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## **Living In an Intense World**

### An Examination of Tristan Garcia's Ontology and Metaphysics

Philosophers have been attempting to solve the problem of ordering objects ever since philosophy has existed. Countless hierarchies have been created in an attempt to describe the world we inhabit in a structured fashion. Philosophers believe that these hierarchies of objects are necessary because it is difficult to understand the world we perceive without one. It is hard to imagine how one would act if everything in the world were perceived as equally "real." Without a hierarchy of objects, it would be impossible to distinguish the concrete differences between a fictional character and one's uncle, or to distinguish the idea of one's uncle from the physical presence of one's uncle. It would be very difficult to live in this theoretical world of ontological chaos. Thus, philosophers have developed countless "ontological hierarchies" that attempt to create a method of determining how real entities are. As time has progressed, more and more thinkers have expressed a tendency toward flatter hierarchies of things, that is, hierarchies that attempt to recognize more and more things as being equal. This is the world Tristan Garcia finds himself in. Much of Garcia's work is an attempt to simultaneously correct and expand this contemporary flat-ontology thought. He develops this philosophical

project through the idea of *intensity*. To begin to explore Garcia's concept of intensity, we must first examine and differentiate two key terms in his philosophy: *things* and *objects*, beginning with the creation of a completely flat ontology of things.

Garcia identifies a trend in modern "liberal" thought to reify everything. He lists several disparate entities and proclaims that modern liberal thought has turned all of them into things. He also claims that liberal thought tries to prove that all "things" are equally themselves. Garcia firmly believes in a flat ontology, but feels that the contemporary liberal ontology is not flat enough as its notion of equality is constrained by "legal and economic necessities" (Garcia 155). This results in a liberalism that is constantly being pulled in two opposing directions despite its claims of pure ontological equality. By his claim that contemporary society turns every entity into a thing, Garcia means that, mainly due to the "desubstantialization of these things" (Garcia 152), resulting in difficulty in determining what is and is not "something." Observing that living in the modern world has been reduced to figuring out "what [can] resist thinghood" (Garcia 152), Garcia claims that a flat ontology is necessary because liberalism in modernity leads to an anxiety of an excess of things. Garcia says that the way to reach this weakest ontology is through "speculation," the "capacity of thought's acceleration" (Garcia 155). Modern liberalism is always working against itself, strengthening some ontological constraints while weakening others, and that this leads to a sort of modern fatigue of things that creates a desire to return to a strong ontology of things. Garcia condemns "critical modernity" because he believes it is ultimately reactionary and the result of a ravenous hunger for exception, arguing that the very act

of excluding a thing from being a thing contradictorily names it as a thing in a minimal sense. This is what causes Garcia to pursue an acceleration of the concept of “thing” and a flat ontology. In response to this torn liberal ontology and centuries of strong hierarchies of things in mainstream philosophical thought, Garcia attempts to find the “weakest” ontological constraint, that is, the most inclusive method possible of determining what counts as a thing and what does not.

Garcia considers several possibilities for the weakest possible ontological constraint that have been suggested in the past. Garcia writes that it is important to find a criteria that is “weak enough to distinguish the least of possible non-existent things” (Garcia 159). Garcia immediately rejects materiality, spatio-temporality, and naturality as “very strong” determinations. Non-contradiction has been used as a constraint in the past, but Garcia finds it too strong, as it is possible to think of non-contradictions as things. Unlike Alain Badiou, Garcia attempts to find a constraint that does not even allow a thing to count as one. Even unity is too strong of a constraint for Garcia, who claims that unity, or counting-as-one, necessarily references other things that the thing counts-as-one among. Garcia writes that “although unity expresses the *common* property of singularity, something other than unity expresses the *exclusive* property of singularity” (Garcia 163). This leaves us with a constraint even weaker than unity: *solitude*. A thing is solitary only if it is not in another thing (otherwise there would be more than one thing) and only if it is in something other than a thing (the world). This leads Garcia to declare a “completed ontological liberalism” in which things are only defined by their solitude (Garcia 163). Garcia’s ontology also gives rise to the

initially perplexing conclusion that things are exclusive: when a hand is some-thing, the body it belongs to lies in the undifferentiated world and is not a thing. Thus, every thing is distinct, but not different, as only one thing exists at a time. It follows from this that every thing is equally a thing in the world—“nothing is excluded from the world” (Garcia 163). Garcia’s world is a world where no thing has more or less identity.

Garcia uses this concept of solitude to tear down the predominant “naive realist” hierarchy of things. Having established that all things are ontologically equal, we are presented with the question of how we differentiate entities as they appear in the universe. It is obvious to the casual observer that a hand, the idea of that hand, and the conceptual Hand are all distinct entities and we treat them as such. The problem of denoting and measuring the disparate levels of being-in-the-universe of these entities arises from this flat ontology. Garcia’s differentiates these through *intensity*. When a thing appears in the universe, it becomes an object with an intensity. This is how things are distinguished from objects—things do not have an intensity. Conversely, all objects have an intensity, no matter how small or large. Intensity can be defined as an object’s the level of being in the universe. A hand, the idea of that hand, and the categorical Hand are all objects as they appear in the universe, and therefore all possess varying levels of intensity.

Garcia emphasizes the distinction between *ontology*, the “solitary and equal somethingness of each thing in relation to no other thing,” and *metaphysics*, the “relations, determinations, and differences between things as objects” (Garcia 166). For Garcia, ontology is flat, while metaphysics is not. Things are not intense, and the realm

of ontology is the realm of things. The realm of metaphysics belongs to objects, which all have varying levels of intensity.

Unlike things, objects can be “in” other objects. This is important because otherwise the world as we know it could not exist. A hand is in a body, but there are also cells in that hand. The cells and hand are both distinct things and objects, but the cells-thing does not exist inside of the hand-thing because things cannot exist in other things—they both only exist in the world. Neither *thing* possesses any intensity, but the hand and the cells each have their own level of intensity as *objects* that appear in the universe.

Garcia defines intensity in slightly different terms each time it is mentioned, but variation lies at the core of each definition. Most succinctly, Garcia defines intensity to be the variation of a thing compared with itself. He later elaborates: “What we understand by intensity is nothing but the possibility, without changing anything in the world, of comparing it to itself, and of suddenly finding it better or more powerful than it really is” (Garcia 205). Intensity arises from a comparison of an object with itself.

It is important to note that intensity is not potentiality, nor is it simply force. For instance, a pumpkin seed is obviously less a pumpkin than an actual pumpkin, but still possesses some ability (a potentiality) to become a pumpkin that other objects do not. Potentiality differs from intensity in that the pumpkin seed is less a pumpkin, but it is not less intense than a pumpkin. Intensity is also not a force that acts on every object in the world. Unlike a generic force, intensity actually takes into account an object’s identity. Indeed, intensity depends on that identity so heavily that Garcia sometimes

reduces intensity to identity. An object cannot vary if the object itself isn't taken into consideration. A comparison can't be made without an object in the first place.

While Garcia's theory of intensity is intriguing on a philosophical level, it can be somewhat difficult to see how viewing the world through the lens of Garcia's intensity would change the way we interact with it. We can see some repercussions of Garcia's ontology and theory of intensity by looking at time and life, both of which he covers in "What Is Being Intense?" For Garcia, what varies over time in a thing is that thing's *presence* rather than the traditional *essence*. Indeed, Garcia comes to the rather Vonnegut-esque conclusion that all moments exist simultaneously. The way we differentiate some moments from others is through varying intensity. Therefore, the present that we experience is the moment with the greatest intensity, or "that which is now is that which cannot be more present" (Garcia 210). Garcia contrasts time with life, writing that life is an intensification of a thing's *self* as opposed to time, which is an intensification of its *presence*.

He goes on to define the living as "that which intensifies its self...the difference that exists between what there is in it and that in which it finds itself" (Garcia 212). This means that life, simply put, is the intensification of the emergent properties of something compared to the parts of that something—an intensification of the irreducibility of a whole to its parts. The question of emergence confounds many preexisting hierarchies. It is difficult in most hierarchies to determine if an emergent property of several things or the several things themselves is more ontologically important. Here, Garcia uses the notion of intensity to circumvent the issue, and it is

clear that intensity is a powerful concept that can be used to solve problems that other hierarchies may not be able to.

Garcia's intensity differs from that of other philosophers and of the contemporary mind. Garcia contrasts his philosophy with that of Deleuze, claiming that not every entity should be defined by pure difference because things themselves aren't defined by intensity as they cannot vary. When the contemporary tries to live intensely, he focuses on giving himself a new identity to avoid simply feeling like a "thing among things" (Garcia 167), to avoid a sort of nihilistic dread. Garcia counteracts this by arguing that if everything is intense, nothing is, and that a flat ontology is necessary to be able to compare and evaluate intensities of objects.

Garcia claims that the contemporary mind is focused on continuously increasing intensity in the next moment and is thus never satisfied. This mentality is a direct result of the contemporary's focus on presence over representation. Indeed, Garcia laments, the contemporary man "no longer grasps his unity except when something intense happens to him" (Garcia 213).

Garcia further differentiates the contemporary mind from the ideal, writing that the contemporary person wishes only to be an identity rather than to have an identity. Having an identity here means to be "an entity subjected to variation," while being an identity is to be that variation itself, the "change from one entity to another" (Garcia 213). Garcia claims that the contemporary seeks out strong intensities in an attempt to feel his identity and only feels his identity when something intense happens to him. In the world of intensity, a "world without substances...interior potentiality and exterior

force,” Garcia claims that the contemporary now only recognizes presences instead of representations (Garcia 211). The contemporary chooses to ignore the concept of representation and focus only on the actual presence of an object.

Garcia’s desire to accelerate liberal ontology is both reasonable and understandable. However, an argument can be made that Garcia is merely creating a new ontological hierarchy under the guise of a metaphysical theory. Indeed, the second half of Garcia’s major treatise, *Form and Object*, reads similarly to traditional accounts of how the universe is structured. The major difference is how the idea of intensity is used to structure objects instead of some inherent value of those objects. Garcia obviously feels the need to separate things and objects, but it is possible that this is more a result of the current state of contemporary philosophy rather than a rhetorical necessity. It is difficult to see how the notion of objects varying their presence in the world through intensity requires a completely flat liberal ontology. And while Garcia’s notion of intensity is certainly unique and intriguing, using it to create another hierarchy is, in a sense, mildly disappointing.

Regardless of whether or not the creation of a hyper-flat ontology was necessary, Garcia’s concept of intensity is still compelling and worthy of discussion. He ends his essay “Let It Be, and Make It Intense” by calling for the construction of new intensities. He reveals his goal in showing that everything is equally something to be to “exorcize” the “curse of modernity” (Garcia 167). Garcia’s claim that depression results from liberal modernity which “promises us this life of pure intensity but ends in nothing and has no referential point or line by which to measure it” (Garcia 167) is a bold but perhaps

misguided one that he fails to offer compelling evidence for. While his argument that the concept of “things” is the most useful method of measuring intensity makes sense, the connection between depression and over-reification is slightly tenuous. The idea of a modern existential malaise resulting from an excess of things is a compelling idea on its own, but it doesn’t seem that the problem is necessarily solved by making all things equal and non-intense. It is possible that Garcia wishes for the contemporary mind to relieve its discomfort by ignoring things for the most part and focusing on ordering objects by their intensity. This is, of course, what Garcia does in *Form and Object*.

Tristan Garcia’s philosophical project is an engaging and challenging one. Conceiving of a completely flat ontology is a daring idea, and it is definitely enlightening to evaluate the universe of objects in terms of intensity. However, there are some weak threads in Garcia’s reasoning and some of his conclusions, especially those that focus on the contemporary mind, are difficult to follow without taking a small leap of faith. Nonetheless, Garcia’s concept of intensity is quite elegant and goes a long way toward relieving some of the anxiety caused by a mainstream modern liberal ontology.

### Works Cited

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