Spring-Source

Attempting to Overcome 'the Staleness of the Philosophy of Human Access'

Randolph J K Ellis

The Spring-Source Seminar Series

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Attempting to Overcome 'the Staleness of the Philosophy of Human Access' was first presented on 20 September 2018 at the St Mary's Centre Annual Symposium in Practical Theology and Religious Education under the title, "It is not my perception of the tent that shelters the carnival from injury in the storm": Attempting to overcome "the staleness of the philosophy of human access".

All objects are in a constant state of withdrawal and are mostly unknown to us. This withdrawal is not simply an abandonment of the object by we ourselves, who might somehow initiate this withdrawal (as a feature of our incomplete awareness). It simply signifies the object's withdrawal from each and every other object and from each and every one of us.

This withdrawal discloses the capacity of the object to remain itself (as that which can never become a complete feature of knowledge) and points toward itself as an undiminished source, a constantly resurgent wellspring of regard. This capacity to remain itself, does not signify a fixed, a frozen or inert state of being, nor does it imply that the object is in a state of constant mutability or instability. It simply cannot be other than itself, can never be anything said, thought, imagined, reported, sculpted, represented or written about it.

The object's withdrawal is not a left-over remnant generated by what we

do not know; neither is it reliant upon us or upon our ignorance or lack of acuity. Rather, the object (being mostly unknown and mostly hidden) has the constant capacity to be in a state of replenishment whenever we place ourselves within its way. This replenishment has nothing whatsoever to do with depletion or entropy or any capability of the object to transform or resurge itself. It simply signifies its capacity to be approached as that which is mostly withdrawn and unknown.

Any approach that recognises that the object is that which is mostly unknown also recognises that it is not identical with what is known about it. As such, the object can never be something that can be collapsed into that knowledge. Such an approach would accept that the object is always a thing-in-itself, a *noumenon*[1] and mostly inaccessible. On this approach, the object would never simply be the yet-to-be-discovered residue of whatever we might ever know about it. It would never simply be dependent upon the existence of 'human access' in order for it itself to be existent.

For ever and always, there lies a constant fissure, a stark cavernous detachment between it and we ourselves, a fissure severing it from everything else, a fissure that can never be spanned. Philosophers have often been quite content to accept the presence of this abyssal gap but have retreated from looking over its edge in favour of remaining with whatever might come into appearance *for them*.[2] Appearance, therefore, has drifted into becoming the property of humans and deemed to be simply another part of knowledge (even *before* anything has actually come into appearance *for us*). In a sense, the starting point has also become the finishing point, resulting in the object (regarded primarily as a thing-in-itself) morphing into some kind of impossibility.

The object has found itself being treated as a kind of clue-giving entity whose clues are gathered together and then reported upon in the form of some sort of continuing narrative, a narrative that, through its very structure, furnishes coherence to whatever might have been apprehended *by us*. This coherence gives shape to any on-going account and serves as an assured and guaranteed mode of grasping the object consistently. However, in that consistency, something becomes occluded. Whatever rises to appearance *for us*, rises as a *phenomenon*, and when we turn towards it to grasp it phenomenologically, we

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do so as 'the unprejudiced, descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness, precisely in the manner in which it so appears.'[3]

But the thing-in-itself, the *noumenon,* does not need partners, does not need the presence of co-workers to bring it into existence and does not need the extended hand of benediction in order to endorse its reality. The hard volcanic basalt, on the dark side of the moon, with all its glassy interiors does not need our insights in order for it to be itself. Whatever we might come to know about it and whatever we might come to write about it, does not add to it nor enhance it in any way, it always remains a *noumenon*, a thing-in-itself, and mostly inaccessible.

Unfortunately, 'the unprejudiced, descriptive study', alluded to earlier, comes to serve as substitute for the thing in itself and the *phenomenon* overwhelms and displaces the *noumenon* and leaves it as an exiled and uninteresting nonentity; somewhat along the lines of; my perception of 'the tent is identical with the tent that shelters the carnival from injury in the storm'.[4] What is lost in all this is the knowledge that a *phenomenon* is merely a feature of being a *noumenon* and that every *phenomenon* is also a *noumenon*. The converse is not true however, in that there are many *noumena* that have no *phenomena* at all, but there are no *phenomena* that do not have a *noumenon.*

But why should we be interested in a *noumenon* as a thing-in-itself, why should we be interested in something that can never be accessed, or never be unsealed, or never be available to us as an initiating point of knowledge? Why should we bother getting out of bed in order to take it seriously into account when its *phenomena* are already overwhelmingly present, are already stridently coming into appearance and are already *enough for us* to contend with? It's at this point that I begin to inhale the first whiff of staleness, the first whiff of the 'staleness of the philosophy of human access' and realise I am being drawn further between the walls of ἀπορῑ́ᾱ (aporia) inside the house of logical impasse and that its walls are beginning to seal me in. However, when I look about, I recognise that I am not alone in this windowless place and that there are many others with me and that they are thriving and getting along just fine, and whilst I scratch about within some pending nightfall, they seem bright and illuminated from within. For what is an ancient and oppressive staleness for me, is the pure oxygen of logical reality[5] for them. I also sense that this ancient and oppressive

staleness is not something to do with my escaping the house itself but with my not being there in the first place, in my not assuming that it is the *only* place I can ever reside. I can get out.

I have long had uneasiness, a lingering discomposure, going back to my boyhood, regarding the casualness of disrespect in our orientation towards objects. 'Disrespect' may seem an odd word to use, but 'disrespect' seems right when considering our assumptions that objects are less than we, are not as entitled as we and that they are there mainly because we consciously perceive them (and that we are alongside other people who do the same, believe the same and who verify our position).

My boyhood uneasiness was progressively amplified whenever some special thing, some distinctive object was pulled out of its own existence and placed quite definitely within the stream of human wilfulness (often in a most banal manner).[6] This uneasiness was sustained whenever that banality proceeded without any hope of change or any hope of redemption from the object's fated destiny.

It was as if the object was somehow being kept 'in', being confined within some mundane enterprise. I was puzzled at the lack of curiosity around the object's hidden being. It seemed then, as now, such a limited mode of apprehension. It was not that the grown-ups were satisfied with simple surfaces; I could see that their perceiving of the object's banality was not focused on those appearances alone, but that it went all the way through and that no part of the object avoided its apprehension.

There was a real tension around all this for me. There was the constant invitation to accept the perception of those around me who, in a very 'practical' way, moved among objects with confidence, a confidence that 'worked' for them, one that functioned efficiently and one that could be relied upon to be repeated. But it seemed to leave so much out. I just wanted them to stop. They always seemed so 'quick' in the way that they skated from one thing to another. There was no lingering (except when some fashioning of an object was called upon to complete an enterprise).

Nevertheless, I could see that whatever they did was effectively a fanciful 'playing' with the object, a sort of dallying, a kind of postponement of something that needed to be taken into account. It seemed almost a piece of

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theatre in which performances were presented daily and where everywhere there were audiences and players. I could see that they believed they were performing the gritty reality of everyday life and that there was no other drama that could surpass its success (and that no other show had had such a long run). But why were they being satisfied with so little, why were they so contented with tarrying with something that was mostly absent, mostly hidden and mostly not there at all?

What struck me back then was the separateness of things. For me, things didn't go together in some sort of birthright, some sort of kinship. Certainly, they came together, were put together, were deliberately inserted into each other, glued, screwed and bolted. But all this was either a deliberate drawing together in order to create something new or an unplanned event (such as a tree falling onto a tent in a storm). Even when something was intentionally or accidently destroyed, its destruction seemed somehow illusory (as if something wasn't quite right with the logic surrounding its finality).[7]

As a boy, I sensed that the grown-ups were being inundated by an unending richness of detail, a richness that threaded everything together so that there were connections everywhere. What I didn't share with them (in this richness of detail) was that things were actually joined up, that things went together or that there were natural families of things. But I couldn't get them to look again; I couldn't get them to stop (and I never once heard them admit that it wasn't all like this).

But why should they? There was a fluency in all this, a competence and a heavy investment of engagement. Things just worked for them. Nevertheless, my sense of the separateness of things persisted and it persisted not only horizontally, as *between* objects, but also vertically, as *within* objects. This verticality took me on an expedition further in, took me to further surfaces and what I found within was an interminable doubling and folding, one surface upon the other without end, and always separated out. This separation made my head go round in a vertiginous sort of way and it always resulted in bringing me to a standstill.

No wonder my head went round. No wonder I was being brought to a standstill. I was attempting several things at once. First, I was adopting a phenomenological orientation towards the object as *noumenon;* I was

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attempting to turn it into yet <u>another</u> *phenomenon* (as if I were engaged in the unprejudiced, descriptive study of whatever appeared to my consciousness). Second, my being brought to a standstill signified the object's *refusal* to be totalised within any epistemic regime I might impose upon it. Third, I had actually attempted to traverse the fissure severing the object from everything else, a fissure that could never be spanned. Fourth, I had defaulted upon my already existent insight that the object can never be collapsed into its *phenomena.* Fifth, I had run up against the implacable realisation that I was not necessary in all this. Sixth, I had approached the *noumenon* as if I already knew something about it. Seventh, I had attempted to fill up my emptiness at my lack of power over the *noumenon*. Eighth, I had been forced to confront the fact that whatever I might do to the object, it would always remain at maximum. Ninth, I still found myself stuck on the other side of the fissure.

I am still on that other side, not because I choose to be but because the *noumenon* holds me there. It has become an undiminished source of regard and has continued to arouse in me a desire to engage with it respectfully. This respect is very motivating for it keeps me in the position of approaching it noumenologically; approaching it as unknown. This seems a contradictory thing to say about that which is always so full (and always at maximum).

Nevertheless, its capacity never to be diminished, never to be known, never to be described, never to be touched, never to be reached, places me quite firmly in a definite relation to it, one I have not chosen.[8] I am always outside and can never get inside and thereby lies its power. For ever and always, there lies a constant fissure, a stark cavernous detachment between it and me, a fissure severing it from everything else; a fissure that can never be spanned.

And the *noumenon* holds me there. So, how can I attempt to overcome the staleness of the *philosophy* of human access, how can I to attempt to overcome the staleness of *human* access to the object?

It strikes me that if I want to attempt this, then I have to engage in a series of noumenological actions whereby I open myself to the impact of the *noumenon* through the minimising of human intentionalism. I have to place myself in the way of the *noumenon*. I have to maintain a consistently noumenological approach and engage in creating a 'noumenography', a written practice, that acknowledges the *noumenon* as an undiminished source. This noumenography

should always be difficult to deconstruct, one that resists shifting into the representational, one that stays with the harsh and opulent interface generated by the *noumenon,* one that forces me to acknowledge that I have no priority in all this and that the cliff that receives the impact of the incoming tidal wave is no less than I am.[9] Above all, I should not attempt to construct a history, an artificial past as a prerequisite for establishing a context. I should remain always within an attitude of respect, as someone who has placed himself in the way of a constantly resurgent wellspring of regard, an undiminished source that is mostly unknown.

There should be something in what I do that resists the unfolding of narrative and embraces the multi-directionality of the *noumenon.* I must recognise the arbitrariness of my intervention in setting pen to paper and accept that whatever I write will be fragmentary; will be nothing less than ambiguities, paradoxes, apparent irrelevances, inconsistencies, disconnections and aporias, all the way down.

Notes

[1] See Kant, I. (1781) (2007). *Critique of pure reason* [trans Marcus Weigelt]. London: Penguin Books, p.260: 'Now the concept of a **noumenon**, that is, of a thing which can never be thought as an object of the senses, but only as a thing in itself (solely through pure understanding), is in no way contradictory; for we cannot maintain that sensibility is the only possible kind of intuition. The concept of a noumenon is also necessary to prevent sensible intuition from extending to things in themselves; that is, in order to limit the objective validity of sensible knowledge.' (see also Guyer, P. & Horstmann, R., below).

[2] See Hamilton, G. (2016). *The world of failing machines*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, p.18: 'The consequence of living in the world of the gaps that open up between noumenal and phenomenal realities is that we are fated to live a life of uncertainty.'

[3] Moran, D. & Mooney, T. (Eds.) (2002). *The phenomenology reader*, London: Routledge, p.1.

[4] Harman, G. (2005). *Guerrilla metaphysics*. Chicago: Open Court, p.17.

[5] See Guyer, P. & Horstmann, R. (Summer 2018 edition). Idealism. In E.N. Zalta (Ed.). *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/idealism/>.:
'Although the existence of something independent of the mind is conceded, everything that we can *know* about this mind-independent "reality" is held to be so permeated by the creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind (of some kind or other) that **all claims to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge.**' [My emboldening/underlining.]

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[6] See Harman, G. (2005). *Guerrilla metaphysics*. Chicago: Open Court, p.23: 'If the concreteness of life is the place where philosophy must seek its fortune, it is equally important that we oppose the tedious, falsely progressive claim that philosophy must remain within the bounds of appearance.'

[7] See Delanda, M. & Harman, G. (2017). *The rise of realism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p.100: 'The distance of the thing-in-itself does not increase or decrease over time; it is not synonymous with mystery, but is there even in situations devoid of any evident mystery.'

[8] See Harman,G. (2012). *The third table* [100 notes-100 thoughts No. 085]. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, p.4: 'First, philosophy must deal with every type of object rather than reducing all objects to one privileged type: zebras, leprechauns, and armies are just as worthy of philosophical discussion as atoms and brains. Second, **objects are deeper than their appearance to the human mind** but also deeper than their relations to one another… Third, objects are polarised in two ways: there is a distinction between objects and their qualities, and a distinction between real objects withdrawn from all access and sensual objects that exist only for some observer, whether human or inhuman. [My emboldening/underlining.]

[9] See Bryant, L. (2011). *The democracy of objects*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, p.288: 'Any qualification of human freedom, any evocation of actors other than meaning, narratives, signifiers, and discourses is **responded to with incredulity at the suggestion that humans are merely among other beings rather than at the centre of beings** such that nonhuman beings are merely their screen, passive things upon which they impose form through their intentions and techniques, and where the world is merely our own alienated reflection. [My emboldening/underlining.]

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