

Ties van Gemert

Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

Epistemological Questions for a Speculative Pragmatist

Abstract: This essay will engage in a critical dialogue with Massumi’s concept of speculative pragmatism by reconstructing and interrogating the epistemology and metaphysics it presupposes. First, we will narrate and explicate the metaphysics embedded in the philosophy of speculative pragmatism. Secondly, we will recapitulate Massumi’s conceptualization of speculative pragmatism in his book *Semblance and Event* (2011). Our reading of this book will lead us to argue that speculative pragmatism can be reformulated as a philosophy of *panperceptionism*. The essay will end with some remarks and questions that aim to challenge the epistemology and metaphysics of speculative pragmatism. We will focus on Massumi’s synthesizing of the subject-object distinction, his theory of judgement, and his deflationary notion of truth.

Keywords: speculative pragmatism; epistemology; metaphysics; panperceptionism; intuition.

Step one: orienting, storytelling, and cleaving

Let us simply begin by asking: what is speculative pragmatism? This concept coined by Brian Massumi in his book, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (2011), at first, seems to consist of two incongruous words. We have, on the one hand, the noun *pragmatism*, the name of a philosophy associated with an attend to the “practical consequences” of an idea and an avidity for identifying empty concepts using the data of immediate experience.¹ On the other hand, we have the adjective *speculative*, a word designating a mode of thinking that “elevates itself entirely above all instruction from experience, and that through mere concepts.”² At first sight, one cannot but wonder how these two definitions can ever be synthesized to create a philosophy.

If we take speculative pragmatism to be composed of these two gestures of thought, it seems to thrust our thinking into two divergent directions. On the one side, it takes thought to a radical empiricism composed of pure experiences. On the

¹ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 20.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Modern Library Random House, 1958), 109.

other side, it directs it out of this world, forcing it to transcend the bounds of experience, and to embrace a speculative realism. A philosophy of the appearance and a philosophy of the immutable. A communion of the two would be an attempt to extricate the eternal from an appearance. A thought that tries to intuit the becoming of absolute Being in the momentous. Subsequently, speculative pragmatism would be a thinking that searches for a transcendence rooted in absolute and infinite immanence. It would take thought to “the most intimate within thought and yet [to] the absolute outside – an outside more distant than any external world because it is an inside deeper than any internal world.”³

The more time we spend trying to think through this concept, the more we are inclined to wonder how the two assignments could ever meaningfully be assembled. If speculative pragmatism would indeed be an attempt to fulfill and combine these two tasks, we are not only lost to what this gesture of thought would signify but also at a loss to how this abstract concept could ever be lived through. How to intuit the abstract and the possible in the immediately given? How to conceive of a thinking that reaches for the beyond and the virtual whilst staying with the practical and the actual? How to bring together these two directions of thought that during every movement of thought must somehow concur to qualify speculative pragmatism?

Instead of being another philosophy that embraces the One or *the* Difference,⁴ we would be dealing with a philosophy that embraces both: a thought of the One where what *is* and what *will be* live together. This One would not be a Being divided by an ontological difference, but a One-Being wherein the finite and the infinite would coexist with each other in every moment. It would be a sublimated Cartesian dualism that conflates the actual and the potential by intuiting possibilities in what appears. A philosophy that sketches a world wherein the momentous and the future live together and where everything that exists and could ever exist, would exist side by side. Could anything ever take place according to such a philosophy? What could ever happen in such a universe? Or would it be like Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* – that is an eternal abstract Being?

Step two: resuming, detecting, and confronting

According to Massumi, speculation and pragmatism are not opposed, conflicting or incompatible.⁵ When we tried to think the two together, we ended up with a lifeless and timeless aporia. We took up the words and conceptualized them as distinct and contrasting. Subsequently, we purified them and forced them to take on a shape of their own by enclosing their content within strict boundaries. Finally, we brought

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 59.

⁴ François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. by Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁵ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 12.

the two together, but relapsed into a universe consisting of an unmoved mover – “one Being and only for all forms and all times” or “the unique cast for all throws.”⁶ In contrast, Massumi’s philosophical project can be thought of as an attempt to surpass this aporia and to breathe life and time into this assemblage called speculative pragmatism. To think every moment as playing out this wonderful gamble where the actual and the virtual embrace. Not by confronting or opposing speculation and pragmatism, but by redefining the concepts speculation and pragmatism in order to put them to the task in an activist philosophy.

Speculation is, according to Massumi, defined by its relationship to potentiality.⁷ Potentiality is said to be the possible unleashed by a change, the coming to be of the future or, simply put, *becoming*.⁸ With every moment passing, we are confronted with an original instance. To speculate is to tune in to this singular becoming, to intuit the what-is-coming, and “to connect immanently with what is absolutely outside ... [with] what may come but is unforeseeable.”⁹ It is an attempt to go along with where becoming is going, and to perceive the coming-to-be of the future. It is in this sense that Massumi notes that speculation is “intrepidly futurefacing” and “far-rangingly foretracing.”¹⁰ It tries to apprehend the future and to be “constructive of alternate future paths” by surfing on the wave-crest of time that eternally bursts forward like an everlasting waterfall.¹¹

Pragmatism is, according to Massumi, “a synonym for composition.”¹² It “has to do with how, in the taking-definite-shape of potential in a singular becoming, the relational and qualitative poles co-compose as formative forces.”¹³ In other words, pragmatism is the act of bringing together the relational and qualitative poles of an occurrence – an occurrence that is always *within* time.¹⁴ But what are these relational and qualitative poles of an occurrence? How can we define these two poles?

The qualitative pole of an occurrence or event is defined by Massumi as “its thusness”.¹⁵ It is its “immediate enjoyment” that “cannot but be felt”.¹⁶ The relational pole of an occurrence is the opening up of an experience. It is the coming into being of the event. The experience that the event as its “just-beginning-to-stir in a more than of its own coming activity [...] in a world of activity larger than its own.”¹⁷ Like the

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Constantin V. Boundas, Mark Lester, and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 180.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Idem.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ *Idem.*

qualitative pole of an occurrence, this relational pole of an event is also felt, perceived or experienced.¹⁸

The relational pole of a momentous event can take on two forms, namely disjunctive and conjunctive. When a relation is conjunctive, there is a continuity between the previous moment and the present moment that co-composes the two into the same event. When it is disjunctive, there is a discontinuity between the participation of events and a separation occurs between what was and what comes to be. According to Massumi, an event never has solely conjunctive or disjunctive relations, on the contrary, every experience always involves both.¹⁹ The same holds true for the duplicity of the qualitative and the relational.

Pragmatism then is the co-composing of the conjunctive/disjunctive, array/disarray and duplicity/unicity of the passing of time into a singular becoming. It is a tracing of how the relational and the qualitative pole of an event play out. The pragmatic gesture of thought is an attempt to find out “when and how to make a break and in making a break field a relation, and to what really-next-effect.”²⁰

But how can we bring together these two definitions to compose the concept speculative pragmatism? How can pragmatism and speculation be synthesized, connected or related? According to Massumi, when apprehending the concept speculative pragmatism, we must, first of all, be aware that we are not dealing with a dichotomy, but with a *differential*.²¹ According to Massumi, this differential should never be understood as a dualism.²² There never is, on the one hand, pragmatism, and on the other hand, speculation. The two terms are not supposed to be conceptually clear and distinct. Instead, the two concepts compenetrates each other in “a dynamic unity of self enjoying occurrence.”²³ They compose “a singular effect of unity” whose immanent distinction cannot “be overlaid on the subject-object dichotomy.”²⁴ In other words, there is always one occurrence, or one event composed of the speculative-pragmatic differential. The two concepts are not distinct but blend into one another. They are two sides of one coin called an occurrence; they are “[t]wo sides of the same speculative-pragmatic coin.”²⁵

When we bring these two sides together, speculative pragmatism turns out to be a gesture of thought wherein (alternative) future paths are constructed by means of perceptions of potentiality inherent to instantaneous events. In this gesture of

¹⁸ Ibid., 3, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 36.

²¹ Ibid., 5, 12. These differentials have a number of “spinoffs” in *Semblance and Event* and play a pivotal role in Massumi’s activist philosophy. Most of the time, they are brought together by hyphens: aesthetico-political, monadology-nomadology, relational-qualitative, speculative-pragmatic, perception-action, and thinking-feeling.

²² Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 5.

²³ Idem.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ Ibid., 120.

thought, speculation refers to experiences of “[c]ould/should” and pragmatic to experiences of “how/which” brought forth by occurrences.²⁶ The speculative-pragmatic coin is co-composed of a differential that has “the self-abstraction of experience” as “the speculative side” and “conrescence” as “the pragmatic side.”²⁷ In this gesture of thought, speculation refers to experiences of “[c]ould/should” and pragmatic to experiences of “how/which” brought forth by occurrences.²⁸ To understand what is going on and to know where we are at, we must perceive in the passing of an instance what its “really-next-effect” is going to be.²⁹ This is the speculative side of the coin. To decide what to do and what to believe, we must be attentive to how “processual differentials eventually play out” and to how “the experience [is] getting where it’s ultimately going with itself.”³⁰ This is the pragmatic side of the coin. We, speculative pragmatists, must practice an activist philosophy that affirms that everything is always in transit and thus indefinite. As a result, we are forced to shy away from concerning ourselves with the determinate being of an object and advised to follow the becoming of events.

In *Semblance and Event*, Massumi makes clear that speculative pragmatism is best understood as “a species of empiricism closely akin to William James’s radical empiricism.”³¹ The fundamental tenet that it shares with radical empiricism is the affirmation that “everything that is experienced is real in some way and everything real is in some way experienced.”³² The passing of time; changes in situations; (causal) relations between events; symbolical figuring; the differentials; and even potentiality. All of this is real, because it is experienced, and all of it is experienced, because it is real. According to Massumi, experiences of all that comes to pass are everywhere and they even are everything: “the world is made of experience, there is perception everywhere in it.”³³ From “dumb matter” to “animals” or from raccoons to subatomic particles, everything perceives and in doing so co-composes and co-creates the world we live in.³⁴ Ontologically speaking, we could say that the Being of the world is composed of and by perceptions. From a bike to a bridge or from things to humans, all “*are* perceptions in themselves.”³⁵ The point is driven home by Massumi’s clearly and concisely formulated maxim: “everything that is, is in perception.”³⁶

By taking this to be his guiding maxim, Massumi seems to subscribe to what we could call a philosophy of *panperceptionism*. An expressive metaphysics of perception

²⁶ Ibid., 167.

²⁷ Ibid., 148.

²⁸ Ibid., 167.

²⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁰ Ibid., 12.

³¹ Ibid., 85.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ Ibid., 25.

³⁴ Idem.

³⁵ Ibid., 26.

³⁶ Ibid., 85.

where all that is, is limited to what is experienced. A vision of the universe where all that is and can come to be is immediately given in perception – including the germs of the future and the virtuality of the past. A philosophy that, indeed, insists that we can perceive possibilities in the passing of instances. The ontology inherent to speculative pragmatism seems to be one that is composed of events that are *in prehension*.³⁷ Thus, far from being a sublated Cartesian dualism, Massumi's speculative pragmatism seems more akin to a philosophy where the dualism is one where the "ocean" of the One comes in "drops" of experiences.³⁸ The world is "a oneness-in-manyness" – best expressed by the formula "pluralism = monism."³⁹ It is time that is the great Substance, here. All belongs to its becoming. A great emergence in which we are plunged – not as a subject, not as an object, but as in a cloud of unknowing composed of both. The universe as Kandinsky's *Kleine Welten* paintings – small worlds that are events that express All, but where we can still see the breaches and breaks between events.

Step three: abstracting, demurring, and egressing

At this moment in our exposition, we seem to have reached a point of conformity concerning the content, concepts, and outlines of Massumi's speculative pragmatism. We are also beginning to come to terms with the logic that Massumi employs during the conceptualization of his words. While practicing his activist philosophy, he seems to proceed as follows: (1) terms are coined, described, and defined, (2) a contrasting term undergoes the same process, and (3) the two are brought together under the heading of one event and taken to "co-compose a singular effect of unity."⁴⁰ This method of defining concepts and practicing philosophy raises a couple of questions. It is important to note, however, that these questions are not questions for those who easily *perceived* what Massumi was doing during the conceptualization of his major terms. They are for those whom could not understand what Massumi was reminding us of or what he was pointing at.

First, how must we understand that strange form of dialectics that Massumi employs during his process of conceptualization? It does not seem to be a dialectics that hinges on the force of the negative. We are never told that we perceive a Nothingness or that we experience a lack in events. The motor of Massumi's thought seems to be one that just drives, and that is driven by nothing but the passing of time. It is incessant. Massumi's movement of thought feels like a strong and arduous wind that takes the reader along a journey during which she ends up as an event. His philosophy is a process that is interminable, but *how* we are taken along and *what* we are doing

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ Ibid., 5, 52, 82.

³⁹ Ibid., 35. Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Trans. by Brian Massumi (New York: Bloomsbury, 1980), 20.

⁴⁰ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 5.

during our line of flight is far from clear. For example, Massumi wants us to change our mind regarding the position of the subject and object in the world. He wants us to embrace the idea that this differential is actually one event. But how do we get *there*? What is the process involved in making us understand that we are not a subject confronted with objects, but that events simply take place and that what constitutes a subject and an object varies? How do we go from *here* to *there*? How must we perceive the dialectics involved?

Secondly, how can we use concepts to differentiate states of affairs when the meaning of the concepts that are used to do so overlap and their definitions intertwine? When defining speculative pragmatism, it is far from clear what exactly is the pragmatic side or the speculative side of an occurrence. Moreover, we are never told how we can distinguish the “two sides of the same speculative-pragmatic coin” in practice or in perception.⁴¹ We are told that in every event, we can discover the two sides, but how this is supposed to be done, and what can help us recognize these two poles remains mysterious. We are given concepts which we do not know how to recognize but should perceive. Concepts that are supposed to be distinct, and yet confused. This tension in Massumi’s definitions is stringent and seems to come close to a contradiction in terms.

Massumi is well aware of this problem inherent to speculative pragmatism and he even explicitly formulates the paradox sparked by his definitions in the opening chapter of *Semblance and Event*.⁴² But instead of attempting to solve the problem, Massumi takes an alternative path.⁴³ He argues that we should “not try to resolve or dismiss the paradox.”⁴⁴ Speculative pragmatism “like any metaphysics [...] must affirmatively make do with paradox.”⁴⁵ A paradox must be turned into “an impulse for continuing the philosophy’s self-creative advance.”⁴⁶ This must be done up to a point, where “[i]t is no longer worried over as a logical contradiction.”⁴⁷ In other words, yes, the concepts are confused but, no, this is not a problem. We can simply proceed practicing philosophy with these paradoxes and confused concepts, simply because we can accept logical contradictions as activist philosophers. Can we so easily and audaciously reject this presupposition that seems to be constitutional for practicing philosophy? Is not the moment when the principle of noncontradiction is thrown out without care also the moment when one starts to wonder whether what is being said has not stopped making sense, right *there*?

Thirdly, how can we perceive potentiality? How do we experience the immediacy of possibilities brought about by events? While we usually think of possibilities as

⁴¹ Ibid., 120.

⁴² Ibid., 18, 19.

⁴³ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁴ Idem.

⁴⁵ Idem.

⁴⁶ Idem.

⁴⁷ Idem.

involving judgements of situations by a perceiver, Massumi breaks with this tradition of defining possibilities. According to Massumi, we do not need to involve considerations, deliberations, and explicit judgements, when speculating about the future. In every event, there always already is “an excess reality of the virtual.”⁴⁸ While Massumi argues that all of this is given, we can ask ourselves whether our judgements of the possibilities inherent to events come so easily. Do we have an immediate understanding of what we can do, when our bike breaks down, when we begin working on a sculpture, or when some software on our computer begins to rot?

While Massumi assumes that we have the preconceptions needed to act in these situations, in practice, we usually seem to need some time to reflect on what is going on, to subsequently pass a judgement on what can come about. If not always, at least most of the time. Moreover, this need for time seems to be especially urgent, when inaugurating philosophical systems or creating works of art. It is especially during these practices that we seem to be at a loss of intuitions, immediacies, and givens. With Massumi’s theory of potentiality, it becomes hard to understand how artworks and philosophies are commenced, conceived, and constructed. How can we engender an intricate work of art or produce a systematic philosophy with simple intuitions? Could Immanuel Kant have written his three Critiques without rumination, without an abundance of time, and without repetitively and meticulously going over his judgements? Could Hieronymus Bosch have been painted *The Garden of Earthly Delights* without thinking about the next stroke, the right figure to place next, or about the colour of the lake in the middle?

While Massumi argues that the aim of *Semblance and Event* is to “open art and philosophy to each other” and “the speculative wager of the book” is to open up “activist areas”⁴⁹, one may wonder whether this is actually what is being brought about by his concept of potentiality. By restricting our concept of possibilities to what is given in experience, does Massumi’s understanding of possibilities accomplish what it hopes to achieve? By giving us such a concept of potentiality, does not Massumi’s intention result in the opposite, namely restricting our philosophical practice, our creativity whilst making art, and our imagination of what can come about? Does reflectivity concerning what is possible not enable us to widen our world, to enhance our grasp of possibilities, and to explicate all the fragments of our shattered world? Why is immediacy to be preferred over meditation, when practicing philosophy?

Finally, how do we *know* that the metaphysics inherent to speculative pragmatism is valid, real or true? Why should we assume *panperceptionism*? How do we know the world to be composed of the perception of events? Massumi’s advice is simple: pour yourself into the event and you will see. The corresponding question is complex: how can we recognize such an event? According to Massumi, this is a non-question, because we are always already there.⁵⁰ Something is happening and we are in the mid-

⁴⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11.

dle of it all: “that much we already know.”⁵¹ For Massumi, asking questions concerning know-how is instantiating a subject-object distinction and equating “the subject with the knower, and the object with the known.”⁵² In other words, it consists in being a cognitive philosopher, instead of an activist philosopher. But the question that we posed remains unanswered by Massumi’s advice: how can the activist philosopher presuppose that the world is thus and so or that she knows what she is doing in the world?

Massumi’s advice concerning those who insist on asking these kinds of questions is, once again, simple: “don’t go there.”⁵³ We are already doing and thinking-feeling and insisting that we should reflect on our doing or ask epistemological questions concerning our thinking and feeling is obtrusive for an activist philosophy. It results in Cartesian doubts concerning the reality of the external world and creates an abyss between the subject and the object that we must subsequently try to overcome using motley acrobatics.⁵⁴ Moreover, Massumi insists that nothing guarantees that the subject and object correlate or that the external world exists.⁵⁵ These questions will never be answered and asking them does not bring us anywhere or give us anything. Therefore, it is better to give up and stop asking these non-questions. These non-problems only stiffen philosophers and make them inactive and inept. By reflecting on their epistemological practices, they will only withhold themselves from practicing activist philosophy.

The problem seems to be that not asking a question is not the same and as simple as answering it. True, we are always already there. But what is *there*? And where are we and what are we doing? If we define *there* as an occurrence co-composed of the subject and object, how do we know this to be true? Yes, asking these questions brings us back to Descartes’ philosophical problems and makes us doubt our being in the world. But does that make these questions inherently problematic, irrelevant or worthless? Is it indeed so that these reflective questions concerning knowledge asked by philosophers, including Plato, Descartes and Kant, have not brought us anything? Should and can we step away from epistemology as philosophers, because its questions seem unanswerable?

Massumi’s answer to these questions seems to be in the affirmative and he explicitly asks us time and time again to reconsider the value of these questions.⁵⁶ He asks us to focus on the problems that these questions pose to practicing activist philosophy. To consider how they would weaken our potential to engage with the world, and how they would restrict what can and cannot be said or done. He even notes that when one properly conducts activist philosophy, these questions concerning truth

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Idem.*

⁵⁵ *Idem.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

and falsehood do not even arise.⁵⁷ However, pointing out that these questions sometimes bring us into critical territory, dismissing these questions because they are unsuitable to your project, and noticing that sometimes we do not ask these questions is not the same as answering them. A problem does not go away by declaring it to be irrelevant, arduous or solved. The question that remains and subsists for those whom are not satisfied by these remarks is: can we do without epistemology when creating concepts or practicing philosophy?

While the epistemology presupposed by the creation of concepts can take on numerous forms, it seems hard to deny that we can rid ourselves of reflectivity regarding the acquisition of knowledge when practicing philosophy. When creating concepts, there might not be one answer or *The* true answer, but creating concepts or practicing philosophy presupposes knowledge of the world and consequently presupposes a conceptualization of the true and the false. Even while practicing and constructing his activist philosophy, Massumi is in dire need of knowledge to pass a judgement. Otherwise, there is simply no way in which he can tell apart creativity from uncreativity, activity from inactivity, or potentiality from impotentiality. To be able to merge the subject and object into a being there, Massumi simply needs to exercise judgements on what appears to unite the two under one heading or distinguish the two during an occurrence. Massumi must presuppose some kind of epistemology to practice his activist philosophy and some kind of epistemological questions need to be answered for him to even make sense to begin with.

Of course, Massumi is well-aware of this problem. But, once again, his answer is simple: there already “are “judgements” that come in all immediacy as *direct perceptions*.”⁵⁸ We are told that the results and knowledge stemming from these judgements are simply given in experience and we know this to be so. They are judgements that “occur without a separate act of judgment.”⁵⁹ They are performed “too immediately for one to have actually been performed.”⁶⁰ As Massumi finally puts it: “they are judgements without actual judgements.”⁶¹ In other words, all knowledge that we have is simply given in perception. We are simply brought back to what sustains Massumi’s philosophy, namely panperceptionism. According to Massumi, questions concerning knowledge or the position of the subject and object are simply answered by experience.⁶² While we usually only take experience to be composed of impressions like a colour, a butterfly or a car and distinguish between judging and sensing, thinking and perceiving or doing math and seeing objects, Massumi fundamentally breaks with this tradition of dividing up the faculties of our mind.⁶³

⁵⁷ Idem.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁹ Idem.

⁶⁰ Idem.

⁶¹ Idem.

⁶² Ibid., 8.

⁶³ Of course, the division of the faculties of the mind does not necessarily have to be that of Kant, who gave us three faculties, namely sensibility, understanding, and reason. One can also, for example, compose them

Instead of a theory of judgement or a theory of knowledge that can help us settle our epistemological concerns, we seem to be given a theory of intuition. We are asked to simply intuit becoming and, in that way, receive knowledge concerning our being in the world. But the question still remains whether this intuition is adequate for practicing philosophy. Is all that we need a reassurance or reminder that we can simply perceive all the knowledge that we need? How can we validate this method and how does it relate to those things that constitute our world but which we cannot (directly) perceive? Is reflectivity regarding what we are doing when we are practicing activist philosophy always obstructive? It is these questions that remain unanswered throughout Massumi's exposition and it is the lack of an elaborated epistemology that remains problematic during his conceptualization of speculative pragmatism. The Cartesian ghost is told to leave by Massumi, but one wonders whether he can simply cast out a spirit summoned by philosophy that has haunted thinking ever since Plato ...

Step four: digressing, stretching, and extending

At this moment, we seem to have reached a point where the animus of our complaints is becoming palpable. The problems that are being spelled out concern the method of speculative pragmatism. With our interminable questioning, we intended to disrupt Massumi's conceptualization in *Semblance and Event* on various occasions. At the same time, we also tried to show how speculative pragmatism engenders a number of compelling philosophical problems. To accentuate these problems, we explicated presuppositions, expressed our confusion, and tried to communicate what we were not able to perceive. All of this was done to get to the point where we could open up Massumi's discourse to external concerns. In our case, epistemological concerns.

Our procedure was threefold. By moving through speculative pragmatism three times, we tried to repeat its movement and line of thought. First, we tore it apart. We distinguished and contrasted the adjective and the noun. This gave us an immutable world. Secondly, we slowly and meticulously went through the process of conceptualization in *Semblance and Event*. Eventually, speculative pragmatism was summarized as a philosophy sustained by what we called panperceptionism. In the third round, we began to hesitate. We detained and interrogated Massumi's method and, simultaneously, formulated complaints, questioned his intuitions, and brought in new concerns. Now, we have come up to a point where we can contemplate the work that lays behind us. We are also able to repeat our story, once more. Maybe, we are even able to rephrase it.

The epistemological concerns that we brought into the picture compromised development, explication, and inference. We wanted to connect our concerns with

from the results of contemporary cognitive science. Massumi also seems to disapprove of this latter method. As he puts it on page eleven of the book: 'all "higher" cognitive functions come back through the middle'. This rejection of differentiating between faculties also seems to be one of the reasons that Massumi's interlocutor in chapter two of *Semblance and Event* accuses him of 'explanatory overkill' (Ibid., 55).

Massumi's discourse and, concurrently, discover the internal weavings of his philosophical project. We took up a thread, namely speculative pragmatism, and followed it through the labyrinth that constitutes his conceptual framework. In other words, we followed his line of thought. While following his line of thought, we tried to look behind and ahead, and ahead and behind. We tried to incorporate Massumi's earlier propositions throughout the movement of speculative pragmatism and assess his postulates at the end of the venture. This method of sequencing and scrutinizing a line of thought gave us a structure. A structure regulated by a desire for coherence.

In other words, our philosophical practice was driven by desires. We desired to relate the next sentence to the last. The current chapter with the next. The one concept with the other. Desires for coherence and desires for consistency, but also desires for attention, clarity or polemics. One can practice philosophy without these desires – like one can write a book with numerous contradictions. But there is always a limit to the amount of freedom that one can seize in practicing philosophy. These limits or boundaries are self-enforced, but one will and must decide. Not conceptualizing one's method is simply ignoring these limits and waiving epistemological questions. There are boundaries to our desires – like there are limits to our capacity for making sense of a text. There is a point where one loses interest. And, there is a point where a limit is reached concerning adequation and significance.

In other words, the problems that trap speculative pragmatism are problems of care. One is simply moving too fast, when coining concept after concept without explicating the relations between them. There comes a moment during the impulsions of creativity that we must stop and remember, reflect, and recuperate. Only then are we beginning to construct a concept, the moment when we compose rather than coin. The critical movement of thinking through a concept within a conceptual framework relays on reflection. It is by means of reflection and by explicating presuppositions that we constructed the fissure that we tried to impel. It is this mode of philosophy that we contrasted with Massumi's activist philosophy. By taking up a conceptual framework and exploring its plasticity, we tried to open a space within speculative pragmatism where we could develop a philosophical problem. The reverberation of this problem and the noise of our questions is the point we are left at. The intention never was to destroy Massumi's conceptual framework, but to fissure and disrupt. As Wilfrid Sellars puts it in his book *The Metaphysics of Epistemology*: "In philosophy, there is not a knockdown, dragout argument for anything. What you do is enlarge your picture with newer and newer considerations."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Wilfrid Sellars, *The Metaphysics of Epistemology: Lectures by Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. by Pedro W. Amaral (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 2015), 136.

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