

The Educational Thing

Thomas Aastrup Rømer

Published online: 1 May 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2011

Abstract In this essay, I argue that education should be conceived of as a thing in itself. To lift this view, I present aspects of Graham Harman’s philosophy, a speculative realism that can be seen as a radical break with social constructivism and similar approaches. Next, I attempt to outline a rough sketch of an educational “thing”, drawing on concepts such as protection, love, swarm, tension and shadow. Finally, I briefly discuss some implications of this vision for philosophy of education. In particular, I think that my discussion point to philosophy of education as the basic discipline in an educational science.

Keywords Speculative realism · Philosophy of things · Educational object · Heidegger · Harman

Over the past decade, Graham Harman has published several books that intend to turn much recent philosophy upside down. First, he wrote *Tool-being*—a peculiar interpretation of Heidegger’s philosophy, positing all things’ independent existence, and in 2005, the book *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, on which I focus in what follows, appeared. Basically, Harman tries to develop what he calls a “speculative realism” or a “weird realism”, portraying a world of objects that exist independently of our discourse and perception of them.¹ It is a return to a kind of essentialism. He describes a philosophy for things in their diversity and their essence, and he develops a way of thinking about things and their causality. These objects have their own lives from which we as such are excluded. Therefore, the objects can also accomplish surprising and strange things. This is why he calls this a “weird realism”. He even speaks of “guerrilla metaphysics”, a philosophy of a strange, independent and invisible world. Harman’s work is not scientific or positivistically grounded—on the contrary. He writes in

¹ See Harman (2009, p. 334) for a discussion of this term. The other references in this paper are to Harman (2005), except where otherwise explicitly stated.

T. A. Rømer (✉)
Department of Education, University of Aarhus, Niels Juels Gade 84, building 2110,
office 241, Aarhus, Denmark
e-mail: thar@dpu.dk

and out of a phenomenological tradition, discussing not only Heidegger, but also Husserl, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Alphonso Lingis at length. Thus, he combines phenomenology and philosophical realism. It is a negation to social constructivism and “the philosophy of appearances”—in which objects are constituted by the way we perceive them or by our discourses—which Harman believes characterises much of the phenomenological tradition. To a certain extent it is a return to an older pre-Kantian metaphysical tradition—for example to the philosophy of Leibniz and Spinoza. It is a return to Reality with a capital R. In the following, I first present this phenomenological realism, then the contours of a speculative and “weird” object of education, and finally I suggest some consequences for educational philosophy.

Guerilla-metaphysics

A first point is that the realism of Harman is phenomenological and not positivistically justified. Objects in the world are not built out of minimal atomic parts or something like that. Things can be all sorts, for example a horse, a tent, a teacher, an education, Finland, love, etc. All the things we talk about, and which we use, are their own objects. So there is no ontological hierarchy. There is only a world filled with things. Yet, it is important to note that things exist in their own vacuous spaces. They are independent of our perception of them. They *are* in themselves, and they are closed around themselves in their own substantial existence. In this way Harman paints a picture of a world full of object-globes that float around in a metaphysical space. Even we ourselves are such globes. The world consists of spheres that attract each other and collide in different ways. As he says in connection with a discussion of “a tent”: “The tent itself is an object, not a phenomenon” (p. 17). His attempt to turn philosophy around is also expressed in this statement: “The basic dualism in the world lies not between spirit and nature, or phenomenon and noumen, but between things in their intimate reality and things that are confronted by other things—with this single conceptual step, metaphysics is freed from its recent pariah status in philosophy” (p. 74). This means, among other things, that Harman is working with an absolute distinction between the object and our perception of it and he has, contrary to the Kantian tradition, the object itself as his primary focus.

Objects are sealed and isolated from each other. They are in the world like planets in the universe. The objects are essences. Harman praises ontology, essentialism and metaphysics; words that have been repudiated for many years in educational thinking. If there are objects, they must “exist in some sort of vacuum-like state, since no relation fully deploys them” (p. 81). Since the object cannot be fully described through sensory perception or social constructions, it must have its own existence, independent of these activities. “The objects in an event are somehow always elsewhere, in a site divorced from all relations” (p. 81). It is as if the object withdraws into a place which is always somewhere else. This site, this vacuum, is not physical but metaphysical. Thus: “To say that the world is filled with objects is to say that it is filled with countless tiny vacuums... What guerrilla metaphysics seeks is the vacuous actuality of things” (p. 82). So it is the character of “things” and their interaction that we are looking for; the things that exists for themselves, independently of human discourse. And this object is a hidden box full of surprises, never exhausted by the perception of other objects. That is why we can talk about “guerrilla”. One is not bound by the paradigms or a particular social order. With a direct reference to Kuhn’s paradigm Harman says: “It is always more interesting to meet explosive minds who oppose us wildly rather than cookie-cutter ideologues that happen to

adhere to the usual views of our particular tribe” (p. 80). Things move us and touch us from their own site in the world, resulting—not in an abstract Heideggerian “wonder”—but in a collision of places in space that is capable of surprising.

Inside a closed object there is a world of its own: “Every object is not only protected by a vacuous shield from the things that lie outside it, but also harbours and nurses an erupting infernal universe within” (p. 95). In this universe elements are used in certain ways, as—in the vocabulary of Harman—“caricatures”. A windmill, for example, consists of different parts (wings, wood, machinery etc.) but these parts are reduced to mean-end relationships within the overall purpose of a windmill. A “wing” could be caricatured by many other things (e.g. “to fly at the wings of liberty”). The object-globe of “wing”, which may have drifted into many other things, in this case a windmill-globe, is turned into something quite specific in this new object. Thus, the “windmill object” is its own world of parts and a whole, its own substance that has absorbed elements from other worlds for its own purpose, its own existence. The windmill has become a “tool-being”.

Harman then raises the question of how things are tied together. When things are not relational and when they exist independently of relationships, how can they come in contact with each other? What is it that causes a wing to become a part of a windmill or an individual to become a part of a people? How can an object become a part of our cognition? Or in one question: What happens when the globes collide? In this connection, Harman develops the idea of a “vicarious cause”. A concept of causality he picks up from the pre-Kantian philosophy, where A does not act directly on B, but where both A and B act on each other because of an entirely different substance mediating between them. Things are brought together by a special ether, and when they bump into each other, an emotional and poetic plasma laps like a wave, and may form new shapes and structures. Harman calls the most central element in this ether “allure” (attraction/entice/charm). “Allure” is not only a physical but also a philosophical thing. It is not only a Newtonian attraction or feelings between a man and an object. Allure also work between the phenomenological objects themselves. Things bump into each other in hot and cold ways, forming nicks and accents. In my view, although Harman does not expand much on it, what is at stake here is the philosophy of Eros. You attract me is like saying that you are the object of my desire. This, in my opinion, brings the philosophy of Harman in contact with all the erotic philosophy, as expressed by Plato’s Symposium and by many modern phenomenologists. Globes desire each other: both in the destructive sense of Sartre for whom Eros is both destructive and possessive, but also in the caring sense of Levinas, for whom Eros is warm and protective. Thus, bodies move around in an ether of desire, destroying and maintaining each other, producing new words and sounds and poetry.²

And “desire” detaches elements from the objects and links them to new objects. As when a woman goes from one marriage to another. She is the same woman but with a new “caricature”, an element of a new marriage-object (but can the new husband discern “the woman” as an object in itself—an object which cannot be possessed, but must appear in this new “infernal universe within”?). Globes graze each other and exert attraction, which detaches elements from objects. When that happens, it is accompanied by sounds, voices and melodies, poetry, novels and emotions. We are a part of the “global” (globe = global)

² Harman is a very friendly reader to the late Heidegger lecture *The Thing* from 1949 (an essay generally overlooked, see for example Safranski’s biography on Heidegger (Safranski 1998). In this lecture “a thing” is considered to be a mirror-play of Gods and mortals and between sky and earth: a fourfold (a concept which Harman uses himself). When the mirrorplay is fully at work, the “thing things” in a kind of glowing ring.

dance; a dance that is the objective origin of the phenomena. We are invited to a carnaval, one of Harman's favorite words.

Finally, as already suggested, Harman has an interesting concept of "elements and moments". What happens when the attraction sets in, is that the detached elements of one object, are caricatured by another. Just as an electron can jump from one atom to another. As if, for example, "learning" jumps from the object of education to the object of economics. The word "elements" reminds me of Laclau's analysis from 1985 (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). He also distinguishes between element and moment. In his way of thinking, an "element" is a floating signifier, a word or a sentence lacking a discourse. A moment, on the other hand, is when the word is firmly established in a language game. Laclau is a social-constructivist of the radical kind. Harman transports this constructivist distinction between element and moment into the objects themselves. It is no more the battle of discourses, but rather the objects floating and colliding, that we are witnessing. Moreover, he makes a second switch. Whereas Laclau believes that the interaction between the element and moment is political-strategic, Harman tends to look at this interaction in the context of "allure". It is not necessarily something completely different, but certainly it is not the same either. I will not, however, go further into this comparison here.

The Educational Thing

What kind of globe is "education"? We would be wise not to respond too quickly to such a question. However, in terms of speculative realism, we must approach the question in metaphysical terms. It cannot be defined relationally or socially. "Education" must be expressed in terms of an object where "things" interact in ways that are entirely independent of empirical conditions. Afterwards, our "educational thing" may bump into other globes, for example an economic planet, a learning-planet or something else. I will mention three things we find when we look at the educational thing, as it is in itself, independent of all the people and words that happens by coincidence to be involved. Although the discussion is somewhat cursory, it should give an impression of the general idea.

First, we find love and protection—or care if you will. Education is protecting a public dialogue on topics you love. It is not private love that is the focus here. It is love for something in public, something you would like to pass on to all children (and not only to your own child) because it is meaningful in itself and because you cannot imagine a society without this knowledge or these values. This is true in the bigger picture, like when we for example talk about freedom and democracy. The reason that these words are in our school legislation is not that they are particularly rational or scientifically proven. It is because we have feelings about the freedom that was ordained by the constitutional events and developed by various popular movements from 1849 to today. But protection and love also matter on a smaller scale. Why are we sad when young people are not familiar with the names of towns and cities in their own country or region? Is it because a boy in Copenhagen needs to know about Hanstholm (a minor town at the other side of the Denmark) in a globalised economy? No, it is because Danish geography is linked to an area we love, where its dramas of freedom has appeared. We teach names of cities to protect Denmark (and Europe) because we love our country and our European and cosmopolitan origins. For the same reason we teach subjects such as literature, music and woodworking. This is to protect words, understandings and practises, that we believe are valuable in themselves, which need protection because they are not being disclosed by themselves. An uneducated

parent may not tell his son about European art. And I fail to pass on any pleasure in connection with crafts to my kids. But all children must experience the pleasures of both activities. Therefore, school must take over. School protects these activities because they are good and beautiful and important in themselves and for all. Teaching in this view is simply a defensive and protective activity that does not take into account special interests or special talents. When a teacher says: “Listen children”, This amounts to saying: “Our public community attach their love to these words and activities, a love that is protected by a popular-based law in a European cultural context”.³ Now, one can easily turn his feelings and his emotions and his protection in the direction of things other than a country or a European community (i.e. Asian industry or Mao’s Cultural Revolution). The point is simply that love, protection and care are part of the educational thing.

The second element we notice when we look at the “thing” of education is myriads and appearances. Love and protection are linked to public and well-established traditions and understandings and dialogues, but it is also a defining feature of education that new children, students and pupils, bodies and faces constantly appear. Many new children from very different starting points and with different experiences and interests, acquire, correct and further develop what is publicly protected. If this “tumbling plurality” is forgotten, an authoritarian pedagogy may develop. It is only when we remember this new “throng” that education occurs. Pedagogy in this sense is the free interaction between new and the established dialogues. The new generations should not just blindly accept a hidebound basic order. They should instead swarm all over the place with texts, pictures, poems, songs and ideas. They must ask, suggest, avoid, fight, argue, disagree, laugh and cry. They must join together, split up, plunge, travel and remember. A new generation swarms and through their interaction with what is loved, they appear as new artistic or intellectual voices in the country. However, there is a problem here: If this “swarming becoming” does not occur within or on the edge of a public and protected set of issues that is surrounded with love by the majority, and is protected by school, the swarming generation will degenerate to self-centered, confused and selfish individuals who are far too dependent on screens, food and shopping. What is everyone’s “ideality”, one’s desire to act in accordance to oneself in a community,⁴ strays into closed and dreary spaces that people can spend a lifetime trying to orient themselves in and to get out of; a confusion that gives psychologists and diagnostics a field day. No, the teeming becoming can only develop as full active attention to the matter of culture in an atmosphere of public love for caring traditions. The school is one of the places where this whole cultural process of re-creation is structured and takes place. The school is a relationship between public love and a teeming becoming. And this relationship is complicated and unpredictable.

The third thing you find when you look at the thing of education is tension, which indicates that things should not come right; that the two already mentioned aspects of education (protection and appearance) cannot do without each other, but also must dispute each other. You cannot, in this view, do this or that and with evidence-based security be sure that something specific happens. Nor should we “build bridges” between theory and practice in teacher-education or avoid “shocks of practice”. And one educational institution, for example a kindergarten, should not prepare for another: the school, which could prepare for college, which in turn should prepare for the university that is said to prepare

³ This is completely in line with the view expressed by Hannah Arendt in her essay *The Crisis in Education* (1961).

⁴ Socratic virtue in the context of the concept of “ideality”, a concept I know from Danish poet, priest and life-philosopher Jacob Knudsen (1858–1917) (Knudsen 1907).

for business. We are not interested in coherence and unity, because these relationships do not exist in things themselves. When we look at the educational “thing”, there is no research that will go around finding little quirky relationships between class sizes and test results, etc. Problems should not be resolved at all. Problems must instead be established; they must be established as resilient devices, as tensions in full diversity and thing-like ether. Thus, kindergartens (just as an example) are quite different from schools. They have other philosophical and practical roots and express different view of children’s lives. If the kindergarten, which in Denmark has degenerated into a municipal service-centre and a school preparation plant, was fully itself and the school was the same, we would get two institutions that were as different as night and day, and kindergarten-workers (“pedagogues”) and school teachers would play the music of a truly pedagogical difference (and we could add universities and folk high schools to this). This would create a wonderful tension in our culture, in every child and in every new generation; a tension that would stay in every one of us as a kind of urge, forcing everybody to speak and to become a voice in a public dialogue, a tension between a free gushing language on the one hand (kindergarten) and the relationship between swarming appearance and beloved public dialogues on the other (school). The same would be true regarding the relationship between school, college and university, which are also different things. It is the differences we must cultivate, so everything can be what it is. Thus, we should make things tricky and resilient to everybody growing into our entire educational life. This will give us plenty of problems, but not with the sad and lazy selfishness or with a general lack of public memory. Instead, we will get interesting and surprising ideas that pop up with a frank sense of the common good when the tension must be expressed as new appearances in science and culture.

A final example of the elasticity (the opposite of flexibility) and tension of the “thing” of education refers to the fact that every form of public protection and its associated swarm of appearances always have a shadow, a moon, a henchman, an anti-matter. Education is a double planet. That is the case because love is always a part of a dispute. For example, what is “Danish” is linked to the non-Swedish or non-German (and others) because the Danish globe has materialised out of a cloud of tension-filled material murmur. Something you love is formed together with its henchman/men, who always return as a rugged otherness. The educational thing is a double planet and its two moments, the main planet and its moons, keep each other in place by a *pugnacious magnetism* in a rugged attraction. This, in my view, is the field of thinking, the place between “is” and “is not”, where thought can appear, where the world happens.

Thus, love, protection, swarming, appearance and tension are elements of the thing of education. That is the way a free people can appear in public attention and veneration for its common life and strife. It is the continuous formation of a new generation in the slightly battered, but still loving and warm image of the old.⁵

Some implications for philosophy of education

It should be noted that the various elements such as “swarm” may well have other meanings in other objects. “Swarm” can be tied to other attractions in other applications. But here, “swarm” is attracted by the object of education. “Swarm” and “appearance” are absorbed by and works together with the other elements (protection and resilience) in an

⁵ See Rømer (2010) for an elaboration of this “object” of education. I think it can be developed on the basis of the heideggerian fourfold, see note no. 2.

object of education that is formulated on entirely essentialist grounds. Thus, there is an interaction between whole and part. There is an internal attraction, I think Harman would say. The educational thing is its own micro-universe, its own essence, its own globe. When this planet collides with, for example, a globe called educational administration, protection becomes rules. When the educational globe collides with an economic “thing”, “swarm” is detached and transformed into innovation. If the collision is strong enough, an entirely new object, “educational economy”, may emerge, where both the elements of economy and education are completely altered. The new thing is highly energetic and not static at all. The new things “things” as Heidegger says. It attracts other objects and makes them release signs of reality. On the other hand, the new thing may be forgotten. It may not “thing” at all, it may dry out and shrink. New things may cloud for the old thing, so it can hardly be sensed at all.

I have tried to make the description largely without references. I could probably have done better, but my point has been to emphasize the non-relational. It is not a knowledge that is constructed in *social* interaction with others (but in an interaction of *those who have nothing in common*). It is an attempt to look directly at things, in full attention. We skip all social attitudes and overlook all abstract methods. We should not tie one intelligence to another, as Rancière would have expressed it. I think we must return to a kind of erudite writing without references, to emphasize that one can see. It is as if thinking is in a strange contact with the rest of reality.⁶ Both thought and reality are invisible, which is why they have something in common. They are made of the same invisible substance that can enter into specific kinds of metaphorical contact. When that happens, when a collision between the thing of thought and the thing of the world takes place, it results in strange, carnivalistic and unintelligible texts that return to the visible world like Socrates returns to the cave. That is what happens when the planet of thought collide with other planets. In Harman’s words, the task of philosophy is to “listen closely to the faint radio signals emitted by objects—so as one night, alone, to hear what was never heard before” (p. 255). In other words, we should be careful that philosophy does not end up as being a social discourse; it is rather a certain kind of attention, an allure or Eros we share with the world.

Further, there is a point about the attraction that Harman believes both binds the objects together internally and makes them collide with each other. This attraction and these collisions have consequences, which are very similar to the “object of education” that I have just described. *Pugnacious magnetism* is a kind of attraction, and so are love and protection, and the whole relationship between protection and teeming appearance is in a sense a description of a “vicarious cause” that makes objects in the world to collide. The question is therefore whether the “educational thing” is simply the ether itself, the plasma that Harman is looking for? The world, perhaps, is moving in education. The world is education. Education is the ether that all other globes are moving in. Thus, Harman’s work can be used to highlight the omnipresence of educational philosophy. Philosophy is not merely an academic discipline—it is also an ontological category. Philosophy is the world. The more you are part of the world’s attraction and energy and the more you are immersed in philosophy, in the allure and the magnetism of things, the more you can see, think and feel.

Within this framework, one can easily engage in educational research, but it is obvious that one should distinguish sharply between educational research and education in itself. Education concerns the attraction, trajectories and collisions of the metaphysical objects

⁶ The idea that thought and reality somehow comes from the same place is also found in the philosophy of Spinoza and of pre-socratic Parmenides.

and the internal cosmos of things. Research, on the other hand, is the registration of the visible consequences of collisions. Research is not about reality but about what you can see. Pedagogy, however, is about reality, and therefore it is invisible. Yet, sometimes it bumps into other globes, and the consequence is different kinds of perceptions and art. The idea that education should rely on evidence-based research is truly harmful, because such idea overlooks the fact that education is a real *thing*. What a proper educational science (and not just “educational research”) would look like from this perspective is an open question. But at least it becomes possible, because it must build on something which is hidden but that also exists.

References

- Arendt, H. (1961). The crisis in education. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Between past and future*. Penguin Books: London.
- Harman, G. (2005). *Guerrilla metaphysics: Phenomenology and the carpentry of things*. Illinois: Open Court.
- Harman, G. (2009). On the horror of phenomenology: Lovecraft and Husserl. *Collapse*, 4, 333–364.
- Knudsen, J. (1907). *Livsfilosofi*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. New York: Verso.
- Rømer, T. A. (2010). *Uddannelse i spænding—åbenhjertighedens, påmindelsens og tilsynkomstens pædagogik*. Aarhus: Klim.
- Safranski, R. (1998). *Heidegger—between Good and Evil*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.