless there is some stability. Whether it be in things or in minds, Heraclitus does not say, but there was much said about this after him. To begin with difference, however, rather than with being is to beg the question against the priority of substance over relation, and to assume that we already have in place the things, an account of which is still needed. This account is not provided however: univocal Being just differentiates itself somehow into fleeting relations. However this occurs, that there are stable beings or natures is denied. Yet, (and this is why the view is so counter-intuitive) we all experience stable things, and nature seems to demonstrate regularity. The freshman's response to Heraclitus's assertion that one cannot step into the same river twice is as predictable as it is true: "Oh yeah? Just watch me!" There is a conflict here between a postmodern deconstruction of things which prefers relation to substance and the desire to get back to objects. The priority of difference and assemblages over being and substances is not the rediscovery of objects, but the obliteration of them.

As Aristotle argues, for example, Being and Unity are the ultimate foundational categories.[49] Within his logical hierarchy, these categories apply to all things; existence and unity are already implied in any concept or thing we can consider. This cat, the Canadian Parliament, difference, the form of cat, a manticore, all have some sort of existence (as a finite particular substance, an institution, a relation, a transcendent or immanent form, an object of fancy, respectively) and are somehow units separable from other things. Where we decide to impose the limits depends upon what it is we are concerned with: there are many senses in which a thing can be 'one.'[50] All sciences and inquiries already presuppose Being and Unity. The biologist investigates things insofar as they are living, and the physicist investigates things insofar as they change, but anything that could be singled out for investigation, whether it be a dog, an apple falling from a tree, or an assemblage or multiplicity such as an epidemiologist or pollster investigates, all already assume that the object of their inquiry is somehow a being and somehow a one. Multiplicity is only coherent in the context of unity. Not only are multiplicities composed of units (otherwise they could not be multiplicities), but a multiplicity itself is *a* multiplicity, that is, a thing and a unit. Aristotle argues, "'many' is applied to the things that are divisible. . . . For we say 'one or many,' just as if one were to say 'one and ones.'"[51] Elsewhere he writes, "all things are either one or many, and of the many each is a one."[52] Thus there is a hierarchy of categories of which Being and Unity are the ultimate foundations for they are "the most universal of all."[53]

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[49] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV.2-3.

[50] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, X.1-2.

[51] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, X.6, 1056b15-20.

[52] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, III.4, 1001b5.

[53] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, III.4, 1001a20.

Somewhere in the hierarchy is the category of 'change,' which for Aristotle applies to most, but not all things, and somewhere there is the category of 'life,' which is narrower again. One need not say that Being and Unity are temporally prior to difference, but as Aristotle argues, there is an explanatory or logical, and perhaps even an ontological, hierarchy present. Further, there is a hierarchy of dependence. If what Bryant says is true, that there are no unities, no Being, then he would not be able to form the concepts 'plural' and 'assemblage' which themselves are units. Bryant can make all the claims and change all the words he likes, but the "plural" and the "assemblage" already assume the unities which are distinct.[54] It is like trying to prove to citizens of Damascus that there is no Damascus by using the road to travel there and then, having arrived, proclaiming that not only is there no Damascus, but no road either. Without a ground that unifies difference we return either to an absurd Parmenidean Being without difference (Bryant praises flat univocity, but wants difference), or Heraclitean flux without things (Bryant likes the fluidity between relations, but wants the independent individual things too). We have more questions than either of these positions is prepared to address. Neither the position of Parmenides nor that of Heraclitus is sophisticated enough to comprehend, let alone address these problems. Both ancients deny what we are interested in: things.

**Substance and Relation**

On the face of it, celebrating difference seems to be an odd approach to take towards obliterating inequalities and creating a level playing field on which all things are on the same ontological footing. Intuitively, one might think that *destroying* difference would be a more direct approach. Bryant does want to destroy a kind of difference: ontological difference, difference between how things actually are. Bryant wants to destroy difference in order that distinctions and powers may no longer be real ontological features of real being and beings. If these were real features of things, Bryant fears that they could never really be eradicated, that at the root of things, the playing field really is, in a sense, unfair. While there could be nothing 'unfair' about nature as such, Bryant just cannot help seeing everything, even ontology, in terms of Marxist classes and power struggles. Bryant perceives hierarchies from the narrow perspective of his particular political view, whereby he automatically interprets

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[54] The same problem arises in Bryant's support of the Deleuzean priority of difference over substance. Deleuze, in his insistence that Difference is prior to Being, also begs the question as to what exactly is being differentiated. Bryant explains: "For Deleuze, being, as it were, is composed of chunks or units. There is not one substance but many substances" (Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 6). While one wonders what these 'chunks' or 'units' are chunks and units of, we are told nothing new: that there are all kinds of substances everyone knows. The philosophical question is, however, *how* are these substances unified in their difference? What makes them stable insofar as they are? What makes them individuals? What makes them things? How can they be similar to and different from themselves and other things? What makes them units? What is unity? Bryant insists throughout his paper that reality is composed only of "individual entities" and "individuals alone," yet he quotes with approval Deleuze's absurd claim that units have "no need whatsoever of unity" (Ibid., 9) Neither seems to realise that unity is already implied in each of the individuals he simply takes for granted.

power and hierarchy as vicious and dominating, and thereby he does not understand what vertical ontologies are really about. The present author suspects that in the end, Bryant does not like hierarchy because it does not mesh with his politics. He wants absolute political equality, so he tries to decry ontological hierarchy and claim that hierarchy does not exist in Being, therefore, it should not exist in politics. Hierarchy is a bad word in his world.

So Bryant's story runs thus: he replaces the primacy of Being, the existence of real natures and essences and so on with a version of Deleuzian 'difference.' Bryant writes, for instance, that "[d]ifference here is not a negation in the sense of 'x is *not* y,' nor is it a difference *between* in the sense of 'x differing *from* y."[55] Or Deleuze: "Instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself—and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it."[56] Bryant is trying to describe how an object is not dependent on its exterior relations. The problem, however, is that difference is relational. It already implies things (beings) differentiated from one another, whether the two things differentiated are distinct from one another originally, or whether something distinguishes itself from itself or from another. Byrant, however, denies that difference presupposes Being. He writes: "In other words, even if there were a single entity in all of being, this being or entity would still be a difference or would still consist of difference despite there being nothing else from which to distinguish itself."[57] How could something simply "be a difference" without there being something else *from which* it differs? Without things related, there is no relation. Further: "In short, difference is not a negation or what something is *not*, but is an affirmation in much the same way that the temperature at which water boils negates no other temperatures but is itself a positive and affirmative difference, with its own proper being and qualities within being."[58] If one were to say that water boils at 100 degrees, Bryant is right that this affirms something about the nature of water and about the temperature of 100 degrees. But Bryant would have us think that this is not at the same time to negate something about Bromine, which does not boil at 100 degrees, or the temperature of 58.8 degrees, which is insufficient to boil water, when surely it is precisely to do just this![59] It is true that a difference affirms something (if

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[55] Ibid., 7.

[56] Ibid., 7.

[57] Ibid., 7.

[58] Ibid., 7-8.

[59] Not even Bryant practises what he preaches. In a particularly revealing blog post Bryant states the following: "In order for a collective to form itself it must name itself (give itself an identity). Yet identity necessarily generates paranoia, a sense of persecution, and therefore violence." (http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/08/18/transcendence-and-the-problem-of-boundaries-a-confession/ Accessed 31 August, 2012) Yet he has this to say about Christians: "No true Christian ever names herself as a Christian because it instantiates this boundary logic of violence that follows from attempts to form identities." Bryant not only says that he is not one of those self-identifying Christians, whereby he himself generates an other from which he distances himself and apparently would like to persecute and do violence towards, but he explicitly identifies himself, asserting "I'm a crypto-Christian." The present author does not blame Bryant for identifying and negating: everyone must do this. What the present author is critical of, however, is either Bryant's disingenuousness, or his blithe unawareness of his doing exactly what he criticises in the very post in which he criticises it.

it did not, it would not be a difference), but it is meaningless to call it a 'difference' in isolation, and false to claim that doing so does not at the same time negate something else. One can affirm the brownness of the table in its difference from the redness of the floor and compliment table on his aptitude for being so brown. But one had better not say to table that he is not red, or that the floor is not similarly brown! Bryant would have us say that the brownness of the table is a 'difference' whether or not there are any other colours at all.

This is why initially looking at difference as Bryant's saviour and great equalizer should be a non-starter, since difference is relational and logically (if not ontologically) posterior to Being. If difference exists, existence (being) is logically prior to difference. The existence of difference depends on being, but not vice versa. If one were to say that existence differs, one must ask, 'differs from what?' Then one must find some other existent thing from which it differs. As Aristotle points out: "That which is different is different from some particular thing in some particular respect, so that there must be something identical whereby they differ."[60] One cannot have difference without having first the things (unified beings) that differ and the similar qualities by which they differ. If two things differ in colour, they must have the feature of having colour in common; if things differ in quantity, they must have the feature of having quantity in common. As Aristotle says, "difference, then, must be an otherness of the genus."[61] One can say and write that 'difference goes all the way down,' but one cannot really think difference apart from the things differentiated. An entirely relational principle cannot ground objects independent of their relations. In the above quote, the '*somethings*' and '*itselfs*' are already assumed. Being and unity are logically prior to difference. Being does not depend on difference, but difference depends on there being beings. Plato has this right: I argue that one cannot conceive it otherwise.

Bryant, explaining Deleuze, claims that Being is univocal. That is, there is no hierarchy of beings and no vertical ontology, which concepts are not the same, as we have seen, since not all hierarchies of beings are ontological. Literally, being is "said in one way" in all cases. Simply put, all things that exist have this existence in common. If two things *are*, neither *is* more than the other. John exists and his bicycle exists. To Bryant it makes no sense to say that John *is* more or less than his bicycle *is*. If the two alternatives are existence and nonexistence, both are the same in that they exist. This is the extent to which Bryant seems to employ this concept of univocity, and it is true as far as it goes. The Parmenidean logic is similar: Being either is, or is not. Bryant brings us back to this essential insight, but which Plato attempted to move beyond. Parmenides is correct, but Being, Plato intuited, is not so simple: things are and are not in many different ways. For Plato, when one is not wearing a coat and does not even own one, he is not wearing a coat in a different way than the man who has his slung over his shoulder. As Aristotle will clarify, things have various potentials, that is, a presence in absence which can be actualized. The kitten is not a cat, but it is not *simply* not a cat. Neither the kitten nor

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[60] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X.3, 1054b25.
[61] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* X.8, 1058a5.

the acorn are full grown cats, but there is a big difference in the ways in which they are both not cats.

Bryant, however, does not make these further claims because they introduce hierarchy: things are different in their potentials, powers, natures, and perhaps value. These might not be a politically correct claims, but the Ancients were not confined by such notions from asserting obvious truths about reality. If it is the case that all "things reside unequally in this equal being," and one wishes to eliminate hierarchy and verticality, it will become exceedingly difficult to account for how and why beings are clearly not equal—that they "reside unequally."[62] Bryant claims that this inequality is 'ontic' rather than 'ontological,' but this does not explain anything. The observation that beings "reside unequally" is easily explained however, by the fact they are *not* "equal beings." Further, whatever "equal being" could possibly mean remains a mystery. Either something is equal to itself, which is tautological, or it is equal to something else. Equality, like difference, is relational. If someone claims that "being is equal," anyone who speaks English should be waiting for the rest of the sentence. One should not hold his breath, however, waiting for Deleuze and Bryant. It would be helpful if Bryant explained his own meaning further, or attempted to argue for it in relation to his overall position. Rather, he quotes Deleuze as if the whole matter has already been settled by him.

Bryant continues:

> If we are to avoid falling back into a vertical ontology characterized by the transcendence of a single substance over all such that all other entities are but affections or modes of this one substance, we need a different sort of logic capable of both affirming the individuality and independence of the various creatures [which have disappeared because there is no longer unity] that populate being while also thinking their temporary relations to one another.[63]

Basically Bryant wants something else to replace hierarchical accounts of the concepts of essence and nature, but such a logic could never be given on the model he proposes. All we get are vacuous and trivial 'chunks' and 'units,' even the superficial recognition of which presupposes all that Bryant denies. Bryant might best try Aristotle, Plato, Aquinas, etc.: all of these address this question without speaking of individuals as 'affections or modes' of the first.

Nevertheless, Bryant presents three conditions that must be met within his flat ontology: "First, being cannot be a supplementary instance that transcends beings or entities as a distinct substance over and above beings as in the case of Spinoza. Being must instead consist of a plurality of individual beings."[64] He continues: "Second, immanence or flat ontology must affirm the existence or dignity of individual things or beings without subordinating them to transcendent and

[62] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 5.
[63] Ibid., 7.
[64] Ibid., 7.

supplementary entities such as forms, essences, or ideas in the mind of God."[65] Of course according to many vertical ontologies, these higher forms are precisely what give us individuality and dignity. Just because one might see the world according to some paradigm of patriarchy and unfairness because one believes that all higher things are dominating and subordinating, that does not mean that everyone should. The Ancients and Medievals saw this not as 'patriarchy' in the narrow minded contemporary sense, but as benevolence. It is absolutely not the case that vertical ontologies such as Plato's and Aquinas's sacrifice human dignity. In fact, these philosophies explain human individuality and dignity by exploring the elevation of the human being and his pride of place in nature, all the while recognizing that the human is not a god. For Aristotle, the elevated human soul has the power to take part in its own limited way in the divine activity of thinking on thinking. For Boethius the providence of God is what guarantees the possibility of human freedom. Only within order can we expect the regularity that any real choices and actions require. But such a possibility, that an over-arching God can be positive for human beings is entirely lost on one who naturally recoils from any suggestion that there is any kind of being that "enjoys a privileged position," "hover[s] above," "condition[s]," and "survey[s]," that acts as a "patriarch[al]" "father," "presiding," as a "central agency" and "centralized controller," standing "over, above, and outside individuals," "overdetermining" and "subordinating" them.

Bryant nevertheless points obliquely to a serious concern, with which the present author is sympathetic. He fears that unjust power relations are inherent features in vertical ontologies. Bryant writes: "By contrast, the heteroverse of flat ontology and a logic of multiplicities demands a multilateral understanding of causation where no one agency is determinative of an assemblage in the last instance."[66] However, his is not the answer. In fact, vertical ontology may be the very thing to save us from such pride. Vertical ontologies do not go hand in hand with paving the rain forests because I need a place to park. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

**Anthropocentrism and Hierarchy**

The present author does have some affinity for Bryant's "object-oriented" approach. It is perhaps time to philosophically get 'back to the world' and move beyond the paranoid and narcissistic obsession with the inner self-in-opposition-to-the-world philosophy bequeathed to us by Descartes and developed in multifarious ways into the various hidden anthropocentric views that Bryant implicates. It seems, however, that Bryant does not have much interest in the way objects really are, but rather, he is more interested in the way he wishes they were. Since Descartes, many have argued that things such as natures and essences have been taken out of things and have been implanted in us, that is, in the mind. Bryant, by rightly castigating anthropocentric imposture, strangely succumbs to a rather opposite sort of timidity.

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[65] Ibid., 7.
[66] Ibid., 12.

Since Bryant cannot put essences back into the things in which they belong without admitting a hierarchy, and he cannot keep them in the mind without being anthropocentric, he simply tosses aside essences and natures altogether. Bryant is right to accuse those theories that impose merely human conceptions upon the world as real features of it, but without the concepts that imply ontological hierarchy, such as universals and essences, he cannot say anything about objects aside from the unsupported maxim asserting a version of the univocity of Being.[67]

Bryant wants to "de-emphasize the centrality of the human in being."[68] He seems to mean this politically, ecologically, ontologically, and I argue, this also has the effect of debasing the human's value and dignity since there is no longer a ground for valuing a human being above the insects and stones which he is naturally above. While we may need to re-evaluate the human's place in the world, we de-emphasize the centrality of the human not by debasing him like Bryant does, but rather, by seeing that the verticality of the hierarchy extends above and beyond him. Our modern anthropocentrism might be seen as the result of cutting off the hierarchy at the human: without anything above and beyond us, we become the acme of reality. This is nothing new of course; the Greek dramatists described this as *hubris*, and Augustine explained it as pride. Bryant wants to solve this problem, not by re-establishing our proper position in the hierarchy of being, the cosmic order, in which we enjoy an elevated, though limited place, but rather, he wants to destroy all hierarchy, which has the nightmarish effect of dehumanizing humanity.[69]

Bryant, trying to undercut anthropocentrism, provides an example that he admits is a "rather slapstick" one.[70] He proposes that instead of humans protecting and breeding cows for their own use, perhaps Bessie uses farmer Brown for her own protection from predators by enticing the poor sap with her tasty fat. In this reversal Bryant suggests that perhaps it is *we* who exist *for the cow*! This is typical of the paper's rhetorical 'clown nose on, clown nose off' approach, by which the author provides an amusing exaggeration that nevertheless is intended to explain his position in a serious manner. While this might be amusing on some level, Bryant wants to make a serious claim; he wishes also to take his clown nose off and say that this possibility is illustrating his point against anthropocentrism.

That the example fits in and is entirely consistent with his flat ontology shows either that: a) cows have the intentionality to do this and this is what is going on from the cow's point of view, that they "seduce us with their taste and fat" in order to be domesticated for their protection from predators; or b) the humour that arises

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[67] That is, "all objects . . . equally exist while they do not exist equally." Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 19.

[68] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 4.

[69] As an example of the kind of solution the present author advocates one could look to Bonaventure, who sees the human in the cosmic order as a kind of Janus, at once looking upwards and downwards. Bonaventure maintains both nature's independence from the human which guards against anthropocentrism and encourages empirical science, and also the ontological reality and objectivity of essences and natures which are knowable by humans, thereby avoiding relativity while surpassing naïve realism. On this see Matthew Robinson, "Individual Agency in Bonaventure's Account of Natural Knowledge," *Dionysius* 29 (2011): 81-105.

[70] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 18.

from the silliness of this example betrays the incongruity of flat ontology altogether: the whole position is slapstick. The same outrageousness that incites us to laughter in the example should cause us similarly to question the seriousness of Bryant's overall standpoint. Either the example is a bad analogy, or it is a good one. Either the position is not amusing, and we should take the cow's acumen seriously, or it is slapstick and thus his whole position is similarly so. Bryant does this throughout his paper, explicitly claiming, 'this is just a funny example to illustrate my point', but seriously asserting, 'this is actually what I think.' He wants to say that he is not really serious and draws back, but he takes his position seriously. But either it is funny and we can excuse it because he is not serious (but he is serious), or it is an illustrative analogy and his whole position should be just as bizarre (which it is).

The danger, evident here, of eradicating hierarchy along with anthropocentrism is that one tends to simply anthropomorphize everything else (the acme of anthropocentrism if there ever was one). One either absurdly ascribes human traits to cows and pebbles, or worse, perversely debases the value and dignity of the human to those of trees and grass—all to construct some false astroturf playing field of equality on which all the players receive a trophy for participation, even the sticks and stones.[71]

Bryant's analysis of the smart phone is indicative of such a move. Bryant writes:

> A standard analysis of the smart phone from the standpoint of vertical ontology would explain the existence of the smart phone in terms of a set of human goals and purposes, responding to a problem posed by humans. Humans wished to be capable of talking to one another anywhere and to be able to access the internet anywhere. . . . Here the phone is reduced to a vehicle for human aims and purposes such that these goals and purposes precede the existence of the cell phone and are the prime agency or mover that brings the cell phone into existence.[72]

If we are wondering what a cell phone is, along with what it is made of, its organization and structure, and how it came to be, we can also ask what its purpose is. Bryant is right: the cell phone comes into existence to fulfill some need, and human beings are the primary things that bring it into existence. However, Bryant wants to deny this 'standard analysis':

> As in the case of DNA, the point is not that human goals and purposes do not play a role in the development of the smart phone, but rather that this mode of explanation is thoroughly unilateral, failing to account for

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[71] Of course Dawkins similarly anthropomorphises with his 'selfish' genes, which just goes to show how difficult it is to explain anything and how disingenuous one has to become when one jettisons the explanatory apparatus of essences, natures, forms, *telos*, and real ontological hierarchy.
[72] Ibid., 15.

the differences that a smart phone contributes to *us* independent of our goals and aims.[73]

One of course can grant that the human is affected by the smart phone within the 'standard analysis.' Proposing a hierarchy of causes does not entail that the causation is unilateral. Again, Bryant creates a straw man by suggesting that inherent in hierarchy is the claim that humans cannot be affected by cell phones. Perhaps the confusion arises in the following way: one could claim that in some versions of vertical ontology, there are forms, essences, etc., that are unaffected by the lower members of the hierarchy. One might then assume that this applies to all members of the hierarchy in relation to the lower members. Thus, the form of man is unaffected by the particular man, and the particular man is unaffected by the cell phone and the cow. But then one can point to the obvious fact that men *are* affected by cell phones and cows, when in reality, no one proposes that they are not. To assume that all causation within any vertical ontology is unilateral is to miss the crucial point that there are material and contingent entities, and transcendent unaffected entities (and as we have seen, the transcendent is not always unaffected either).

Bryant is masterful at describing the effects that technology has on human beings:

> Finally, with constant use, the very nature of my cognition becomes dependent on the ready accessibility of the information stored and available through my smart phone. . . . My smart phone becomes an indispensable component of my thought or cognition, generating a new style of thought not previously available to me or other human beings.[74]

Even if it is true that "these technologies change the very nature of our existence," we can *choose* to use them, or choose *how* we use them.[75] Bryant does not explicitly question here whether or not we should allow cell phones to change what we are: at what point do cell phones cease to be instruments that promote human happiness and become impediments to human flourishing? Reflection on the good of technology requires, however, that all that Bryant denies comes back into play: human nature and *telos*. If we do relinquish our autonomy to the pressures of using smart phones, then perhaps Bryant is right, there ceases to be a difference between humans and other animals. But this gives animals too little credit, for even they by nature seek what is best for them. The question should be, how, given my nature as a human being, could I positively and negatively be affected by this technology? Because the proposed flat ontology asserts that "there are no such things as either man or nature," the position seems incapable of ever raising this question, let alone answering it.[76] This is what happens when one denies the essential natures of,

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73 Ibid., 15.
74 Ibid., 17.
75 Ibid., 17.
76 Ibid., 10.

differences between, and the various hierarchies among monkeys, sticks, rocket ships, astronauts, cell phones, philosophy professors, and cows: one loses any capacity to distinguish between and determine what is good for them.

If only the position were simply impotent; the dehumanizing equating of humans to cell phones is extraordinarily dangerous. The moral of the story is this: we have always known that we can be taken over by external causes and pressures, whether they be drink, sex, sloth, or technology, but we must similarly realize our relation to the good. Technology can be an addiction like any other: the addict can be overcome by desires, or can just be weak willed. Because a flat ontology cannot be caught "privileging any of these components" in any assemblage, its adherent must ignore essences, natures, aims, and actual important causes, which are nevertheless required implicitly when Bryant references some of his political concerns such as animal cruelty and environmentalism, but which noticeably disappear when he praises technology.[77] One ends up with the worst of both worlds and still one does not avoid hierarchy: the human is debased to the level of brutes and plants above all of which reside smart phones, exerting their pressures to the loss of human dignity and autonomy. It will be interesting to observe how the progressive technophile will continue to deal with the problem of technological waste: technology or the environment? Currently he acts like the proverbial donkey placed between two equidistant bales of hay.

But Bryant is not alone in this view: "If the logic of multiplicities required by flat ontology or immanence requires a democracy of causes, and if, as Susan Oyama argues, there is no centralized controller of multiplicities, it follows that we can no longer privilege human points of view in the unfolding and development of assemblages."[78] The present author finds it amusing that these humans, Bryant and Oyama, are admonishing their readers to accept their human view that we should not accept the privileging of a human view. Is this not another point of view that Bryant wants privileged? Is Oyama not human? Should we privilege her view? The present author suspects that the position advocated by Bryant is caught between a dogmatic denial of hierarchy and an apprehension about being anthropocentric, the result of which renders it unable to make any pronouncements about objects. We are left with trite but true observations that there are many causes and all things that exist exist and anthropomorphic (and similarly anthropocentric) characterizations of inanimate objects that are not only "slapstick" but tend to equate all objects in a way that even Bryant seems averse to doing. Is this the best one can do with an onticology that either asserts nonsense about anthropomorphic cows and smart phones or makes trite but true pronouncements that stuff affects stuff? The application of a flat ontology in any particular example, merely creates another anthropocentric paradigm which, due to its overt anthropomorphism, is more unbelievable than the vertical ontologies hidden within the anthropocentric theories of which Bryant is critical. His aversion to ontological hierarchy slams shut the exit from the Cartesian rabbit hole he creates for himself. Without essences and hierarchy, that is, the

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[77] Ibid., 17.
[78] Ibid., 17.

realization that we cannot explain the natural naturally, Bryant cannot move from his observations without anthropomorphizing and himself doing what he says we cannot. One is stuck with anthropocentrism within *Bryant's* view, and one finds that his onticology is among the Kantian, Marxist, Foucauldian, and Adornian kinds of theories that he wants to avoid.

In the end, no one truly believes in a flat ontology. It is just a devious way of condemning the human. All of the examples illustrate it. We are supposed to think that because the emperor can choke to death on a pebble, there is absolute equality between Octavian and an olive pit. Yes, they both affect and are affected, this is true, yet Bryant wants to equalize and level the cause/effect playing field, decentralize the human, and wipe out all hierarchy by means of such analogies. No one, not even Bryant, really thinks that the pebble and the emperor are ontological equals in terms of *how* each exists. In the end, it is just a rhetorical method that Bryant employs throughout the whole paper. But the position is untenable; if everything is equal, everything is equally worthless.

To those who deny transcendent hierarchy the solution to anthropocentric narcissism, having gotten rid of that which is above us, is either: 1) to replace the highest with something else to which we are subordinated and should worship: the environment, animals, technology; or 2) to flatten out the whole thing—to deny beings and natures, which also results in the degradation of humanity. Both positions have the effect of making humans less important than those things that they are really above. It is, however, the hierarchy of beings that *preserves* humility and stewardship, not some deification of the smart phone or mother nature, nor some view of fairness and the absolute equality between babies and baboons. In fact, without hierarchy and natures, we lose our place in the cosmic order, the recognition of not only our powers and pride of place, but also our limits. Anthropocentric views generally exaggerate the former and deny or ignore the latter. The real problem is that the human in the contemporary secular age sees himself as the highest because God or any other thing higher than he has been forgotten. This was never the case with the philosophers against whom Bryant writes. Those who used to propose the hierarchy never saw themselves at the top of it; neither Hesiod nor Aquinas, neither the Platonist nor the priest would dare to say such a thing. In the scramble to remedy the results of human pride and narcissism without God, many thinkers, instead of putting the human in his proper place, either degrade  him, or worse, eliminate him altogether. The result is that there is no man, and there are no men.  How can such a philosophy bring about the desired equality of beings when once applied, leaves no beings remaining to equalize?[79]

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[79] Take this example: Bryant approves of Deleuze and Guattari's claim that "there is no such thing as either man or nature . . . only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together" (Ibid. 10). If there were really no man or nature, there could be no coupling either, since there is nothing distinct to couple. This second part of the claim can only be comprehensible if the beginning of the claim is false. How could the "process produce the one within the other" if there is neither the one nor the other neither first nor last? If there are no natures and no essences, not only are there no individuals, but no language, humans, selves, and all those things that Deleuze's and Bryant's descriptions rely on, yet explicitly deny. Gilson observes the same conundrum in Darwin: "It is thus quite difficult to know that of which Darwin intends to explain the origin, unless, it be the origin of

By decentralizing the human's place in the world, Bryant seems to want to replace cruel inhuman treatment of animals, for example, with the equally absurd worship of them. Since Bryant denies that there are any natures and essences, this equal worship of the dog and human could just as easily turn to the enslavement of both. Bryant's real political aim underneath all of this ontology is clearly on display: "Flat ontology thus suggests a profoundly ecological vision of being that emphasizes shifting and interacting relations among entities without any of these entities fully or completely overdetermining the rest."[80] One does not know what is more surprising here: that this claim is not argued, or the revelation that all along the world has been amazingly in step with the fashions of the early 21st century and has shown itself to be quite politically correct. By taking natures out of both beings which cease to be beings and anthropocentric, narcissistic, and imperialistic human minds, one loses any possibility of grounding values objectively, and must replace them with a story about equality. Once one has done this, perhaps, like the little poor man of Assisi, he will treat all things as though they were kings. Though he just as easily may treat them all as though they were excrement. And on what basis should one imitate the former and admonish the latter if not from an appeal to human nature, or the nature of trees, or the nature of the fetus—that all things have their proper dignity, their place in the cosmos which we should do well to investigate and understand?

There can be no doubt that many of the inequalities in our world are rooted in anthropocentrism and individual narcissism, but again Bryant exaggerates the mundane truth to a universal dogma, all in order to find a solution to these problems that the old hierarchy already addresses, and does so better. The present author would hope that men and women should be treated equally because there is something objectively true about them, something in common that provides a certain dignity, some rational capacity, etc., whatever it might be.[81] It must be there, no matter what one's politics and policies. Whatever it is, the human is distinct and above the mud in the ditch. I want women to vote because of the same reason and nature. What I don't want is for women to have the vote because they are on equal ontological footing with the birch in my backyard who equally deserves a say. A flat ontology, upon which everything enjoys equal ontological footing does not tell us how to treat things reasonably: we are either absurdly humane to all things or cruelly inhuman to them, as long as we treat them all equally. While some people, thinking similarly to how Bryant thinks, come to care more for animal and plant rights than

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something which does not exist. It is particularly surprising that the term 'species' occupies so visible a place in the title of the work when it plays such a diminished role in the doctrine. . . . [Darwin] persists in speaking about species in order to say that they do not exist. He had need of the word precisely to be able to deny its existence" (Gilson, 170).

[80] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 6.

[81] If Bryant's main concern is to remind us to 'keep an open mind' concerning the possibility of many causes at work, Aristotle takes this up as well. One of the purposes of the syllogism is to create a schema within which we can try out different middle terms in order to say something more worth saying. Humans are both 'political' and 'rational' animals, and there may be many more terms we can insert in order to test our memories and experience to explore what it is that makes a human being be what she is. Neither Aristotle nor Plato claims to have certain knowledge or to have discovered the key paradigm that explains everything.

they do for human rights, would anyone fight for the right of the air not to be breathed, the chair not to be sat on, or the ground not to be stood upon? Certainly one would not stand to see the child sat or stood upon. But what in a flat ontology is there to ground such a position? Alas, there is nothing left to provide such a ground, for there are no longer human beings, no dignity, no species, no essence, not even the unity and individuality of a child. Any individual is just its relations among other transient sets of relations, and since there is no unity, there is no individual. There is nothing to love, and no self to love it, just a Thyestes soup of difference.

## Some Sympathy for Object-Oriented Philosophy

Bryant concludes his paper with an important admonition. He argues that his position

> . . . entails overcoming that way of viewing the world that sees it as a depersonalized mirror of our own intentions and learning how to think seriously about our entanglement with nonhuman agencies. Only once we begin to understand our entanglements and how heterogeneous agencies act with and against one another can we begin to engage in wise action with respect to the world in which we dwell.[82]

This is a positive, noble, and timely exhortation, with which the present author entirely agrees. Bryant's enemy here, however, is not hierarchy and vertical ontology. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The vertical ontologies and hierarchies of Being of Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, grounded in the dictum, "Know thyself," are the philosophies that take individuals, agencies, their purposes and limits seriously. Any logic that would destroy the individual and subordinate substance to relation would destroy the very things that Bryant wants to focus on and "think seriously about." A return to Aristotle and the philosophy of nature is the cure for what Bryant rightly sees as a disease in the modern views that perceive the human individual as the crown of the cosmos.

Once Bryant gets clearer about his opposition in his last section, it seems perhaps that he is not against vertical ontology *per se*. Rather he is against Kant and Descartes and others who draw too much of a distinction between the self and the world. Nothing he says against vertical ontologies actually accuses Plato, Aristotle, the Neoplatonists, and Aquinas. Also, his problems with Descartes and Kant are concerns he would *share* with Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, among others. Furthermore, a return to these would further Bryant's project without the Deleuzean deconstruction that is opposed to the objects that he wants. This latitudinarian blurring of individuals destroys individual objects or at least obscures their forms to the point that we should not be able to distinguish them amid the muck of differentiation; but yet, we do perceive them.

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[82] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 20.

Essential to this whole discussion is the question, what is the primary unit of analysis? For Aristotle, this depends on the kinds of questions one wants answered. But for most of us, day to day, the focus is on the macro individual. Looking at big things is generally necessary for the epidemiologist, the statistician, and the lawmaker, while looking at small things is often required for the chemist, the detective, and the judge. But looking at ants does not require that we deny that there are elephants any more than looking at whales obligates us to refuse the galaxy. That there are levels of analysis itself suggests a hierarchy of Being. The level at which we think is often determined by the kinds of questions we have. Aristotle generally took the individuals we normally see, hear, smell, taste, and touch as the primary units of analysis: this particular man, this particular horse, this particular shade of white.[83] Mariska Leunissen writes:

> I believe that the reason why Aristotle contrasts his own teleological worldview with that of his materialist predecessors is that the latter deny that high-order natural phenomena, such as animals and plants, have a privileged ontological status. According to the materialists, only the material elements are natures in a true sense, which means that the things that are constituted from them are mere accidental qualities or arrangements of these elements. The materialist view of nature eliminates those very things that Aristotle takes to be ontologically basic, and which in his view are in particular need of explanation, namely complex natural wholes such as living beings. In short, for Aristotle an animal is the primary example of a natural substance, whereas for the materialist an animal is merely a coincidental conglomeration of elements. The heart of the debate does not pertain (or at least not directly) to the question of reductionism, but rather to that of eliminativism: the mistake of the materialists is not just that they reduce plants and animals to their material elements, but more that, as a consequence of this reductionism, they deny that plants and animals are substances at all.[84]

Leunissen's description of Aristotle's problem with the materialists applies precisely to the modern deconstruction of substance. Both Aristotle's materialists and Bryant end up losing the very things that they set out to explain. Aristotle was aware that substances exist within greater schemes of relations and are themselves comprised of relations between smaller parts or principles. It is not that Aristotle had never thought of this, it's just that he never thought much of it. Aristotle took the truth of what is obvious in experience concerning the connectedness and relations between substances and moved forward in explaining the world by taking the individual,

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[83] See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, X.1-2 on how we can focus on many different kinds of 'ones.'

[84] Mariska Leunissen, *Explanation and Teleology in Aristotle's Science of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 24. On the problems inherent in theoretical reductions that attempt to reduce all of nature to physics, see Steven Horst, *Beyond Reduction: Philosophy of Mind and Post-Reductionist Philosophy of Science* (USA: Oxford UP, 2012).

common sense things we interact with every day as the primary substances, and set out what must be the case metaphysically in order for these things to be as they are. He employs hierarchy, forms, essences, natures, and other such concepts not only to explain how change and stability are possible, whatever the particular empirical data might turn out to be, but to show that the conclusions imply that the explanatory structure describes and indicates real ontological features of the world. That is, Aristotle, develops the philosophy of nature.

Bryant's view is rather that "the individual will thus not be the basic unit of analysis, but rather the organism plus its environment constitutes the elementary unit of analysis."[85] But Aristotle, despite Bryant's straw man, in focusing on the individual, nowhere suggests that it could be understood entirely in isolation from its environment. In fact, for Aristotle, particulars can never be *known* at all: they are too particular. Yet Aristotle provides us with a way to explore the individual, which we all recognize in experience. He draws the lines and separations which are not only required for explanation, but intuited in experience. Without essences and natures, where could one draw such lines? Where do assemblages begin and end? If there is more than one, which the grammar suggests, how are they delineated? How could we understand and experience the units and individuals within an assemblage?[86] What constitutes the 'organism's' 'environment'? What is left out of it? Bryant begs the question: he takes it for granted that there are "organisms" and an "environment" and thinks that units, whatever they might be, can remain without these concepts that he interprets as being in conflict with his politics. Bryant either overlooks these questions, or he is picking and choosing his ontology to fit his predetermined view of the world.

Bryant proposes his position in response to what could universally be recognized as a bad extreme: the narcissistic view that the individual human being is the centre of the universe, and therefore, all things can and ought to be reduced to his own desires over which he asserts his power. Here, human beings, or even one individual human being is thought to be the pinnacle of the hierarchy. Of course anyone can foresee the tyrannical horrors that could and did arise from this delusion: the enslavement of those human beings considered to be non-human, moral decay, and the destruction of our environment. Bryant seems to think that these outcomes are inherent within vertical ontologies and hierarchies of being, and so he proposes what he thinks is a cure: he flattens the entire hierarchy to bring man down to the level of everything else. His cure, however, is worse than the disease, for some of the reasons we have already discussed. Bryant is wrong, however, to diagnose hierarchy as the cause of this narcissistic tendency of humanity, for not only do vertical ontologies also decry the evils of the first extreme, but further, one can understand the first as a problem only if hierarchy is real. Even Nietzsche, who chillingly understood the destruction of the old hierarchies in morality and goodness

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[85] Bryant, "A Logic of Multiplicities," 14.

[86] While Bryant claims in *The Democracy of Objects* that "not everything is related to the human, nor . . . is everything related to everything else," one still struggles to see where the lines between assemblages are drawn and feels like he is the rope in a tug-of-war between Parmenides and Heraclitus (25).

as a kind of progress, still must have some standard of progress against which he judged the superman's position and our relation to it. Indeed, we have more of a chance of getting what Bryant wants *with* the hierarchy (the *whole* of it, that is) than without it.

The solution to human narcissism and self destruction is not the abolition of hierarchy, for this is willfully to ignore our experience. To try to ignore it is a vain pursuit which Bryant's paper demonstrates every time he mentions the things that his own position will not allow him to discuss. Bryant's solution, having gotten rid of that which is above us, is either to replace the highest with something else to which we are subordinated (which we are really above) and should worship, whether it be mother nature, the environment, the collective, the government, technology, animals, etc., or to flatten out reality, to deny beings and natures, which also has the effect of degrading human dignity. We are wanderingly lead to two mad positions, curiously mingled together throughout the paper: a paganized technology and nature worship and the explicit degradation of human eminence. The solution to these problems lies not in ignoring real features of the world in some attempt to politically correct reality. Rather, objects need to be investigated according not only to material and efficient causes, but also according to their formal and final causes, if we are to discover our proper relations to the world and what lies above us and it.

All vertical ontologies understand that the human has his place within the hierarchy. Generally we are elevated beings but not gods. Since the beginning of philosophy this was encapsulated in the dictum, "Know thyself!" That is, we must know what we are and what we need, and what our environment must be like in order to survive and flourish. We must ask what it means for humans to flourish, for the tree to flourish. We must try to discover what kind of beings are we, and what are the relations to other things that promote our happiness. We must ask: "What is the good?" The elevated status of the human over an above many (though not all) things, does not automatically entail the domination of them, as it does to Bryant's mind, but rather, it entails stewardship, a notion all too absent from contemporary discussions about our relation to the world.

Augustine described the ignorance which thinks the human to be the self-sufficient centre of the universe as the freedom of a runaway slave. We must, however, as even Homer knew, restore the human's place within the cosmic order as elevated within the cosmos but not its acme. The human finds himself within an order which he is not responsible for creating. Our scientific advances allow us to manipulate ourselves and our environment, but such activities alone can never determine whether such things are good for us. What is good for the human is not determined by the human. The real solution, as the vertical ontologies of the Platonists and Christians advocate, is not the flattening of hierarchy, but the realization that the hierarchy extends far beyond the human being. Perhaps many of our problems today, including our environmental ones, are the result of cutting off the hierarchy at the level of the human and seeing all things as below us.

That there are natures and essences and real relations between things encourages science. We do not blind ourselves to real affirmations and negations, differences and values in nature. Rather we see, explore, and respect real ontological

differences, hierarchy, powers, roles and places, to see our place in the cosmic order as beings with power and dignity, but also with limits and responsibility. Yes, some evil things can be done in the name of hierarchy misunderstood or intentionally distorted. But this is all the more reason not to put our fingers in our ears and heads in the sand and ignore essences and powers or to claim that they do not exist, or to draw our attention away from such truths to some commonplace ontologically PC fact that they all *are*. Hierarchy is not the enemy here; in fact it is what preserves against what Bryant fears. This is what preserves humility and stewardship.

The problem is that we think we have become God; we do the surveying and dominating, thinking we are not conditioned by what we see below and that there is nothing above us. We ourselves act like the perverted caricature of God that Dawkins describes. We have turned our backs to the hierarchy above us and have become proud, rejoicing in this pride of place and power while failing to recognize our limits. We must re-establish our own dependence on the lower and the higher and understand our place in the cosmic order. This was also the error of Prometheus; technology must serve Zeus, not humans as though they were Zeus. Bryant, because of his vague generalization of vertical ontologies and the 'transcendent' misses the all important and essential claim common to all vertical ontologies: we, like all things 'below' us, are also dependent on what is higher than we. And we are not dependent as though we are controlled by some Dawkins/Hitchensesque bourgeois "surveying," "controlling," "centralized," "patriarchical" God who "enjoy[s] greater privileges than others." Rather, just as the higher is benevolent and giving towards and ordering what is below, so too do humans have a responsibility for stewardship over what is below and beside them. As Chesterton rightly said, nature is not our mother; rather, she is our sister.