

## DeLanda's ontology: assemblage and realism

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**Abstract** Manuel DeLanda is one of the few admitted *realists* in present-day continental philosophy, a position he claims to draw from Deleuze. DeLanda conceives of the world as made up of countless layers of *assemblages*, irreducible to their parts and never dissolved into larger organic wholes. This article supports DeLanda's position as a refreshing new model for continental thought. It also criticizes his movement away from singular individuals toward disembodied attractors and topological structures lying outside all specific beings. While endorsing DeLanda's realism, I reject his shift from the actual to the virtual.

**Keywords** DeLanda · Realism · Virtual · Assemblage · Essence

The name of Manuel DeLanda is not entirely unknown to present-day philosophy. He commands a large international readership, and can safely be described as "famous." Yet even for those who do know his work, DeLanda is often treated as an intriguing figure lying at the fringe of current debate. He leads nothing like a school of international philosophy, though others of his generation (b. 1952) have begun to do so. This is unfortunate. DeLanda's basic concepts define a new model for continental philosophy; an account of his ideas amounts to a preview of a surprising possible future for the field.

DeLanda's latest book, *A New Philosophy of Society*, describes his position as *assemblage theory*. The present article will focus on this book instead of his better-known earlier ones. In stylistic terms all of DeLanda's books lie surprisingly close to mainstream professional philosophy, despite his emergence from outside the professional guild, and despite his especial prominence amidst the incense and bongo drums of the most bohemian circles of our craft. If DeLanda has any

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detractors yet, even they would have to concede that his lucid prose style and taste for rigorous argument meet the standards demanded by hardcore analytic philosophy. It would be impossible to describe DeLanda as “unphilosophical,” and I doubt anyone has tried. Nonetheless, he openly declares himself a *realist*, and though he is already a fashionable author in some quarters, realism remains out of style even among his admirers.

## 1 Realism and its alternatives

In the first paragraph of *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, DeLanda makes a candid statement about the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze:

There are philosophers who grant reality full autonomy from the human mind, disregarding the difference between the observable and the unobservable.... These philosophers are said to have a realist ontology. Deleuze is such a realist philosopher, a fact that by itself should distinguish him from most post-modern philosophies which remain basically non-realist.<sup>1</sup>

While this reading is not shared by all members of the Deleuzian community, my concern here is not with Deleuze. What interests me instead is the instinctive shudder of revulsion that still goes through many whenever the word “realism” is mentioned. As DeLanda vividly puts it, “for decades admitting that one was a realist was equivalent to acknowledging [that] one was a child molester.”<sup>2</sup> The past tense may even be too optimistic, since it is not clear that those decades lie behind us. Even when continental philosophy began to shift in the mid-1990’s from the hegemony of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida to the latest avant-garde mixture of Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek, realism remained a theory upheld by a handful of outcasts. Although the reading of Deleuze as a realist is plausible, it is certainly not obvious, and in any case realism is surely not the basis for most of Deleuze’s popularity. In the cases of Žižek (explicitly) and Badiou (tacitly) realism is even the primary enemy under attack. If we term “realist” any philosophy in which there are real things and relations between them quite apart from being witnessed by thought, realists remain a small minority on the continental scene. This puts DeLanda in the strange position of a fashionable author with a highly unfashionable central doctrine.

The recent bias against realism is understandable. Whether philosophy is defined as wonder, *Angst*, or something less dramatic, it always suggests the promise of outflanking common sense and letting strange flowers bloom. This is why many of us were drawn to philosophy in the first place. And the standpoint most widely associated with common sense is *realism*: or worse yet, “naïve realism,” a phrase in which the adjective is supposed to do the thinking for us. It is widely believed that true philosophers are those who push the envelope with daring conceptual inversions of the naïve standpoint. The role of the realist is merely to serve as the

<sup>1</sup> DeLanda (2002, p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, January 30, 2007.

grim Inquisitor: a joyless authority figure who smacks his colleagues down whenever they wander too far from the constraints imposed by mere boring facts. Realism is viewed as a corrective force rather than an adventurous one, bearing the same relation to philosophy as health inspectors do to restaurants. The appeal to realism is used to shut down extravagant philosophies, never to open up even more imaginative ones.

Surprisingly, this aversion to realism is increasingly found even among those who call themselves materialists. Slavoj Žižek is an outstanding example, since his anti-realist views are just as blunt as his denial that he holds them. In his conversations with Glyn Daly, Žižek tells us that “Kant was the first philosopher,”<sup>3</sup> and though he rightly predicts outrage at this notion, he seems convinced that only musty old scholars could feel any nostalgia for pre-Copernican philosophy. (His evident lack of interest in Alfred North Whitehead is revealing on this point.) Žižek claims further that philosophers do not ask “‘What is the structure of all?’ but ‘What are the concepts the scientist already has to presuppose in order to formulate the question?’” In his own words, “that is what philosophy is about, not ‘I philosopher believe in a certain structure of the universe, etc.’, but an exploration of what is presupposed even in daily activity.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, in a moment of sheer counterintuitive gall, Žižek goes so far as to propose an *idealist materialism*. As he puts it, “the true formula of materialism is not that there is a noumenal reality beyond our distorting perception of it. The only consistent materialist position is that the world does not exist.”<sup>5</sup>

Against these views, we should insist that Kant *was not* the first philosopher, that philosophers *do* ask “What is the structure of all?”, that their claims *should* amount to “I philosopher believe in a certain structure of the universe,” and that the external world *does* exist. In short, we should oppose not only idealism, but also the watered-down version of it that Quentin Meillassoux has brilliantly termed “correlationism.”<sup>6</sup> Correlationists are those philosophers, now dominant in both analytic and continental thought, who hold that it makes no sense to think of humans apart from world or world apart from humans, but only of a primal correlation or rapport between the two. By contrast, realism insists on the independence of the world from thought, and must weather the slingstones of those who call it “naïve.” At this point in the argument, I have remained in the company of DeLanda, who seems to be the only full-blown realist among continentally inspired philosophers of his generation.

## 2 Summary of DeLanda's ontology

The first two chapters of DeLanda's new book present as lucid an ontology as one could hope to find. It contains perhaps five basic features from which the others derive.

<sup>3</sup> Žižek and Daly (2004, p. 26).

<sup>4</sup> Žižek and Daly (2004, pp. 25–26).

<sup>5</sup> Žižek and Daly (2004, p. 97).

<sup>6</sup> Meillassoux (2008).

- First, DeLanda is obviously a *realist*, still one of the few open realists working in our midst. Philosophy is not concerned with human access to the world, but with the world itself. If Žižek marks one frank extreme of contemporary continental thought, DeLanda represents the other.
- Second, despite being a realist, DeLanda rejects any notion of essence. The world is filled with individuals of countless different sizes, and in each case they must be understood through the concrete historical-genetic process through which they appeared, not as instances of an essence shared by many concrete things.
- Third, despite his “flat” ontology in which atoms have no more reality than grain markets or sports franchises, DeLanda draws an absolute separation between species and genus. For him these are not just relative terms depending on where one looks in the chain of assemblages that fill the world. Instead, they actually refer to two different ontological structures. A species is always made up of individuals (as Darwin observed) and never transcends those individuals to become a permanent natural archetype. By contrast, DeLanda holds that the genus has a *virtual* structure referring to topological “degrees of freedom” deployed by different species in different ways, and hence the genus *must* transcend individuals. Although the virtual plays a more prominent role in DeLanda’s book on Deleuze than in his latest work, this actually gives it a clearer status in the new book, since it is less ubiquitous and hence easier to place.
- Fourth, DeLanda briefly develops a theory of *catalysis* against the doctrine of mechanical causation. Instead of the same causes leading to the same effects every time, DeLanda points to cases where a cause merely serves as a catalyst for something without automatically unleashing it.
- Fifth, DeLanda organizes the world along two separate axes. (He briefly mentions an additional third axis, but does not develop it in sufficient detail to convince this reader that it belongs on the same footing as the other two.) The first axis is the difference between the material and the expressive, while the second is the familiar pair of territorialization and deterritorialization. The crossing of two separate axes always yields a fourfold structure, and here DeLanda is far from alone in the history of philosophy.

Taken together, these five principles define one of the most ambitious ontologies of our time, and one of the few cases of ontology at all among recent continental thinkers. It will be helpful to cover each of the points in turn.

## 2.1 Realism

DeLanda both claims to be a realist, and is one. The structures of the world described in his book require no presence of a human subject on the scene: neither a naked Cartesian *cogito*, nor a flashier post-human condensed from language and power games, nor even a Badiouian subject of truth-events. While DeLanda offers no “proof” of realism, the burden of proof actually lies on the idealists and correlationists, with their implausible view that the world can be reduced to a

hologram. For such authors, the sun that warms us and the disease that cripples us are reduced to their manifestation in consciousness; the resistance of the world is repackaged as a feeling of resistance in our minds. But idealism and correlationism are so unconvincing that their primary support seems to come from the simple fear that realism is *boring*—that it reduces the role of humans to measuring the physical properties of grey clods of matter, thereby stripping all imagination from philosophy. Yet the point is not to avoid realism per se: it is simply to avoid the pitfalls of old-fashioned realism, and this can be done without reducing the world to phenomenal specters. One of the main drawbacks of the old realism lies in its arbitrary distinction between natural substance and artificial aggregate, as found in the great tradition stretching from Aristotle through G.W. von Leibniz. Against both substance and aggregate, DeLanda gives us the *assemblage*, his central concept. The word “assemblage” covers all real entities, including humans, rocks, corporations, and nation states. If every assemblage can be termed a “person,” then every assemblage is made up of subpersonal components as well. There is no final layer of ultimate reality to which larger assemblages can be reduced.

Numerous implications follow from this. In the first place, emergence must be real. If neither atoms nor natural kinds are privileged realities, then there is no sense claiming that atoms are more real than atomic bombs. This is not to say that there is no such thing as mere aggregates: normally, we would not claim that there is a real assemblage formed by the Pacific Ocean, Angela Merkel, and the set of all coins and beans that ever have existed or will exist. Bizarre scenarios might be concocted in which this offbeat assemblage might stake its claim in the world, but this would require immense literary or mechanical labor—which simply goes to show that the assemblage does not yet exist. The fact that many strange assemblages *can* become real should not obscure the point that they are *not now* real.

DeLanda even offers some criteria for what counts as a real assemblage. One is that an assemblage is able to affect its parts retroactively. The absurdity of the Ocean-Chancellor-Coin-Bean Assemblage, its ludicrous status as a mere thing of reason, is shown in part by its lack of impact on any of its members. By contrast, we find real assemblages in the cases of London and Damascus, Opus Dei, a spider's web, and the Knights of Malta, which do set their components into new vibrations. Emergent properties are another sign for DeLanda that an assemblage is real. Opus Dei may bring about flagellations, poisonings, and legal actions that its members would not have attempted alone. A further index of a real assemblage is the presence of “redundant causation.” That is to say, the components of Opus Dei are redundant insofar as no member of the order is likely to be irreplaceable; its ritual conspiracies will unfold with grim regularity through generations to come, long after all current members are deceased.

Whereas traditional realism allowed for only two levels (substance and aggregate) DeLanda allows for an infinity of levels, and presumably for an infinite regress and progress of different-sized assemblages. Moreover, DeLanda's realism puts an end to the organic or dialectical model of interaction between things. For DeLanda, internal relations do not exist between separate things; relations are external to their terms, as in the saying so beloved by most Deleuzians. Organic and inorganic entities shift freely in and out of assemblages. Automobile parts shift

easily between vehicles, just as football players are transferred from club to club while preserving their properties intact. With this step, the prestigious reign of mutual negativity and holistic contexts of signifiers comes to a close, and things are determined by their own internal reality. More generally, if things themselves were a seamless whole, it is difficult to see how anything new could ever emerge, since the whole would contain nothing in reserve beyond its current state of affairs. Things engage in feedback, not fusion. Relations are a matter of symbiosis, not of organism.

## 2.2 Anti-essence

Despite being a realist, DeLanda does not believe in essence. It is easy to see why realism and essentialism usually go hand in hand. If a thing's reality is independent of our access to it, this clearly implies that the thing has important central qualities unaffected by its interactions with us, as opposed to relational or accidental properties floating on its surface. DeLanda even makes this implication himself with his own distinction between the inherent *properties* and relational *capacities* of a thing. Nonetheless, he goes on to reject two of the historical models of essence. The easier target is the Platonic model: disembodied forms in which the numerous particular things participate. Since this theory has few recent defenders, aside from Whitehead and his "eternal objects,"<sup>7</sup> DeLanda expends more energy against the Aristotelian model of essence, which he also calls the "taxonomic" model. For Aristotle, individuals all belong to some unifying species, and while the species may not reify universal qualities in the Platonic manner, it does create an absolute wall between each kind of species, as opposed to the more permeable barrier between members of the same species. As present-day philosophy puts it, the taxonomic model holds that entities occur in "natural kinds." Since DeLanda rejects the view that natural things are more real than artificial assemblages, he abandons natural kinds along with any other permanent wall between one kind of being and another. This shift in focus from species to individuals is often linked with the name of Charles Darwin, and in fact DeLanda refers to Darwin explicitly. Though animals do tend toward reproductive isolation through a gene pool closed to outsiders, Darwin holds that these insular pools emerged over time through a long struggle with predators and climates. Hence, the difference between two species is no more absolute than that between two cats or two eagles. In short, there is no such thing as "eagle," but only individual or singular eagles. Note that in some ways this merely radicalizes Aristotle's position by allowing the species to change over time; the focus on concrete individuals was already crucial for Aristotle's opposition to Plato.

This leads DeLanda to a pair of interesting and related conclusions. First, individuals must be viewed as historic processes. Here we find some ambiguity in DeLanda's views. In his famous previous book, he had stated that "in a Deleuzian ontology... a species (or any other natural kind) is not defined by its essential traits but rather by the *morphogenetic process* that gave rise to it."<sup>8</sup> This shifts the action away from concrete individuals toward a kind of previous historical trajectory, with

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead (1979).

<sup>8</sup> DeLanda (2002, pp. 9–10).

individuals being merely the transient crystallizations of a longer process. This theory is designed to oppose not only essentialism, but also what Roy Bhaskar and others have called “actualism”<sup>9</sup>: the view that the world is made only of things as they are here and now. But whereas some authors try to escape actualism through potentials that the things gradually unfold (Aristotle against the Megarians) or laws they will obey whenever the situation allows (Bhaskar against his enemies), for DeLanda these solutions are not realist enough. They define reality in terms of something not currently real, and thereby make it dependent on a relation to something elsewhere. To avoid the pitfalls of actualism on the one hand, and potentiality or laws on the other, DeLanda holds that the best option is the Deleuzian *multiplicity*. In explaining what he means by this term, DeLanda praises “attractors that are never actualized”<sup>10</sup> and celebrates the flow of genesis over fully formed individuals. Or at least this is how he summarizes Deleuze's position. But in DeLanda's new book it is no longer clear why priority needs to be given to genetic process over fully formed individuals. He repeats his previous example of atoms formed in the core of the sun:

chemical species, as classified in the periodic table of the elements, may be reified by a commitment to the existence of hydrogen, oxygen or carbon in general. *But* it is possible to acknowledge the objectivity of the [periodic] table while refusing to reify its natural kinds. Atoms of a given species would be considered individual entities produced by recurrent processes [of nucleosynthesis] taking place within individual stars. Even though, unlike organisms, these display much less variation, the fact that they were born in a concrete process gives each of them a history.... [Hence] there is no need to be ontologically committed to the existence of “hydrogen in general,” but only to the objective reality of large populations of hydrogen atoms.<sup>11</sup>

Yet it is not clear why this requires philosophy to shift attention from fully formed hydrogen atoms to a morphogenetic history lying outside them. The atoms can easily remain individualized through certain accidental residues left by their individual histories, without requiring that the full story of their birth become philosophy's theme. Indeed, real things *lose* most of their histories, as DeLanda's own idea of “redundant causation” indicates, since this notion entails that numerous causal forces can be interchangeable in producing the same entity. All atoms of uranium have the same number of protons, and the contingent morphogenetic paths by which this number was reached in each case no longer have a say in whether the atom is uranium or not, though it is possible that the *residues* left by these diverse histories might incline each atom toward a different fate. A new President appears in the White House due to electoral victory, or through the resignation or murder of a predecessor, and is equally President in all three cases. Even if the exact history may leave traces able to shape the policy and destiny of the new leader, it is by no means the case that the President's *entire* morphogenesis is preserved.

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<sup>9</sup> Bhaskar (1997).

<sup>10</sup> DeLanda (2002, p. 32).

<sup>11</sup> DeLanda (2006, pp. 27–28).

In this respect, DeLanda's new emphasis on redundant causation actually implies that genesis is partially superfluous, and is relevant only insofar as it leaves lasting fingerprints on each individual. Yet such fingerprints can still have numerous possible causes, their exact contingent details often irrelevant to the new situation. In short, the information in a thing's history is not entirely preserved: far from it. If this were true, then emergence could never break with the forces that made it emerge. The point is important to me because of my view that the true path for ontology is not to escape *actualism*, but rather to escape *relationism*. In other words, the way to establish a realist philosophy of things is not to shift from individuals toward process, flux, genesis, dynamism, or pulsion, but to establish a new model of individual entities as free of all relation, and hence as cut off from each other and from their own histories. Just as the apparent boredom of realism has inspired a correlationist/anti-realist dogma, the apparent dullness of rock-hard atoms and billiard balls has inspired mass exodus toward cryptogenetic upsurges of *élan vital* and mighty Heraclitean waterways. The problem with such dynamic genesis, fashionable though it currently is, lies in its inability to account for the way in which entities are partially cut off from their own pasts and from each other. (DeLanda's instinctive realization of this fact is shown further by his unusually quantized model of the virtual, which for him is far more fragmented into discrete chunks than it is for many Deleuzians.)

The same example of hydrogen atoms created in the core of a star already touches on DeLanda's second conclusion: namely, that individuals occur in *populations*. From these populations, new assemblages can emerge. From our vast human multiple, a certain number are inclined to become lawyers or Buddhists. From a large population of inanimate objects, some assemble into fuel for a raging forest fire. Though DeLanda does not dwell on the point, this implies that each individual has numerous extra properties beyond those that qualify it as part of the population. It may take certain oratorical skills to aspire to a legal career, skills not found in all members of the human population; one may need certain temperamental features to find Buddhism appealing. Hence, along with our population-relevant features, we are also encrusted with numerous properties that might be called accidental. As DeLanda puts it, the important thing is "chance encounters."<sup>12</sup> We are all the prey of chance, since we all have capacities not unleashed in our current situation, but which may become crucial when certain random events occur. You may be the only reader of this article with the right genetic structure to survive the coming plague of ebola, and hence one of the few who will survive to replenish the human species afterward—ensuring that your other, more peripheral quirks will emerge as key structural features of the human race to come.

### 2.3 The virtual

For DeLanda, then, there are no species. There are only populations of individuals, each with its own unique private history. Nothing is *actual* except specific individuals, even if some portions of their actuality are "capacities" unexpressed

<sup>12</sup> DeLanda (2006, p. 21).

until the right moment; in this sense, the potential is a mere derivative of the actual. But along with these two modes there is also “the virtual,” and in DeLanda's new book the role of the virtual is played by the *genus*. Here we find a less expected theme, treated more sparsely than in the previous book, though perhaps with more precision. Although we can and should replace Aristotle's species with individual singularities, DeLanda says the same cannot be done for higher-level classes. He is referring to biological kingdoms (such as plants or animals in general) and also phyla, “including the phylum ‘chordata’ to which humans as vertebrate animals belong.”<sup>13</sup> As he puts it, “a phylum may be considered an abstract body-plan common to all vertebrates [that], as such, cannot be specified using metric notions such as lengths.... Therefore only non-metric or topological notions, such as the overall connectivity of the different parts of the body, can be used to specify it.”<sup>14</sup> An example he cites from the social sciences is Max Weber's distinction between three forms of social legitimation (traditional, bureaucratic, and charismatic) that exceed any of their possible incarnations in specific societies, and recur amidst vastly different surroundings.

To define these basic topological kinds. DeLanda speaks of “the structure of a space of possibilities.” Harking back to his celebrated book on Deleuze, he also refers to “phase spaces,” “attractors,” and “degrees of freedom.” Other related terms include “topological invariants” and also “*universal singularities*,” as opposed of course to individual ones. The Deleuzian term “*diagram*” is also drafted into service. Although a species can be reduced to the many individuals in a population, DeLanda holds that virtual spaces of possibility lie outside the members of the populations that embody them. In this way, DeLanda simultaneously upholds a nominalism of the species and a realism of the genus. One important implication of the virtuality of the genus is “mechanism-independence.” As DeLanda puts it: “analysis in assemblage theory is not conceptual but causal, concerned with the discovery of the *actual mechanisms* operating at a given spatial scale. [Yet] the topological structure defining the diagram of an assemblage is not actual but *virtual and mechanism-independent*, capable of being realized in a variety of actual mechanisms...”<sup>15</sup> In other words it is not causal, but *quasi-causal*, another term familiar to readers of Deleuze.

#### 2.4 Catalysis

With the quasi-cause we have a rival to the usual mechanistic theory of linear causation, which famously assumes that the same causes yield the same effects every time. DeLanda mentions other rivals to linear causality, most notably catalysis and statistical causation. Let's ignore the statistical kind here, since the debate is endless as to whether it should be read in ontological terms (as a genuine, Copenhagenesque indeterminacy in nature) or in purely epistemological ones (as a mere inability to know the universe with greater than statistical accuracy). Let's

<sup>13</sup> DeLanda (2006, pp. 28–29).

<sup>14</sup> DeLanda (2006, p. 29).

<sup>15</sup> DeLanda (2006, p. 21).

look instead at catalysis. To take one example, DeLanda observes that smoking is not so much a cause of lung cancer as a catalyst for it. Some unlucky souls contract lung cancer from minimal environmental fumes, while others make a full-blown lifestyle of cigars and water pipes but emerge unscathed. Genetic and dietary factors also contribute to the onset of cancer, and hence smoking is merely one dangerous catalyst for the disease.

A number of things can be said about this notion. First, although DeLanda employs both quasi-causes and catalysts to undermine linear causation, they are not meant to be the same thing. Whereas quasi-causes are supposed to belong to the structure of a virtual phase space, catalysts are brutally *actual*. The catalyst for cancer would be concrete, individual cigarettes, not some elusive topological degree of freedom. Next, we must ask whether the catalytic ability of a thing belongs to it as a *property* or as a *capacity*. The answer seems to be a capacity. The very term “carcinogen,” in reference to tobacco, refers to its *capacity* to induce cancer in living bodies that have the *capacity* to generate cancer cells. It is obviously capacities, in other words, that do all the relational work for DeLanda; that is the very meaning of the term.

Now, these capacities must somehow be grounded in real properties or they would not exist, since DeLanda is a realist who grants no mercy to free-floating relations. But what *is* a non-relational property, exactly? Could we say that “carcinogenic” refers to the capacity of tobacco to cause cancer in living creatures, and that the non-relational properties of the tobacco lie instead in its molecular structure? This seems to be the position of someone like Saul Kripke.<sup>16</sup> The problem is that a molecular structure is itself an assemblage, and hence is built up from the capacities of its “sub-personal elements.” And even if this were not the case, the molecular structure occupies a given point in space having specific metric relationships with its surroundings. Thus, DeLanda seems to have no good way to separate the actual from the relational, and for this reason he tends to convert all properties into capacities. That is why he takes the step most typical of Deleuze-inspired philosophers, and moves toward a virtual or quasi-causal layer—in DeLanda’s own case a “genus” not made up of individual things even though it structures the topological space in which those things take form. Individuals become sterile crystallizations atop a dynamic genetic process or pre-individual virtuality.

DeLanda makes some additional points about the importance of non-linear causation. Unlike logic, in which each step seems to unfold with mechanical necessity from the previous one, causation is *productive*. There is always more in the effect than there was in the cause, and again one suspects that this “more” is seen most clearly in the accidental features of the effect. If the same couple produces three sons, they are a filial population in which each member has distinct individual features exceeding their bare shared heritage. Perhaps two sons are Nobel Laureates and the embittered third becomes a pitiless killer. Childbirth is “productive” in this sense, given that identical children do not proceed with mechanical regularity from the same parents. For this reason, what is most surprising is that DeLanda thinks that linear causation *ever* occurs, which he does

<sup>16</sup> Kripke (1996).

seem to think, since he continues to use the term throughout the book. Given his view that all interactions must involve two highly specific individuals, and that even hydrogen atoms are unique persons with specific historical trajectories, why should it be the case that linear causality exists at all? For DeLanda, the collision of two atoms of hydrogen seems to be as fraught with complexity as the relation between a pair of high-maintenance lovers. For this reason, it would have been more consistent if he had simply risked the step of replacing causation with catalysis entirely.

## 2.5 Double axis

Finally, we should consider DeLanda's fourfold structure of the world, which he does not describe as such, but which does result from the two basic dualisms he endorses. The most famous fourfolds in the history of philosophy are probably Aristotle's four causes, the classical four elements of Empedocles, and Heidegger's mysterious earth, sky, gods, and mortals, but anyone who looks seriously for fourfolds will start to find them everywhere. Any rigorous fourfold model of the cosmos will arise from the crossing of two basic dualisms. The obvious advantage of a fourfold model is that it maintains the structural clarity of dualism, while avoiding its paradoxical monotony by adding a bit of spring or tension to the world. Any fourfold ontology must do two things. First, it must ensure that its two basic dualisms are sufficiently deep to warrant inclusion in the backbone of the universe. To say that everything in the world is either a tiger or a non-tiger, and either angry or not angry, does cover all possible entities, but is clearly an ontology built either for fools or for a tale by Borges. All successful philosophers avoid such frivolity, though some choose better dualisms than others. A second thing fourfold models must do is explain the interrelation of the four poles and their possible transformation into one another. This is something that philosophers have done less well. A good example is Heidegger's problem with earth, sky, gods, and mortals. While the four terms can be made surprisingly intelligible with a bit of work, what always remains murky is their interaction, which Heidegger obscurely glosses in terms of mirror-plays, weddings, dances, and songs. Such descriptions are merely negative, since they tell us only that the four somehow bleed together instead of remaining lonely poles of being, while all positive description of their relations is missing.

Returning to DeLanda, he states his own double duality as clearly as one could wish. "The concept of assemblage," he says, "is defined along two dimensions." To be specific:

One dimension or axis defines the variable roles which an assemblage's components may play, from a purely material role at one extreme of the axis, to a purely expressive role at the other extreme. These roles are variable and may occur in mixtures, that is, a given component may play a mixture of material and expressive roles *by exercising different sets of capacities*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> DeLanda (2006, p. 12).

As for his second axis:

The other dimension defines variable processes in which these components become involved and that either stabilize the identity of an assemblage, by increasing its degree of internal homogeneity or the degree of sharpness of its boundaries, or destabilize it. The former are referred to as processes of territorialization and the latter as processes of deterritorialization. One and the same assemblage can have components working to stabilize its identity as well as components forcing it to change or even transforming it into a different assemblage. In fact, one and the same component may participate in both processes *by exercising different sets of capacities*.<sup>18</sup>

Two things should be noted here. First, I have changed the italics in these passages to highlight the phrase “by exercising different sets of capacities” in both. This is important. For DeLanda, what allows an assemblage to flip back and forth between material and expressive, or territorializing and deterritorializing, are its capacities rather than its properties. To use one of his own examples, a city has a certain infrastructure that can be viewed as material, but also has facades and skylines as an expressive surface exceeding the city’s current material reality. The term “skyline” is so apt that it ought to be made into a technical term: objects are not just hidden material strata, but also have “skylines” with which they greet the others. These apparently gratuitous skylines can also become functional, as DeLanda notes following Deleuze.<sup>19</sup> In a sense, that is how all populations generate new assemblages, by turning their formerly expressive dimension into the raw material for a new assemblage that uses only a subset of the population. The accident that some humans of each nation are more interested than others in chess gives rise to international chess league assemblages. But what is most interesting is that a thing’s *capacities* are what serve as DeLanda’s shape-shifting formula. The problem with this view, as in the aforementioned case of causation, is that it never really tells us what the *properties* of a thing are outside its relations. Are the properties of an assemblage material, or expressive? DeLanda’s answer seems to be “neither/nor.” The skyline of Hiroshima might be at the same time purely expressive for Zen monks admiring the morning freshness, and materially functional for the atomic bombardier who makes a visual sighting of the target. But what about Hiroshima itself? What are the true *properties* that hold together the material and expressive *capacities* of the city? The danger for DeLanda in making capacities the magical elixir is that things become fully defined in terms of their relations to other things, and we begin to slide toward the very ontology of the seamless relational whole that he, like all realists, wishes to avoid.

Second, DeLanda states that “the two roles that components play in an assemblage, material and expressive, are related to [the] different forms of causality. While material components include the entire repertoire of causal interactions, expressive ones typically involve catalysis.”<sup>20</sup> Here too, it is difficult to piece

<sup>18</sup> DeLanda (2006, p. 12).

<sup>19</sup> DeLanda (2006, p. 14).

<sup>20</sup> DeLanda (2006, p. 22).

together the exact role of all the terms under discussion. We have already heard that both material and expressive roles involve the capacities of an assemblage, which means its ability to relate to other things rather than the assemblage considered in its own properties (whatever those may be). Properties do not seem to be either material or expressive, and for the same reason cannot be marked as either territorializing or deterritorializing, since these too are a matter of capacities for relating to other things. But we also run up against the previous difficulty of how causation, in the non-catalytic sense, could occur at all for DeLanda. Non-linear causation, of which catalysis is the clearest example in the book, fits quite well with his position as a whole. One thing does not unfold from another in a seamless mechanical process; instead, two or more distinct individuals are in proximity, and either do or do not engage in some sort of interaction. But this still leaves a difficulty. For on the one hand, even if cigarette smoke does not cause cancer in all cases, but merely acts as a catalyst, this simply pushes the question of causation one step further back. For what if *all* environmental and genetic factors were somehow equal in many different cases? Would cancer then have to be the identical result in all such cases? In other words, DeLanda's notion of catalysis is based on the complex interaction of numerous different factors, so that no one factor has the same effect on all occasions. But what about the same *combination* of factors? Where would indeterminacy come from if the entire environment were stipulated to be precisely the same in numerous different cases? In this respect, DeLanda still allows room for a mechanistic philosophy, though a much more intricate one than usual.

I can now summarize my basic objection to DeLanda's refreshing and marvelous ontology. DeLanda is a realist: he holds that philosophy addresses a real world apart from any human access to it. That world is made of assemblages of many different sizes, and assemblages must have emergent properties that are neither contained in their parts nor fully exhausted by the larger assemblages to which they give rise. He rejects "actualism," because if the world were solely what it is here and now, we would have an organic totality of states of affairs with no reason for anything ever to change from its current state. However, he never fully develops what the properties of an assemblage are, defining them instead in terms of their capacities to affect and be affected by other things. This entails that for DeLanda, any focus on individual things will automatically begin to slip toward "actualism," and of course he rejects both individuals and actuals as the basis for ontology, replacing them with the virtuality of the genus. Even though an assemblage has emergent properties, which by definition are partly cut off from its smaller and larger neighbors, individuals become so enmeshed in their relational capacities that they are no longer able to serve as the bulwark for a true realism. This is what pushes DeLanda away from particular beings toward all the Deleuzian-sounding options: virtuality, topology, diagram, genus, universal singularity, and other realities that are supposed to lie beyond their embodiment in any specific individual. In short, DeLanda seems to imply that only virtuality goes with realism, whereas actuality will always tend toward relationism. For DeLanda, since individual entities are always actual, they are also always relational: "capacities" become the sole class of wizards that shift entities between their material and expressive functions and their territorializing and

deterritorializing movements. But this dominance of capacities undermines realism by denying any realities outside a web of interactions—a fashionable doctrine that DeLanda so admirably resists in other ways. Hence, he believes that we must shift our focus from specific entities toward deeper virtual structures, away from individuals toward the genus and its topological structure.

My objection is that this step is superfluous. In fact, *actualism and relationism need not be the same*, as DeLanda's own views on emergence ought to have indicated. Consider the example of a table. For DeLanda, a table might be a real assemblage insofar as it is irreducible to the features of its parts, and also because it exceeds any use one might make of it. The table is a terminal point of reality, cut off from other parts and wholes; if not, then it is not a real assemblage. Hence, the table is actual without being relational. It is actual because it is an individual, singular thing, not some sort of disembodied topological invariant that outstrips all specific entities. It is non-relational because its reality is never explainable by its parts, and also never fathomable by the humans or other entities that come into contact with it. DeLanda's shift toward the virtual, much like Deleuze's own, seems motivated by an underestimation of individual actual things. But realism is already guaranteed as soon as we deny that a thing can be reduced to its relations, since this gives us a world of obstinate individuals that cannot be dissolved into anything else. It is not required that we shun the *actuality* of these individuals. What is required is that we develop a new theory of specific objects: withdrawn from their constituent parts and environmental wholes, yet somehow managing to engage in causal interactions with those neighbors anyway. The Deleuzian approach developed by DeLanda is a badly needed alternative to the text- and context-loving philosophies of relation that dominated previous continental thought. This is what makes his realist platform (much clearer in DeLanda than in Deleuze) so compelling. Even so, it needlessly shifts the philosophical action away from individual rocks, trees, birds, and dance clubs toward disembodied attractors and quasi-causal operators. It is a realism that grants too little dignity to specific things, and shifts the problem of causal relations away from its true scene: the duel between *specific* objects.

### 3 DeLanda: a hyperbolic assessment

The usual method of assessing a philosophy is the “critical” one of looking for the weak points in its arguments. This is surely preferable to becoming a naïve devotee of any new philosophy, since no one enjoys watching prospective initiates fawn before the Master. But the critical approach has an obvious downside. We do not live in a world of perfection. It often happens that my 18-year-old students find grievous blunders in the arguments of such giants as Plato and Leibniz, and sometimes these mistakes seem as wild as those of a novice. Yet we continue to read Plato and Leibniz, and gain more from their writings than from lesser works containing an equal number of flaws. The critical approach not only reduces philosophy to a table of accurate and mistaken arguments, but also tends to demoralize those rare authors who, against all odds, avoid the narrowing, specializing, sandbagging pressures of academic training and roll the dice with a

systematic vision of the universe. For these reasons, I propose that we replace philosophical critique with a method of philosophical *hyperbole*.

When reading an interesting new work of philosophy, I find myself asking not “where are the mistaken arguments here?”, but rather: “if this work were the greatest of the century, how would our current thoughts need to change? And what would we still be missing?” This method avoids gullible hero-worship (if such a thing still exists) by identifying the empty rooms that are found in even the greatest philosophies. Yet it also does more justice to bold visions than the excessively admired “critical thinking” that finds 17 mistakes in Kant and 19 mistakes in some dry, forgettable article that risks nothing. Manuel DeLanda deserves to face such a hyperbolic test. He proposes a sweeping vision of reality that wants to be taken seriously as a major contribution to present-day philosophy. Hence I ask, without a trace of irony: “what if DeLanda’s assemblage theory were the greatest philosophy of the twenty-first century? What would have to change, and where would we find the empty rooms that some later philosophy might wish to fill?” The general principle is that exaggeration is a more useful method than respectable critical understatement, since the latter merely provides an alibi for the critic no matter what happens. Exaggeration means the willingness to be falsified, and an openness to surprise. Cagney ironic caution, by contrast, is simply a safe move by those seeking to avoid demerit points. But one day, death wipes the slate clean, and only the gamblers have a chance to survive in the dreams of their heirs.

In this spirit, let’s imagine that in the year 2030, DeLanda’s ontology has swept all rivals aside, attaining the status of canonical classic or outright dogma. DeLanda has now replaced analytic philosophy as the very embodiment of the philosophical mainstream—perhaps containing splinter factions (the Harvard and Oxford DeLandians) but not facing much real dissent. Let’s take a moment to imagine this scenario, and try to think about the ways in which we would feel liberated and those in which we might feel cramped or stifled. The immediate gains under a DeLanda hegemony would be obvious. In 2030, clear philosophical prose is back in fashion. The continental camp is no longer denounced for its “fuzziness,” or for its literary pathos and empty wordsmiths. Even more importantly, realism is now back in fashion. But unlike the previous old-fashioned realism, the *Zeitgeist* of 2030 takes account of multiple layers of reality, giving a “flat ontology” of various assemblages (whether societies, machines, or atoms) rather than an arbitrary decree as to which things are real and which are mere aggregates. There is no danger of a feared “essentialist” relapse, since essence has been banished from the picture despite the new realism. It is a powerful, flexible ontology fully aware of the latest advances in everything from physics to historiography to geology to cinema. It is rich in empirical insight, as already seen in DeLanda’s intriguing reflections on markets and human conversations. And it is presented with genuine flair and passion.

This is an attractive portrait of the near future of philosophy, and grounds for complaint seem minimal. But having been granted so many benefits, the inherent greed of human nature makes me wish for more. If we were rebels against the future DeLanda hegemony, what might we rebel *against*? As hinted earlier, one of the remaining empty rooms in philosophy in the year 2030 would be causation. What I

would most miss in a DeLandaian universe is an adequate theory of causal relations. Consider the case of a tree. The tree is obviously not a mere aggregate for DeLanda: not because it is a substance or natural kind, but because it meets the standard of having emergent properties not found in its parts. The tree has retroactive effects on these parts; furthermore, there is a redundancy to the parts that allows them to be removed or replaced without destroying the tree as a whole. The tree is “material” insofar as it can enter into an emergent larger forest, home to various animal species in a way that single trees rarely are. It is “expressive” by flashing its arborescent skyline toward all other things, perhaps allowing for some new catalytic interaction or other. It territorializes by closing off from neighboring entities, and deterritorializes by wavering at its edges and allowing external forces to infiltrate and alter it.

The problem is that DeLanda defines the double axis of his ontology in terms of capacities, not properties. What are the properties of the tree in its own right, apart from its capacity to serve as material for larger aggregates, to unify and supervene upon smaller ones, or its dual propensity to close off from the environment while also bleeding into it? It is not clear where we find the tree itself in the DeLandaian model, since it is registered only through its effects on other assemblages—which in turn have properties only in relation to still other assemblages, with the hot potato of reality passed down the line, and nothing actual taking any final credit for being real. In this way, the tree becomes a specific, relational state of affairs rather than an autonomous object.

To repeat, this strikes me as the very deadlock that motivates present-day philosophies of the virtual, which sense correctly that “events” or “states of affairs” are not adequate to account for the whole of reality, and realize well enough that potentiality is always a form of relationality, yet also assume that *individual* objects can only be defined in relational terms. But if we define objects as inherently deeper than all the states of affairs in which they ever become involved, then no recourse to a disembodied virtual is needed. There would be a realism of objects all the way down—of objects completely determinate and different from one another, but also never fully expressed by any attempt to register their existence. “Properties without capacities! The actual without the relational!” These would be possible slogans of the anti-DeLandaian rebel wing circa 2035. If the tree in its own right cannot be reduced to its capacities, then it must have an entirely non-relational structure, but still an actual structure rather than a virtual one. Yet trees, mushrooms, and donkeys must still be able to interact in some way, or nothing would ever happen. Somehow, objects relate without relating, and only here does the true problem of causation arise. And this problem is what I still find missing in the year 2030.

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