Rein Raud: Being in Flux—
A Post-Anthropocentric Ontology of the Self

Reviewed by Manuel RIVERA ESPINOZA*


The book provides a reading of ontology, consciousness, selfhood, and agency primarily based on the concepts of process and field. By using these concepts as springboards, Rein Raud strives to supply a holistic system of interpretation in which disciplines that are often studied separately—such as metaphysics, ethics, and cognitive science, among others—come instead to be seen as fundamentally interconnected and entangled realms of knowledge and practice. Being in Flux consists of four chapters, each dedicated to a different subject.

Chapter 1, titled “Ontology: Some of the Story So Far”, works as a diatribe against ontological essentialism, particularly its commitment to the existence of mind-independent, self-identical and continuous “objects”. As the author explains, essentialism “has a reifying effect on our view of things, imposing strict borders and clear-cut categories on phenomena that should more appropriately be seen as a flux” (p. 15). Accordingly, he opposes this view because “any essentialist discourse necessarily postulates things about reality that diminish the explanatory power of this discourse, instead of increasing it. Such discourses cannot handle vagueness or spontaneous transformations” (pp. 17‒18). In Raud’s view, the dynamic nature of reality is such that things possess no essence or substance, but simply “pattern continuity”: “the concept of substance describes nothing but an appearance of what a relatively stable pattern has produced for our gaze” (21 n. 4). In this sense, and strictly speaking, things are not objects, because “an object is something identical only to itself at any given moment” (p. 21). Moving away from ontological essentialism and into process philosophy, the author argues that “it is empirically justified to consider the workings of reality as a process to be primary, and its constituents, available as they are to us in a context-free form only as products of our mind, to be secondary” (p. 26). Flirting with multiplicity-centred ontologies,

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he contends that entities are “embedded” inasmuch as they are engaged in continuous interactions with other entities and their contexts (pp. 26‒29). Concepts like excess, emergence, event, and affordance, among others, are thus revisited (pp. 29‒42). Based on these vistas, Raud explains that, for all its novelty, the continued commitment of DeLanda and Harman’s object-oriented ontology to objects seriously limits its potential for furthering our understanding of reality, particularly its alleged capacity to eschew anthropocentrism, given that objects are necessarily gaze-dependent and thus contingent upon human perception (pp. 38, 41). This leads the author to critically discuss social constructionism and the linguistic turn (pp. 43‒48). Although he agrees that language constructs reality, he also notes that “not unlike mirrors, lenses and retinas, language itself is also a part of the reality it seeks to reflect” (p. 47). He then briefly examines Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s assemblages and the relationship between gaze and relationality to conclude that “object-oriented ontologies, old and new, are only able to retain explanatory power as long as we are happy to remain limited by the human perspective on reality” (p. 54).

Chapter 2, titled “An Ontology of Processes and Fields”, attempts to offer an alternative to essentialist and object-oriented ontologies. This alternative “does not suffer from many of the deficiencies of the received view and, moreover, has a greater explanatory potential for the elaboration of a non-anthropocentric paradigm of entities and the relations between them” (p. 55). Here the concept of “field” is of utmost importance, and it is defined as “as a configuration of constitutive tensions, including both attractions and repulsions” (p. 56). This definition is also central to the author’s understanding of “process” because “every cross-section of every process of any kind at any given moment is best represented as a field” (p. 56). Such an understanding of process differs from traditional process ontology. For example, Alfred North Whitehead’s ontology still asserts the existence of “eternal objects”—which he explicitly equates to Platonic forms—and sees processes as mere expressions of them (pp. 57‒58), prompting Raud to wonder if “Whitehead’s ontology, in the final analysis, really differs from an abstract idealism that would see the flux of reality as not a process per se, but a process of interaction of eternal, self-identical objects” (p. 58). The fact that this distinction between eternal objects and processes is present even in Whitehead’s processual metaphysics tells us of the powerful persistence within the Western ontological tradition of a view of reality “which assumes that there are two planes of existence, one housing pure type-variables and the other their token-values, or actual entities” (p. 60). In contradistinction to this two-tiered, hierarchical ontology we find a one-tiered one, or what DeLanda calls a “flat ontology”. The author argues that this “view of reality has greater explanatory power than its two-tiered alternatives
simply by not imposing mind-made (or just simply mind-dependent) structures on reality” (p. 61). One way of relinquishing the imposition of such structures is appreciating the existence of gradients and thresholds in the ontological structure of reality. Instead of endorsing the clear-cut distinctions embedded in the configuration of ontological “objects”, such as those between animate and inanimate, conscious and unconscious, etc., “we can argue that though neither rock nor milk is alive, milk is closer to life than rock is, and though neither amoebas nor trees are conscious in the same sense as humans are, trees are closer to this state than amoebas” (p. 65). This also involves realizing that these kinds of distinctions are always culture-specific and gaze-dependent. We can still describe the world in terms of “things” or “entities”, but “we should only do so while remembering that language has carved these things out of the flow of reality for us, creating ‘islands of meaning’ (Zerubavel 1993, 6), or chunks of space and/or time, slices of experience that we are henceforth going to see as discrete and self-same objective existents” (pp. 66–67). Relatedly, the relationships between things should be described as “membranic” in nature, in the sense that the borders between them resemble membranes, i.e., they are not discrete but permeable (pp. 70–72). In this way, we are invited to think of entities as “nodes in networks, always blending into other entities in the grey areas on their margins” (p. 77). This can also be expressed by the concept of “field”, which is more extensively defined by the author as “a space of constitutive tensions, but also of partially determined undecidedness, of a chaos struggling to organize itself and an order constantly dismantling itself” (p. 80). It is important to note that Raud chooses to speak of undecidedness instead of randomness. The suggestion is that fields and processes do possess a certain structure, what he calls “metapatterns” (pp. 78, 80), but that the specific behaviour of this pattern or structure is never entirely predictable (pp. 80–82). This mirrors the “internality” of processes, namely, their ability to possess a certain degree of insulation from external environs and yet not “be totally contained by impermeable borders.” (p. 88) This formulation is designed to deal with the issue of how to “make a distinction between a singular process and the flux of reality as a whole without concomitant reification or presenting them as twin brothers of the ‘objects’ of traditional ontological discourses” (p. 82). The concept of internality allows to make a distinction between two kinds of change, “reorganization and transformation: the first of these implies a reconfiguration of the processes within the boundaries in a new way; the second, however, involves a reconfiguration of the boundaries that hold the internality together” (pp. 88–89). It is suggested that the latter enjoys a greater degree of undecidedness than the former, leading to a third kind of change, game changers, characterized by their capacity to dramatically change the course of a process/field (pp. 91–94). Finally, understanding that “the universe is neither completely determined nor wholly random” (p. 97) implies reassessing the
nature of causality: Causes do exist but not as linear relationships between clearly distinguishable entities. The membranic and wavering nature of things/processes/fields is such that their causes are necessarily diffused and multiple, synchronic and diachronic, etc. (pp. 100‒111).

Chapter 3, titled “Me, myself and my brain”, reassesses selfhood and consciousness in light of the abovementioned ontology, particularly the concepts of process and field. Accordingly, the self is seen as an “agentic entity that has processual, but not substance or pattern, continuity”, and the self and the mind as a field “constituted by tensions between positions and elements both internal to its flow and external to it” (p. 113). Raud explains that this is a “non-anthropocentric view” of selfhood and consciousness that “will also help to avoid the temptation to think that humans actually have an adequate understanding of themselves, and that the centres of gravity they project into their mind, such as the rational ego-consciousness, are real entities that structurally dominate other entities present in their minds” (p. 114). More precisely, he argues the self/mind is a field in the sense that it is “without a stable condition of balance, an undecided (yet not random) space within which different centres are vying for control” (p. 114). Only one of the centres belongs to “the rational ego-consciousness”, the others belong to emotions, sensations, external factors, etc. This implies recognizing the importance of both the bodily and relational aspects of the mind/self (pp. 115‒66). Drawing upon the work of Andy Clark, David Chalmers and John Haugeland, the author argues that “our conscious activity does not take place in ‘the mind’, but only in the process of interaction this mind has with its environment” (p. 117). In this view, places, smells, sounds, etc., are a constitutive part of the structure and functioning of the mind and thus cannot be completely distinguished from mental processes. Accordingly, Raud challenges those that identify the brain with the mind, suggesting that these views fail to appreciate the symbiotic relationship that the brain has with the body and environment (pp. 125‒34). He argues that “a more acceptable explanatory strategy would be not to isolate the process of ‘thinking’ into a strictly neuromental domain, but to consider it as emerging in a relationship between what we call the subject and its reality” (p. 135). Returning to the issue of selfhood, the author quotes Nietzsche’s suggestion that “the ego is a plurality of personlike forces” (p. 138). Furthermore, “any of these subsections of the mental field can act as the centre in which decisions are made” (p. 138). In this way, there is not a central, prevailing or ruling force within the self/mind, the self-as-field is defined by continuous shifts between various centres or forces, as each of them attempts to prevail over the other. In other words, we are never solely rational, emotional, sensuous, etc., but all of these at once (pp. 139‒40). The field of the mind thus works as a dynamic web of relationships between multiple points, and
each of these points contains and overlaps with each other, and so “the field can also be metaphorically described as holographic in that any particular focal point can recast the entire system of tensions” (p. 144). In this light, a decision “is the recalibrating of the constitutive tensions of the field in such a way that it alters significantly the course of the selfhood process” (p. 147). The author concludes the chapter by summarizing his view of the self: “It is not an enduring and self-same entity or an egocentric particular, but an internality, which is held together by constitutive tensions” (p. 158).

Chapter 4, titled “The Self as an Extended Decision-Making Network”, re-evaluates the nature of human agency. Raud commences by recalling the notion that “the mind itself emerges through the interface of our bodily and sociocultural presence as a part of our whole being” (p. 165). On account of this he suggests that we think and act with our bodies as much as with our minds—a view known as “bodythink”—so that “perhaps the succinctness of a key passage in a philosophical work, or an atypical nastiness exhibited by a fictional character in a crucial scene of a novel do not necessarily result from disembodied mental calculations, but are co-caused by an itch or a back pain of the author?” (p. 166). The implications of this for an understanding of agency are manifold, but most notably it involves distancing ourselves from the notion “that action is to be explained in terms of the intentionality of intentional action” (p. 171), and particularly the view that consciousness initiates all acts and polices the body, as, for example, Benjamin Libet explains. Alternatively, Raud contends that “agency consists in choosing courses of actions that are most consistent with [the self’s] current understanding of its place in the world” (p. 175). More precisely, decision-making works as “the final balance achieved between the constitutive tensions that make up the subject field of the agent” (p. 184). The self, as well as its decision-making process, is extended in the sense that it “is not bounded by my body, but in a significant way extends into its environment” (p. 184). In light of this, the relationship between cognition and action, the nature of responsibility, and the interaction between individual and group agency, among other things, are reassessed (pp. 187—205). All of the above, the author hopes, should lead us to recognize that selfhood and agency emerge “from a multiplicity of heterogeneous causal flows, as nodes within a network of interweaving processes, distributed over the range of processes that we are involved with and that constitute us” (p. 206).

Overall, the book manages to provide an interesting and thought-provoking explanation of ontology, selfhood, consciousness, and agency by way of the systematic deployment of the notions of process and field. Although many of Raud’s arguments might appear to be unoriginal for those familiar with Asian texts and thinkers, they are certainly innovative for, and sometimes openly disruptive of,
the assumptions that guide the mainstream debates about the nature of reality, the self, etc., within the fields of analytic and continental philosophy, and particularly the former. In this sense, the author has achieved what he set out to do at the beginning of his text, namely, to offer a new interpretation of these issues based on a processual and correlative vision. As noted at the start of this review, this approach provides a holistic system of interpretation of both human and extra-human reality.