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**Holism: Possibilities and  
problems Conference**

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(15-minute paper: 2000 words  
with 5 minutes for discussion)

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# **Emergence & Things in Themselves**

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*An Oblique Offering*

I hope some of you have had an opportunity to look over my 'comic-paper' that was sent out a couple of weeks ago; if not, don't worry, as I've included some images on the slide show and I have some hard copies of the comic book for

My contribution to this conference is *An Oblique Offering*, to borrow the phrase from Jacques Derrida, in that it is not a straight forward analytic elucidation of Holism but, rather, an indirect response.

And perhaps it could be argued that *An Oblique Offering* is very much in keeping with the papers we have heard here over the past two days and with the writings and ideas of both Jung and Deleuze and with Holism in general.

The major question of my research is: **What must the world be like for our thoughts about it to be both practical and meaningful?**

In philosophical terms, this question is a form of pragmatism. The approach to thinking about the world that evaluates the success of a set of beliefs in terms of their practical application.

For many years, I have been reading and researching into pragmatism from Pierce, Dewey, and William James to Richard Rorty and Robert Pirsig, and trying to apply these ideas to certain questions, such as:

What must the natural world be like for our scientific experiment to be meaningful?

What must the social world be like for our analysis of social activities and culture to be helpful?

And

What must social structures be like, for our practices to aid human agency and emancipation?

Today I'm going to touch briefly on three areas of my research, later I will discuss the problems with positivist thinking and how the Holistic concept of Emergence and Assemblage can help us overcome these issues. But first I want to outline what I'm calling my **Pragmatic Ontological Materialist** approach, that I believe to be the best way of moving beyond the stagnation of much contemporary thinking.

So, let's unpack this rather convoluted phrase:

My process is **Pragmatic** in the sense that I mentioned a moment ago, it is about judging a set of beliefs through practical application.

**Ontology** is the theory of being: what kind of beings populate your world or what kind of entities are you committed to claim exist in your world.

Ontological ideas are concerned with the most basic presuppositions of any philosophy. The things that underpin our ideas and that we take for granted. Ideas that we are not going to have to explain over and over again before we can move forward with explaining so many other important things about our world. Everything we say and think is based upon presuppositions, every Philosophical idea, every Scientific law, every Sociological attempt to understand the complex relationships between individuals, every Psychoanalytical interpretation of the complex pathologies of each individual, and every practice, is based upon several undefined assumptions that we take for granted. If you don't have presuppositions you are condemned to saying nothing, repeatedly.

This process of basing our larger ideas upon assumptions is better known as **Metaphysics** and I want to reclaim metaphysics from its place of condemnation in contemporary thinking where it is used as a term of derision. Metaphysics, as an insult, is the one thing that seems to unite continental and analytic philosophers; "Oh, that's just pure metaphysics", they say, as if this 'presupposition' itself were a way of dismissing 'things' out of hand.

The third word in my phrase is a return to the dismissed 'thing', our material existence, realism or **Materialism**, the idea that the world has an existence independent from the contents of our minds. That there is a mind independent reality outside of our consciousness of it. But I want to clarify a couple of things here before moving on. As a realist, if all the human minds in the world vanished overnight, then although cities, communities, works of art, and the building that house institutions such as universities and banks would still exist; they would, however, cease to function in the way they do in a world that includes human minds. In this sense, they would not be real in any meaningful sense of the term, because all meaning, as we understand the term as humans, is human. Rather they would be simply physical objects, existing independently of meaning and the contents of the human mind. For materialists, although the world exists independently of our minds, meaning does not, and therefore, communities, institutions, art, and science, do not exist without minds and bodies to create, activate, and interpret them.

Although this does not appear as a huge claim when put in this way, calling yourself a realist today is like calling yourself a metaphysician; it places you outside of the predominant thinking of our era.

Therefore, the key to my work on the comic-paper is to address pragmatism, metaphysics, and materialism, through the principle of **Quality**.

This means that it is ambition enough to be part of a community of thinkers who are under-labouring with a commitment to creating coherent methodologies, via an immanent critique of the presuppositions used, and committed to constructing a practical set of ideas. This process is not about building grand systems, uncovering first principles, or building the foundations upon which to erect a whole set of laws and axioms for our knowledge of the world as it is *in-itself*. Or, and this is perhaps the worst of all, presenting oneself as the '*philosopher genius*' who comes up with these ideas, all by **himself**, and gifts these ideas to the world as if they came out of his head fully formed without the rest of the community being in any meaningful way a part of this process.

Obviously, some thinkers present things in a wonderfully new way, that enable the rest of us to stand back and say, "I thought exactly that, but could not have put it into such sublime language, or beautifully prose." However, these individuals are not geniuses, rather they are the end point of a process that emerges from the myriad of thoughts being spoken and debated within any community. These ideas are the dialectic thoughts drawn from the social, and intellectual levels of an active society. They are shared ideas that emerge from the **Scenius**, to use Brian Eno's term, which suggests that Scenius is like genius only emerging holistically from cultural scenes as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, and not merely in the genes of certain individuals. In this way, the present patriarchal white supremacist world of academia, and philosophy especially, is retarding us from a truly useful and inclusive form of thinking i.e. Pragmatic Ontological Materialist thinking, with its goals of being meaningful, useful and emancipatory.

Therefore, doing metaphysics with Quality today should be concerned with articulating the conditions for the possibility of practice; looking at the theory behind practice; presupposed by practice, and implied within practice. This form of ontological realism reduces linguistic confusions while attempting to forge new forms of emancipation that would give us the conditions for the possibility of practice.

So, I hear you ask, what are the forces holding this process back? Well, one of the most pernicious culprits is **positivism**, the idea that there is no knowledge other than *a posteriori* knowledge and that all *a priori* (presuppositions) are nonsense and merely pure metaphysics. Positivism's claim is that all knowledge must be based on logical deduction and proven through empirical investigation (i.e. sensory experience) which then produce universal laws. This may seem like the very gold standard of science and proof today, but not only is it based upon certain assumptions and presuppositions, but it also creates what critical realists like Roy Bhaskar, term, an **epistemic fallacy**. The fallacious idea that statements about being should be eradicated in favour of

statements about knowledge. But this would mean that we are addressing the map and not the territory.

The ontological challenge to positivism is that all of its laws and law-like predictions are actually produced in closed systems like laboratories or in the rooms of economic professors and that these are unreal environments, fixed in time, rather than being in the open systems of change and multiplicity. Therefore, positivism and its laws work fine in false situations i.e. they work fine as fixed ideas about how free market systems work as models, how physics works as laws, and how philosophies work as maps, so long as they are kept in the hermetically sealed world of the laboratory. But if these laws, models and maps are used in the world they implode. And today these Laws, models and maps have become more real than the open systems that they are meant to interact with and represent. The map, the law, the model, have become our real; and this is just crazy.

Critical Realism avoids these problems by suggesting that research is not about maps, models and laws but about exploring the powers, structures and mechanisms that under certain conditions provide temporary pragmatic methods and results. In this way, we ask what must the world be like for our understanding of it to be possible and meaningful. To do this Critical Realism identifies three overlapping levels:

There is **The Real** which is the level of 'generative mechanisms' causes, powers, and structures that produce the events we experience. It is very rare for us to know The Real to understand the generative mechanisms that structure our world. But we begin by assuming that they are there because the world exists independently of our minds.

The next level is the **Actual**, the events, things, products; the very basis of our experience and the symptoms through which we analyse the real.

And the final level is the **Empirical**, our experience, observations and measurements of these events. Through sensory experience, we explore the symptoms of the actual world to make predictions about the real.

These ideas are presented in the section of the comic-paper entitled 'Good Intentions', where I attempt to illustrate ideas of assemblage and emergence in the event of making 'Bronze'; a wonderful chemical example of holism in that it is an alloy made from the combination of Tin and Copper. Tin has a tensile strength of 22 Megapascals, Copper 24 MPa, which should if combined together add up to 46 Megapascals of tensile strength, whereas Bronze has a tensile strength of 59MPa much more than the sum of its parts. Those extra 13MPa emerge from the new properties in the structure of Tin and Copper combined.

This section of the Comic-Paper also contains another holistic assemblage with emergent qualities, i.e. the combination of oxygen and hydrogen atoms to form the water molecule H<sub>2</sub>O, which has very different properties from each element taken separately.

However, assemblages are not only holistic in terms of chemical processes, they can also be holistic in regard to social activities, in the way that assemblages have the ability to move from one level of existence to another, i.e. from inorganic to biological, from biological to the social, and from the social to the intellectual. And it must be remembered that as these assemblages go upwards they gain emergent properties which means you can't move downward without losing properties. Therefore, entropy happens when you move down the levels and holism when you move up.

Emergent properties also have the ability to block reductionism: Molecules cannot be reduced to atoms, cells cannot be reduced to molecules, organs cannot be reduced to cells, organisms cannot be reduced to organs; and intelligence cannot be reduced to a single organism, the male genius, because at every level new properties emerge that create a whole greater than the sum of its individual parts.

However, it is important to bare in mind that Bronze is simply an alloy, and is only greater than the sum of its parts when understood in materialist terms as being part of our understanding of the world. Bronze is only ever as 'good' as the intentions of its user; outside of this, it's simply an object.