

**The Philosopher's New Clothes:
An Introductory Survey into Object-Oriented Ontology**

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Abstract

My project for the past 10 weeks has been the study of the philosophical movements of Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology as developed by a few prominent philosophers: Graham Harman, Bruno Latour, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Quentin Meillassoux. My paper starts by analyzing the critical stance post-Kantian philosophy takes and its view (dubbed “correlationism” by Meillassoux) where subjectivity reigns supreme and knowledge of any real world external to the mind is impossible. I then examine Harman, Bryant, Bogost, and Latour’s philosophies and explicate their views as well as compare and contrast them to each other. The project concludes with a chapter where I reflect upon these individuals’ ontologies and offer my own ontology of objects. My hope is that this project will serve as the first building block in a larger project aimed to aggregate the wide ranging and disparate views of Speculative Realists and Object-Oriented Ontologists. In the end, this longer term project is intended to serve as a primer, if you will, for those interested in Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology.

Chapter 1: Kant's Two Theses

1.1 The Spectre of Correlationism

A spectre has haunted philosophy for the past 400 years – the spectre of ‘correlationism.’ Since Kant’s final formulation of his so-called Copernican Revolution around the intersubjectivity of knowledge as a solution to the fear of skepticism and solipsism implicit in Descartes, the philosophical worldview of correlationism has remained the dominant trend in Western philosophy. Correlationism, as defined by Quentin Meillassoux, is “the idea [that] we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” and serves to render impossible any attempts to view “subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”¹ In a word, correlationism states that Being is intrinsically tied up with thought.

As Levi Bryant has pointed out, the rise of correlationism has seen with it the subordination of questions of Being – that is to say, ontological questions – to questions of knowledge *about* Being – that is to say, epistemological questions – such that the question “‘what is being?’” now, everywhere and always, carries a footnote, colophon, or bit of fine print such that the question must be read as

¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Bloomsbury Books, 2008), 5.

‘what is being *for us?*’² The history of this subordination of ontology to epistemology can be seen in interpretations of Socrates’ dialogue *Meno* where the question of “how can one make positive truth claims about something one does not yet know?” arises. For example, how can we say anything about Being without first understanding what Being *is*? Furthermore, following the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Being ceases to be a transcendent quality and instead turns into yet another correlate of human existence due to the bracketing of questions of a world independent of the mind and a focus on the individual and her subjective experience of the world she sees. In other words, Being *as such* is subordinated to Being *for* humans.³ As human-centeredness, or ‘anthropocentrism,’ takes hold, epistemology becomes first philosophy wherein all other questions are relegated to the sidelines, never to be considered worthy of investigation in their own right.

In contrast to the Ancients’ questions about substance and the materiality of the world, the subordination of ontology to epistemology has led to questions of human access to the world becoming the centerpiece of all philosophies. Specifically, ontology becomes “onto-epistemology” for “how can ontology make claims about the being of beings without first knowing these beings?”⁴ The privileging of the human-world correlate has become so entrenched in Western

² Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 35.

³ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

philosophy that we are almost unable to think of an object without a subject, sparking Graham Harman to say “humans [now] make up 50% of ontology.”⁵ The question which we must now grapple with is ‘what are the implications of an epistemologically centered (epistemo-centric) tradition of philosophical thought?’

1.2 The Rise of Correlation

Questions of epistemological access to the world have always been around, but they grew wings and took off, garnering widespread grounding and acceptance, with René Descartes’ problem of skepticism and the rise of ‘modern’ philosophy. Descartes’ main worry was about whether his senses could be trusted to deliver “representations and language [that were] accurate mirrors of the world as it actually is” – what’s called epistemological realism – and thus he began to question their objectivity in a project of radical doubt and distrust.⁶ When he realized that his senses could not, in fact, be trusted to deliver accurate information of the world as it is, he tore down all the walls of prior philosophy and started from zero to attempt to determine an undoubtable truth. For Descartes, the only *a priori* knowledge one can have is that one exists. Utilizing the methodology of radical doubt, the conclusion he came to is that because he thinks, he must exist – *cogito ergo sum*. Extrapolating from the existence of the self,

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ Ibid., 18.

Descartes thought that he could show the existence of God, logical laws, re-establish certainty in sense perception, and subsequently establish the existence of material objects. In this view, however, the existence of objects is entirely mind-dependent insofar as a subject's perception becomes foregrounded and thus one's experience is used to make epistemic claims about those objects. The initial problem Descartes raised, however, did not die with him. The potential descent into skepticism and solipsism that originated with an untempered epistemo-centric tradition of philosophical thought remained and subsequent philosophers found Descartes' solution unsatisfactory or incomplete and thus had to formulate their own theses. The rise of givenness and the privileging of consciousness was at hand.⁷

On the flip side of the coin and taking a more common sense, although slightly naïve, position on human access to the world was John Locke who began to more explicitly formulate the circle of correlation that was already implicit in Cartesian epistemology. Locke rejected any claims of *a priori* knowledge and innate ideas (the kind that helped Descartes revive God) and wasn't bothered by the questions of skepticism and solipsism because for him, our knowledge of objects comes from first-hand sense data. In Locke's empiricism, all we have are our perceptions of objects and the knowledge we gain from first-hand experience and experimentation of the world. As such, discussions of a pre-experiential

⁷ Ibid., 60-61.

world or claims of *a priori* knowledge are nonsensical.⁸ Locke, as opposed to later empiricists, embraced some sort of material substratum that was independent of cognition, however, as he realized that the qualities the mind perceives must be stuck to something, he just couldn't say anything positive about it hence he coined it "I-know-not-what."⁹ Further, Locke made a distinction between two types of qualities of an object: primary and secondary qualities. For Locke, primary qualities are qualities that are intrinsic to an object and independent of the human mind (e.g. "solidity, extension, figure, and mobility," etc.) whereas secondary qualities are the result of the mind's interaction with primary qualities (e.g. "texture, [...] colors, sounds, tastes," etc.).¹⁰ For example, the solid nature of a cotton ball would be a primary quality whereas the white color would be a secondary quality. For Locke, these two categories of qualification, plus his "I-know-not-what," made up the totality of an object's existence. Thus, while not fully enmeshed within the circle of correlation, Locke's description of the characteristics of objects became a description of the human-world correlate.

On the coattails of Locke came George Berkeley and his radical empiricism and immaterialism. Berkeley accepted Locke's bracketing of the worry of skepticism and agreed that our perceptions are all that can be known. However, Berkeley took Locke's empiricism a step further by rejecting the idea

⁸ See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996).

⁹ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 123.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

of material substance (Locke's "I-know-not-what") altogether in favor of a metaphysics that privileged experience and thought that the totality of an object's existence can be summed up in one phrase: its sensible qualities.¹¹ Specifically, Berkeley's argument stems from a positive acceptance of sensible qualities which ultimately lead him to his view that secondary qualities are indistinguishable from their primary 'causes.' Berkeley did not view the solidity and color of the cotton ball to be two distinct things; rather they were bound up in one positive quality that was, for lack of a better word, the essence of the cotton ball that is perceived. To make his point, Berkeley argued that the sensation of the heat of a fire (a primary quality) is intrinsically tied up with the sensation of pain (a secondary quality) and that the two cannot mentally be separated. If the two cannot be separated – that is to say, heat *is* pain in this sense – then the 'primary quality' of the fire's heat cannot be said to exist independent of a mind perceiving the sensation of pain.¹² This positive acceptance of immaterialism or, as it's called, 'subjective idealism'¹³ led to the severing of philosophy from discussions of 'objective' existence as all that can be known, and subsequently all that can *be*, are what subjects perceive. In other words, for Berkeley, *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived. Berkeley's solution, however, turned into solipsism by spiking the Kool-Aid with the absolute, or "strong," correlation between Being and perception; we could no longer think of a thing outside of thought.

¹¹ See George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), 35.

¹² Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, 13.

¹³ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 29.

As in all good stories (and the history of philosophy is most definitely a story), a villain is required and the villain in the story of the history of philosophy (or at least metaphysics and ontology) is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant, however, was no ordinary villain. He was no Domsday with unsalvageable qualities; Kant is to philosophy as the Joker is to Batman – the two need each other yet the havoc one causes is immeasurable. Just as the Joker can be read as Gotham’s anti-hero (killing mob bosses and exposing corruption in the vilest of ways), Kant can be read as philosophy’s necessary anti-hero bringing forth two theses that must be examined.

1.3 Kant’s Theses

Kant, awoken from his slumber by David Hume, was worried about falling into the pit of skepticism and solipsism and thus leaned on the works of Locke and Berkeley when formulating his metaphysics.¹⁴ Kant condensed can be read in two simple theses which will be explained in order:

1. There are two worlds of existence, the “noumenal” world of “things-in-themselves” and the “phenomenal” world of experience.
2. Since we have no access to the noumenal, all we ought to (and can) concern ourselves with is the world of experience.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), 5.

Kant divided existence into two worlds: the noumenal and the phenomenal. For him, the noumenal world was a quasi-Platonic world that exists completely external, and *inaccessible*, to humans where objects exist as “things-in-themselves;” completely indescribable and unknowable. This is the world of the essence of objects to which we paradoxically have no access to. As Bryant says of objects in Kant’s noumenal world,

[Kant] maintains that we have no access to these objects and therefore no means of determining whether, like the objects of our experience, things-in-themselves are autonomous, individual unities, or whether the things-in-themselves are, in reality, really a *thing-in-itself*, a primordial unity or One, that is then subsequently formatted or “cut up” by our minds.¹⁵

The phenomenal world, on the other hand, is the world of zebras, quarks, refrigerators, chamber pots, malls, nervous ticks, and so on. It is the world that contains the physical existence of the objects we interact with by way of the material and experiential manifestation of the “things-in-themselves.”¹⁶

When the question of what we ought to concern ourselves with came up, however, Kant’s answer broke with his dualistic conception of existence and reverted to a monistic view: we can only concern ourselves with the world of phenomena. More specifically, Kant embraced Berkeley’s radical empiricism as a starting point for a deeper understanding of the human-world correlate. Kant liked

¹⁵ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 81.

¹⁶ Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*.

Berkeley's solution to skepticism, but was worried about the solipsism inherent in radical empiricism and thus he wanted to clarify Berkeley's world. Splitting the already immaterial (and arguably completely subjective) world of Berkeley into subjective and objective sub-worlds, Kant helped cement correlation by arguing that the human mind imposes categories on reality. For Kant, while there are subjective differences between how you and I view the phenomenal world (e.g. "this stone feels warm"), there is an objective understanding between subjects in general about the *structure* of the world based on categories the mind imposes (i.e. the category of causality allows us to say "the sun warms the stone"). For example, while the specific physical existence and experience of a given object is observer dependent, the ability to gain any overall knowledge of the thing is filtered by the human-world correlate which is, supposedly, intrinsic to all humans.¹⁷ What's more, Kant's conception of the categories makes it such that the world is not structured by itself, but rather humans structure the world according to our intersubjective understandings. For example, Kant says

[u]p to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of

¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us.¹⁸

In other words, the world doesn't have an inherent structure, instead *we structure the phenomenal world*.

The poison introduced into the Kool-Aid of philosophy by Berkeley – the supposed impossibility of thinking of a thing outside of thought, or ‘the Correlationist Circle’ – was stirred in by Kant and his view that our relation to the world is all that can be known.¹⁹ With a simple, strong affirmation of his second thesis, Kant cemented correlationism in the minds of philosophers in such a way that everyone from Hegel to Heidegger, Freud to Lacan, and Pierce to Baudrillard were implicated.

1.4 Kant's Anti-Heroism

Kant's division of existence into the noumenal and phenomenal, to continue the analogy from before, can be seen as his heroic aspect in relation to philosophy as it provided the ground upon which the Object-Oriented Ontologists, to whom we will examine shortly, stand. More specifically, Kant's formulation of a world of “things-in-themselves” provided a means by which to escape the

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), [B xvi]

¹⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, [B 219].

solipsism of Berkeley and ultimately, with a few qualifications, revive the concept of material objects. Kant's cementation of correlationism by the affirmation of his second thesis and his subsequent privileging of epistemology over ontology, however, is his 'chaotic' contribution to philosophy as it served to privilege the human-world correlate. This ultimately is his anti-heroism exemplified.

All Object-Oriented Ontologists, whether they admit it or not, embrace Kant's first thesis (albeit with a few qualifications) while rejecting the second. Rejecting the second thesis, however, is easier said than done and requires some novel argumentation to resurrect idealism's arch-nemesis, realism.

Chapter 2: Realism's Revenge

2.1 Towards Realism

In the last chapter we shed light on the spectre that has haunted Western philosophy since, at least, the time of Descartes as being “correlationism” or the view that humans cannot have access to anything outside of thought and thus any truth claims we make about the world must involve a human subject looking at an object – in a word, thought and Being are codependent. We traced the history of the privileging of epistemology over ontology and ended with an examination of Kant which revealed two theses which have served as the foundation for modern philosophy: the noumenal/phenomenal distinction and the primacy of the phenomenal. As already mentioned, the first thesis is accepted by Object-Oriented Ontologist. The second, on the other hand, is staunchly rejected as it necessarily privileges the human-world correlate and leads to various forms of idealism that either outright deny the existence of material objects or subordinate objects to knowledge.²⁰

In order to deny thesis two, one must escape from the Correlationist Circle which argues that any attempt to think of objects outside of thought is impossible insofar as by thinking about them we have brought them into correlation with us. In this chapter we will examine three escapes from the Circle of Correlation which can be used to argue against correlationism and which help defend the

²⁰ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 37.

worldview called “realism.” If idealism is the view that objects in the world are dependent, in some way, on the human mind, realism is the antithesis of that: objects exist independently of, and unaffected by, consciousness. To defend realism we will examine Quentin Meillassoux’s arguments for what he calls “speculative realism.”

2.2 Meillassoux and the Arche-Fossil

Calling out correlation does not solve anything and thus, despite being named, the issue of the human-world correlate still exists and the problem raised by the Correlationist Circle seems like a serious, and perhaps insurmountable, one. Thinking of an un-thought-of tree *does* seem like an impossible task and attempting to think about something that is not a thought *does* seem to be a very serious issue. Any inability to escape the Correlationist Circle dooms us to some form of idealism.

Meillassoux, in order to resurrect idealism’s nemesis, realism, wonders about the status of what he calls “ancestral statements” which he defines as “statements about events anterior to the advent of life as well as consciousness.”²¹ In wondering about the status of these claims, he asks the following question which structures the brunt of his inquiry: “how is correlationism liable to interpret

²¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 9.

[...] ancestral statements?”²² For Meillassoux, the correlationist is not able to accept ancestral statements literally and thus, when confronted with a scientific claim such as ‘the universe is 13.5 billion years old,’ must add the caveat of “for humans”²³ insofar as the objective existence of a world prior to human givenness is supposedly non-sensical. For Meillassoux, however, the addition of the caveat and the inability to interpret ancestral statements literally is counterintuitive and antithetical to the project of science. For him, scientific statements (e.g. ‘the universe is 13.5 billion years old’) are *not* making any claims that come with a footnote that necessitates human existence, but rather a “[scientific] statement’s literal meaning is also its deepest meaning.”²⁴ In other words, when cosmologists say that the universe is 13.5 billion years old, they *literally mean* that the universe is 13.5 billion years old; *not* the correlationist view that the universe is 13.5 billion years old *for us*. Science is able, according to Meillassoux, to make ancestral claims due to the rigor of empirical science. As such, scientists can make statements about how old the universe is, when the sun formed, how far away (and thus how old) other stars are, when life likely emerged on Earth, the branching off of *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*, and so on. All these events, and countless others, are claimed to have occurred *prior to* the development of consciousness and thus occupy a special place in metaphysical and ontological inquiries. Empirical science can utilize evidence that exists independently of

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Ibid., 13.

²⁴ Ibid., 119, 122.

humans, such as the radioactive decay rate of Carbon-14, the luminosity of a given star, or the physical imprint of a long extinct species to index some event anterior to the existence of human consciousness (or givenness). These indices are what Meillassoux calls “arche-fossils” and they must be taken into consideration when making any metaphysical claims.²⁵

Summarizing the view he rejects, Meillassoux says

since Kant, objectivity is no longer defined with reference to the object in itself [...] but rather with reference to the possible universality of an objective statement. It is the intersubjectivity of the ancestral statement – the fact that it should by right be verifiable by any member of the scientific community – that guarantees its objectivity, and hence its ‘truth’. It cannot be anything else, since its referent [the ancestral claim], taken literally, is *unthinkable*. If one refuses to hypostatize the correlation [that is to say, posit God as the universal subject thereby translating the human-world correlate to a God-world correlate], it is necessary to insist that the physical universe could not *really* have preceded the existence of humans, or at least living creatures.²⁶

In other words, the truth of any scientific statement, for the correlationist, must not rest on any appeals to the nature of a piece of evidence in and of itself, but

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid., 15

must rest on the validity of evidence garnered from experiments conducted in the present that can, in theory, be verified by other scientists within the present.²⁷

Put simply and concretely, the truth of the claim that ‘radiocarbon dating shows that X rock was formed 300,000 years ago (100,000 years prior to humans)’ cannot, if one subscribes to a correlationist view, be simply due to the process of radioactive decay and the number of, say, Carbon-14 atoms left in the rock. Rather, the truth of the claim *must* come from the fact that a given scientist in a given year performed a given experiment on the rock which yielded this result that *they observed* and that this experiment is reproducible by other scientists currently, creating an intersubjective agreement about what the given finding represents. In other words, for the realist the process of radioactive decay and the number of Carbon-14 atoms in a rock would be, even if there were no humans around to test the rock, proof that the rock was indeed 300,000 years old. For the correlationist, this cannot be so and the process of radioactive decay and the number of Carbon-14 atoms left in the rock only serve as proof of its age (for us) if *we* examine and test it. In a word, the “fact is fabricated.”²⁸ As Meillassoux says regarding the correlationist’s revision of history,

[c]onfronted with the arche-fossil, *every variety of idealism converges and becomes equally extraordinary* – every variety of correlationism is exposed as an extreme idealism, one that is incapable of admitting that

²⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

²⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 18.

what science tells us about these occurrences of matter independent of humanity effectively occurred as described by science. And our correlationist then finds herself dangerously close to contemporary creationists: those quaint believers who assert today, in accordance with a ‘literal’ reading of the Bible, that the earth is no more than 6,000 years old, and who, when confronted with the much older dates arrived at by science, reply unperturbed that God also created at the same time as the earth 6,000 years ago those radioactive compounds that seem to indicate that the earth is much older than it is – in order to test the physicists’ faith. Similarly, might not the meaning of the arche-fossil be to test the philosopher’s faith in correlation, even when confronted with data which appear to point to an abyssal divide between what exists and what appears?²⁹

For scientific statements to make sense, for them to have some meaningful external referent, they must be taken in their literal, and consequently *realist*, sense. Meillassoux concludes that any ancestral statement “has a realist sense, and *only* a realist sense, or it has no sense at all;” the correlationist can have no middle ground.³⁰

Meillassoux makes a further argument against the Correlationist Circle that does not rely on empirical science. He claims that the correlationist argument

²⁹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

that “it is impossible to intelligibly think a world without men because, in the very act of thinking such a world, we are picturing ourselves as present to this world”³¹ leads to absurd conclusions. In an interesting move, he points out that the adoption of this anthropocentric epistemology – that is to say, the supposed inability to think of a world without humans – leads to counterintuitive and provably incorrect conclusions. For him, if I seriously claim that it is impossible to think of a time without humans, this means that it is impossible for me to think of a time without myself as, under a correlationist mindset, “the thought of [my] own death requires the presence of [me] thinking”³² which means that the only thing I can say without contradicting myself is that “I can only think of myself as existing, and as existing the way I exist; thus I cannot but exist, and always exist as I exist now. Consequently, my mind, if not my body, is immortal,”³³ a false proposition. Thus, if one can think of one’s own death without believing in immortality (of any sort), one can think of a time without humans, thereby escaping the Correlationist Circle.

Finally, all the aforementioned is only one side of Meillassoux’ critique, however. The other side hinges upon an explanation and understanding of what he calls “the strong model of correlationism.” For Meillassoux, the strong model of correlationism consists of two theses: first is the claim that “not only is it illegitimate to claim that we can *know* the in-itself, but *also* that it is illegitimate

³¹ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 53.

³² *Ibid.*, 54.

³³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 55.

to claim that we can at least *think* it” and second is absolutization of the first as a necessary logical law – that is to say, the absolutization of correlation.³⁴ In other words, where Kant (a weak correlationist, according to Meillassoux) makes claims that “things-in-themselves” exist, a strong correlationist says we have *no grounds whatsoever* to make any claims about anything outside the correlational circle of experience.

For Meillassoux, another major impact correlationism has is on absolutes which can, for our purposes, be understood as meta-concepts outside the correlational circle of experience. As Meillassoux says, correlationism “culminates in the disappearance of the pretension to *think* any absolutes, *but not in the disappearance of absolutes*”³⁵ as no arguments can be made against them. For him, this move “legitimizes *all* those discourses that claim to access an absolute”³⁶ insofar as, if the strong correlationist wants to be intellectually honest, she must stand by her words and *not* make any claims about anything outside the Circle of Correlation. The implication of this is that those who follow the logic of strong correlationism cannot make any offensive claims against individuals who claim knowledge of an absolute *apart from* repeating their argument that one cannot have knowledge of, or even think about, anything outside the Circle of Correlation. When faced with the zealot who claims knowledge of an absolute,

³⁴ Ibid., 35, 37.

³⁵ Ibid., 44.

³⁶ Ibid.

the correlationist and her argument with the zealot becomes akin to a child yelling at a wall; there is no argumentative interaction.

To put the argument more concretely, strong correlationism implies that we can never speak *rationally* about questions outside of any possible experience. What this means is that rather than destroying irrationality and absurdity, correlationism has made all metaphysical truth claims about absolutes *equally* irrational (as they are all outside our experience) and thus it becomes impossible to prove or disprove one over another. In other words, since we cannot speak rationally about a world outside of our experience, the claims that a) a magical flying gnome named Anthony created the universe 300,000 years ago and b) the universe was formed from the Big Bang 13.5 billion years ago are *both equally legitimate* insofar as we cannot make rational metaphysical arguments for or against the absolute truth of either and thus *both ought to be treated the same in our understanding of the cosmos*. In other words, if one subscribes to a belief in strong correlationism, the metaphysical truth of each statement cannot be weighed and is thus treated as equal while the content of the statement – that is to say, whether a gnome created the universe or whether the universe was created in the Big Bang – becomes subject to an individual’s predilection. In a word, the correlationist position makes it such that empirical science is no more “objective” than young Earth creationists’ musings.

Ultimately, Quentin Meillassoux’ contribution to modern philosophy can best be summarized by way of an analogy. In Hans Christian Andersen’s 1837 fairy tale, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, a vain emperor (as I’m sure any modern

reader is aware) commissions a new suit to be made. Two con-men decide that they can trick him by saying that the fibers are invisible to anyone unfit for their social role when, in actuality, they are not using any fibers at all. The king, confident in his social position and eager to show off his power agrees to let the ‘tailors’ work. As the tailors work, neither the emperor nor his servants can see the suit (as there are no fibers, of course), but dare not say anything for fear of seeming unfit. Finally, the ‘suit’ is done and the emperor dons it as he walks out of the palace. The townsfolk, not wanting to appear unfit either, say nothing until a child, unaware of the fragility of the situation, yells out the obvious; ‘the emperor has no clothes!’ If we were to rewrite Andersen’s classic in the context of modern philosophy, Kant could be read as the emperor asserting the primacy of experience and the unknowability of things-in-themselves, the cohort of post-Kantian modern philosophers could be read as the townsfolk who see the world of objects around them but are too scared of looking stupid – in this case, being called a naïve realist – to say anything, and Meillassoux plays the role of the child who yells out the obvious; ‘Look! Real objects!’

2.3 Object-Oriented Ontology and the Return of the Noumenal

It is, at this point, time to return to our anti-hero Kant and his two theses: the noumenal/phenomenal distinction and the primacy of the phenomenal. Before examining specific Ontologists, we must briefly examine why Kant’s first thesis is important. As discussed above, Kant attempted to split existence into two

worlds, the noumenal world of “things-in-themselves” and the phenomenal world of things as they manifest to us. Kant’s goal was to find a way out of the skepticism and solipsism that followed from strict Cartesian radical doubt as well as establishing an *a priori* system of access. In order to help solve the issue, Kant embraced the empirical views of Locke and Berkeley synthesizing them and creating his conception of the world of phenomena while still escaping skepticism by positing an external world of “things-in-themselves” – that is to say, a quasi-Platonic realm of objects – that is transcendent and yet unknowable.

Object-Oriented Ontology, in rejecting empiricism and strict phenomenology, doesn’t want to shrink back into the skepticism the moderns tried to avoid, and thus it needs ground to stand upon. While Kant’s primacy of the phenomenal is undesirable insofar as it is correlationist, the noumenal/phenomenal distinction, with a few qualifications, serves as the ground upon which to build a new metaphysics. While Object-Oriented Ontology borrows Kant’s distinction, it does not lift it directly from the pages of Kant’s *Critique*. Instead, qualifications are added to our understanding of the noumenal. Although the qualifications vary from Ontologist to Ontologist, as we shall see in the coming chapters, there are two uniting threads. First is that the noumenal no longer becomes unthinkable, and second is that the phenomenal doesn’t have primacy. More specifically, the noumenal world of “things-in-themselves” can largely be read as the world of objective existence – that is to say, the world where objects *really do*, as per our understanding of realism from Meillassoux, exist – while the phenomenal world can be read as a thing’s relation to, and

experience with, objects. In a word, the noumenal is the world of existence without consciousness while the phenomenal is the intersubjective experience of the world by objects of all kinds.

Chapter 3: Graham Harman

3.1 Graham Harman: Analyst of Objects

If Kant, continuing our metaphor from before, is philosophy's Joker, then Graham Harman is Batman. Where Kant wanted to reduce the world to its relationship with human thought, Harman wants to imagine a world of object-object interactions that can be completely independent of human thought, where Kant can be read as endorsing transcendental idealism, Harman wants to make realism a metaphysically viable position, and where Kant wants to say the noumenal is unknowable, Harman wants to make the noumenal the Real.

Since Harman's work spans two decades and his views have changed over time, I find it helpful to split his work into three categories that are, hopefully, easily digestible: "early Harman," which includes his works from 1997-1999, "middle Harman," which includes his works from 2002-2008, and "current Harman," which includes his works from 2011 onwards. (While there are obviously skipped years, were a more complete survey of Harman specifically to be conducted, the works not utilized here could still be accurately placed within one of the three categories. That task, which is much more detailed than the one we have in front of us, shall be left to a future biographer, however.)

3.1.1 Early Harman (1997-1999)

The philosophy of Graham Harman, “Object-Oriented Philosophy” as he called it in a 1999 lecture,³⁷ spawns from an openly unorthodox reading of the 20th century juggernaut, Martin Heidegger. Harman takes Heidegger’s tool-analysis found at the beginning of *Being and Time* and expands upon it in novel ways. Heidegger’s original analysis, simplified, goes something like this: our interactions with objects in the world are not interactions based on sitting back and gazing at objects and describing them – in Heideggerian terms, this is called “presence-at-hand” (*Vorhandenheit*) – but instead are based on ‘pragmatic’ uses of objects such that we don’t notice them – in Heideggerian terms, this is called “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*). For example, in building a house, as we are nailing shingles onto the roof we don’t think about the hammer upon which we are relying – that is to say, it “is not *grasped* thematically as an occurring Thing”³⁸ – but rather it recedes out of view, so to speak, withdrawing from us until something happens to force it into view: namely, it breaks.

For Harman, the tool-analysis “is applicable not just to widely-recognized examples of handyman’s tools (hammers, drills), but to every possible entity”³⁹ insofar as every entity withdraws in its own way. As a human, I rely on an unimaginably large network of objects all the time that are not at the forefront of my attention until they either fail or I start to consciously think about them. For

³⁷ See Graham Harman, “Object-Oriented Philosophy (1999),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 93-104.

³⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York City: Harper and Row, 1962), 98.

³⁹ Graham Harman, “Phenomenology and the Theory of Equipment (1997),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 6.

example, as I type this I am relying on my heart to keep beating, my tendons to retain their tension as I type, the floor upon which my chair sits to remain solid, my synapses to keep firing to continue my train of thought, the liquid crystals in my computer monitor to polarize light so I can see it, etc. All these things that I had taken for granted prior to writing that sentence come to the forefront of my mind while other objects recede into ultimate darkness. What's more, however, is that even if I focus my attention on the Swingline stapler holding my book open and stare at it, I do not exhaust its Being insofar as there are some aspects that either withdraw from my attention or are untouchable. In other words, when I engage in a relationship with an object, I am never *fully* engaged with that object. To be more specific, Harman utilizes the example of the sun. In order for the sun to be able to be 'used,' it must already be capable of having some effect. We can develop a theory of radiation and warmth from the sun, but this only scratches the surface of what the sun-being *is*. The sun is in multiple different relationships with, arguably, an infinite number of different objects and they each interact with each other in different ways while actualizing different potentialities.⁴⁰

The key point for the rest of our discussion is where Harman breaks with Heideggerian orthodoxy. In a move most Heideggerians would find unpalatable, Harman asserts that all objects are tools, or what he calls "tool-beings," capable of having *interactions and 'experiences.'* As Harman says, "[r]eadiness-to-hand does

⁴⁰ Graham Harman, "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit* (1999)," in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 51-54.

not mean ‘usable by people’, but rather ‘sheer performance of an effect.’”⁴¹

Harman argues that when a tool breaks (or, more generally, is thrust into the forefront) it is encountered in what he calls an “as-structure.” When the hammer breaks, for example, it is not a hammer for hammering nails but is now seen as a hammer *as such*; the hammer simply *is*. What’s crucial about this moment is not that the object becomes foregrounded, but that other aspects of it withdraw. For example, when a hammer breaks we no longer engage with the productive force of the hammer (that potentiality withdraws), instead we engage with the unproductive force. Despite our attempts to analyze the hammer, there is always an aspect that we miss; a part that cannot be catalogued, and this feature that withdraws infinitely is the hammer *as such*. What’s important about the aspect of infinite withdrawal and the finitude of access is that it means “[t]here is no turbocharged version of the ‘as’ to which humans would have privileged access.”⁴² When a chair is encountered as a chair, “[t]he human being is no closer to the chair ‘as’ chair than a dog or butterfly can be: for all these entities, the tool-being, the chair-effect, has withdrawn forever into the invisible kingdom of efficacy.”⁴³ A further point that ought to help clarify Harman’s statement is this: the fact that the same object has different interactions with different things means that objects encounter one another differently. A snowflake that lands upon a frozen lake encounters the lake *as* frozen and thus the snowflake doesn’t melt. On

⁴¹ Harman, “Phenomenology and the Theory of Equipment (1997),” 8.

⁴² Harman, “The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead (1997),” 30.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the opposite side, a snowflake that lands upon hot asphalt encounters the asphalt *as* hot and it causes the snowflake to melt. The snowflake simply encounters the various obstacles *as* obstacles. For example, a leaf running up against a wall encounters the solidity of the wall; it does not encounter the wall's color or smell, etc. Further, it does not exhaust the wall's solidity as the wall remains solid after the leaf has landed. The leaf touching the wall

does not exhaust the wall's reality. It does not shatter against it, nor does it engage in chemical reaction with the materials that bind the stones together. Other entities might well do these things, thereby invoking forces in the wall that the leaf never remotely touches. This is the real meaning of the "as": one entity always encounters another only from a certain standpoint, only liberates *some* of its energies.⁴⁴

Harman then identifies two important characteristics of tool-beings: invisibility and totality. 'Invisibility' refers to the fact that all tools operate in the background of whatever is going on. The pressure pads under my keyboard keys operate invisibly as I'm typing this in the very same way as rivets on a cruise ship operate unnoticed by the lounging passengers or as absorbed oxygen in water is diffused into a fish's gills. All the action and grandeur of objects occurs in the background of a given context. For Harman, what this means is that "the tool isn't

⁴⁴ Harman, "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit* (1999)," 58-59.

‘used’; it *is*.”⁴⁵ Further, ‘totality’ refers to the fact that tool-beings operate in a given context and are not stranded on their own isolated islands. Although we will soon see him changing his mind on this, early Harman argues that “[n]o tool operates in a vacuum; ontology allows for no action at a distance”⁴⁶ and asserts that all tool-beings are enmeshed in a network of other tool-beings. In a beautiful passage summing up this point, Harman says “[t]he most irrelevant nail or square of asphalt is already shipwrecked in an environment of cement, bridge-cable, vehicles, tremors, and random vibrations.”⁴⁷

For Harman, the view that objects interact with other objects *in the same way* as humans interact with objects constitutes what can be called the univocity of the ‘as-such structure.’ To understand this univocity in more detail, we will examine two brief examples, one of my own devising and one of Harman’s. Take, if you will, a pile of sand one-foot-high on a beach on the one hand and a fjord off the coast of Norway on the other. A three-foot-high wave encounters the pile of sand as functionally nothing. The sand does not obstruct the wave’s path in the slightest and will only have the most miniscule of effects on the wave’s structure. The wave continues its trajectory onto the beach despite the pile of sand. The same wave, however, encounters the fjord as something much more. The wave breaks upon the rocky side, its path stopped by thousand-year-old stone. The

⁴⁵ Graham Harman, “The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead (1997),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 25.

⁴⁶ Harman, “The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead (1997),” 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

wave is destroyed in a violent act of sea vs. land while the fjord barely notices it has been poked. Harman's example is thus:

Imagine that a three-ounce weight and a one-ton weight are both dropped from the same height onto an empty house. The smaller weight encounters the house on some primitive level "as" a barrier, as an obstacle on its downward flight. The larger weight will hardly be resisted at all, and might pick up only a couple of scratches as it smashes the house to the ground; thus, it runs up against the house "as" a contemptible pseudo-barrier.⁴⁸

To further solidify his argument that all objects act upon each other in the same kind of way – that is to say, the differences in the ways they act upon each other are differences in *degree*, not in *kind* – Harman utilizes and expands upon Alfred North Whitehead's concept of "prehension" which Harman defines as the "relation between actual entities."⁴⁹ For Harman, actual entities (objects) have a potentially unlimited number of characteristics which they project into the world around them. As objects interact, orprehend, they do so in such a way that the entirety of their Being is not exhausted as "[t]he full content of an actual entity is irrelevant to the other entities, which limit it to a specific site in their experience."⁵⁰ In other words, when fire burns cotton, it doesn't 'care' about the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁰ Harman, "The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead (1997)," 38.

color, shape, smell, etc. of the cotton. All the fire cares about is the materiality of the cotton such that it is flammable; all other characteristics of the cotton withdraw into the void.

3.1.2 Middle Harman (2002-2008)

The period of “middle Harman,” as we shall call it, begins in 2002 when Harman and his comrade Manuel DeLanda openly call themselves realists.⁵¹ During this period, although Harman’s writings cover a much wider range of topics than simply the tool-analysis (e.g. he begins to write on other thinkers, namely Bruno Latour and DeLanda), Heidegger’s analysis still remains at the forefront. There are, however, new insights and changes in Harman’s overall ontological view that must be examined.

While metaphysics has typically been met with eye-rolling in the age of modern philosophy, Harman wants to try to revive it as a legitimate philosophical discipline. He begins his project by isolating two problems in contemporary continental philosophy that he views as being closely related. The first is the privileging of philosophies of access over philosophies of Being – that is to say, the subordination of ontology to epistemology – while the second is the related view that the intertwined concepts of substance, essence, independent Being, etc.

⁵¹ See Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 210 endnote 57.

are naïve and outdated. For Harman, these are the implicit dogmas of continental philosophy.⁵² Harman attempts to push back against these views by extending Heidegger's tool-analysis and adding a critique of theory. For him, objects aren't 'used,' rather they simply *are*. Further, understanding objects as potentially useful tools is equivalent to reducing their Being to a caricature – that is to say, “to reduce [the object] to the very limited way in which it appears *to us*.”⁵³ For most Heideggerian scholars, the rejection of theory in favor of praxis is relatively uncontroversial insofar as it follows the pragmatist reading of Heidegger (one where tools are utilized by humans but simultaneously go unnoticed as they function properly) which seems so common. Harman, however, deviates from this view by equally critiquing both praxis and theory. For him, just as theoretical descriptions of objects reduce them down to a caricature, the physical use of objects does the same. For Harman, this caricaturization is tantamount to what he calls “objectification” which is “[t]o become explicitly aware of an object.”⁵⁴ While pure praxis ought to imply pretheoretical usage of something, Harman notes that pretheoretical, or pragmatic, usage of an object is intrinsically different for various people. Speaking of a crowded barroom, he points out that different people objectify the objects in the room, while being engrossed in conversation, in different ways. “Some of us may find it cramped and cold, while others may sense

⁵² Graham Harman, “The Revival of Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy (2002),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 107.

⁵³ Harman, “The Revival of Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy (2002),” 112.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

that it is too hot,”⁵⁵ he says. The Being of the room is “tacitly” objectified differently for different people *without* any theoretical understanding of the room.

The examination becomes even more interesting, however. For Harman, it’s not just sentient creatures that objectify objects, but other objects do so as well. A white hot flame burning a red piece of cotton does not care about the color of the cotton (nor does the cotton care about the color of the flame, assuming it’s above a certain temperature), it simply reduces its experience with the cotton down to the materiality, and thus the flammability, of the cotton. For photons being ejected from the sun and striking the cotton and fire, however, the materiality (apart from some basic qualities such as solidity) of the cotton does not matter. What matters for the photon is the pigmentation of the dye in the cotton as that is what affects the wavelength of the photon that is reflected back off the object. As such, the interactions between these various objects objectify each other in specific ways that are ultimately irreducible to anything else. For the fire, the color of the cotton withdraws while for the photon, the materiality of the cotton withdraws. What’s more, Harman also claims that qualities don’t define an object. Color can change, materiality can morph, temperature can transmute while still leaving the object the same. It is at this point that Harman attempts to revive a lost word in philosophy by saying “[t]o describe the reality of a thing, irreducible

⁵⁵ Ibid., 113.

to any of its relations or qualities, I can think of no better term than the traditional word *substance*.”⁵⁶

Finally, we begin to get Harman’s definition of what an object is.

Although the definition changes as his metaphysical views develop, we know a few things about objects already. We know that they are “irreducible to any objectification,”⁵⁷ and thus are “loaded with unexpressed qualities.”⁵⁸ Given this, we know that they “far exceed their interactions with other objects,”⁵⁹ but we do not quite know where their excess lies. Further, we are treated to a preliminary definition of substance – “that unknown reality of a thing that resists being exhausted by any perceptions of it or relations with it”⁶⁰ – as well as a final point that is slightly, although necessarily, fuzzy: Harman’s view of vicarious, or indirect, causation between substances as “no substance ever comes in contact with another at all.”⁶¹ For him, since all objects caricature one another, when one thing interacts with another, what comes into contact with the other object is not the thing-itself but rather the other object’s caricature of the object, and vice versa.⁶² For example, under this view when fire burns cotton the fire *in-itself* is not actually burning the cotton *in-itself*, but rather the relevant qualities – in this

⁵⁶ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁶¹ Ibid., 119.

⁶² Ibid.

case the flammability/materiality of the cotton and the heat of the fire – are interacting; the things-in-themselves remain withdrawn. This last point marks another profound shift from early to middle Harman. Where early Harman made it clear that “[n]o tool operates in a vacuum; ontology allows for no action at a distance,”⁶³ middle Harman patently rejects this view in favor of one where there is a lack of direct connection. This issue of indirect causation does not go away, but rather persists and is found in more of the works of middle Harman.⁶⁴ For our purposes however, we will bracket the question of indirect, or vicarious, causation until the next section on current Harman. Instead, we shall return our focus to objects and their ontology.

Harman, in an unsent letter, adds a bit more nuance to his definition of objects. For him, “object” is a very broad category of thing used “to designate anything with some sort of unitary reality.”⁶⁵ What’s more interesting is that during this period, Harman does not rigidly distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ objects. For example, Harman says that “[s]ome objects may be real in the usual sense of external physical existence, but others may not. Donald Duck is no less an object than a pillar of granite.”⁶⁶ As well shall see, it is Harman’s views about the rigidity of the distinction between “real” and “unreal” objects that, in

⁶³ Harman, “The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead (1997),” 25.

⁶⁴ See Graham Harman, “Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities (2006),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 122-139.

⁶⁵ Graham Harman, “Space, Time, and Essence: An Object-Oriented Approach (2008),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 147.

⁶⁶ Harman, “Space, Time, and Essence: An Object-Oriented Approach (2008),” 147.

part, differentiates him from other Object-Oriented Ontologists. As we move into the next section, let us keep in mind what Harman says are his five rules about objects:

1. Relative size does not matter: an atom is no more an object than a skyscraper.
2. Simplicity does not matter: an electron is no more an object than a piano.
3. Durability does not matter: a soul is no more an object than cotton candy.
4. Naturalness does not matter: helium is no more an object than plutonium.
5. Reality does not matter: mountains are no more objects than hallucinated mountains.⁶⁷

3.1.3 Current Harman (2011-present)

While Graham Harman has written at least 12 books, his most famous potentially being his expansion of his doctoral dissertation, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, I believe that his 2011 book, *The Quadruple Object*, serves as a manifesto for Object-Oriented Philosophy. Where

⁶⁷ Ibid., 147-148.

Das Kapital is Marx' *magnum opus* and *The Communist Manifesto* is his legacy, I would apply the same categories to *Tool-Being* and *The Quadruple Object*, respectively. Thus, let us turn our attention to *The Quadruple Object*.

In addition to the Correlationist Circle outlined above, Harman views philosophies that reject an object-oriented approach as either “undermining” or “overmining” objects. Briefly, philosophies that undermine objects are those that attempt to reduce objects solely to their constituents. For example, strict scientific naturalism is largely an ontology built upon undermining objects insofar as the book opener to my left would be described not as a book opener *as such* but as being made of wood which is, in turn, made of cellulose, hemicellulose, and other molecules. Each cellulose molecule would then be described not as a cellulose molecule *as such*, but rather as something made up of 6 carbon atoms, 10 hydrogen atoms, and 5 oxygen atoms. These atoms, of course, would not be described as atoms *as such*, but would be further reduced down to protons and neutrons and electrons which would be reduced down further, and so forth. In a word, in undermining philosophies, “[o]nly what is basic can be real.”⁶⁸ Philosophies that overmine objects, on the other hand, attempt to relate objects solely to the role they play in larger structures (particularly of the mind). For example, Michel Foucault’s understanding of power relations examines objects – in this case physical objects as well as relations – by expanding them upward and seeing what work they do in constructing larger social systems of power. The

⁶⁸ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), 8.

prison, for example, is not viewed as a prison *in-itself*, but as part of a larger system of power-play in which all prisons, humans' views of prisons and punishment, etc. are subjected to. In a word, "objects are important only insofar as they are manifested to the mind, or are part of some concrete event that affects other objects as well"⁶⁹ – a fundamentally correlationist position.

An offshoot of philosophies that overmine are those characterized by "relationism" – that is to say, the position that claims that "nothing is real unless it has some sort of effect on other things."⁷⁰ For Harman, this view of objects is flawed as it cannot account for numerous structures of reality and the linkages of relations. For example, a house that is viewed by multiple entities enters into a separate relation with each of them and as such it becomes hard to claim the house that is in relation to, say, my dog Max is the same house that is in relation to me.⁷¹

From here, Harman synthesizes the views of both Edmund Husserl and Heidegger when he dichotomizes the kinds of objects that exist, distinguishing between what he calls "sensual" and "real" objects. For Harman, a "sensual object" is the same thing as a simplified Husserlian "intentional object." In classical phenomenology, thoughts and actions are directed *at* something. When I think about the anger my Kawaii Cube Batman sitting atop my monitor displays

⁶⁹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

in his stitched face, I am thinking about *some* object. When I shift my focus to the Yoo-Hoo can sitting on the other side of my desk, however, the intentional object – that is to say, the aspect of the object that I experience – of the Kawaii Cube Batman disappears into oblivion. Harman further expands upon the concept of intentional objects by pointing out that they are a representation of an object that changes depending on different factors or “profiles.” At the end of the day, however, intentional objects are mind-dependent with Harman likely noting that sensual objects are a mind’s caricature of real objects.⁷² In a word, sensual objects are the objects formed during an interaction with real objects or qualities.

On the other side of the ‘object coin’, there are real objects, according to Harman. The real object, for Harman, is the object that forever withdraws from relations. As I use a hammer, I am interacting with the sensual object the hammer-being “gives off” while the hammer *as such* withdraws entirely. Nodding back to Harman’s initial reading of the tool-analysis in 3.1.1, the object’s essence – that is to say, what the object *is* – withdraws as I try to theorize about it or use it and it is this essence that makes up the real object.⁷³ As Harman says, “[w]hile there may be an infinity of objects in the cosmos, they come in only two kinds: the real object that withdraws from all experience, and the sensual object that exists *only* in experience.”⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid., 20-26.

⁷³ Ibid., 35-49.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 49.

Thus far, however, we have only looked at the coin of objectivity. For Harman, however, there are two coins of existence, the second of which is the coin of qualities. As with the dichotomization of objects, there is also a dichotomization between “sensual qualities” and “real qualities.” Sensual qualities are those qualities which do not withdraw from sensual objects; they lie within the realm of experience. When I utilize my mouse, the texture, solidity, mobility, etc. are qualities that I experience and become a sort of appendage for the sensual object of the mouse that I am experiencing as I use it. The mouse itself withdraws forever, but the relevant aspects of my usage become foregrounded. Since Harman views objects as being able to have experiences (in some form), the relationship between cotton and fire can be read as an analog to the relationship between my hand and my mouse. Specifically, when fire burns cotton, the real cotton withdraws while the flammability of the cotton engages with the heat of the fire. The aspects of each that are not relevant for that given interaction withdraw into nothingness while the sensual qualities associated with the action are foregrounded and are being experienced by one another.

The *real* qualities of an object, however, are according to Harman, ungraspable. Revisiting Husserl, all sensual objects have an *eidōs* that cannot be grasped by perceiving the object. When we remove the qualities of the object that we utilize, there is something underneath that we don't have sensual access to: the object's “eidetic features.” For Husserl, “the *eidōs* of an object is incapable of sensual presence; we have access to it only through so-called categorical

intuition.”⁷⁵ Harman adds, however, that the concept of categorical intuition does not imply that we can know the qualities of a thing as they actually are, just that we can know something. Further, the only way we can ‘access’ the *eidos* – that is to say, “qualities crucial for [an] object to be acknowledged as what it is” –⁷⁶ of an object is by way of indirect reference: allusion and metaphor.⁷⁷ Thus we are left with four poles of existence: sensual objects, real objects, sensual qualities, and real qualities.

It is at this point that we must return to the question (raised in 3.1.2) of indirect or vicarious causation. To recapitulate as well as restate the issue: in contrast with early Harman’s claim that “[n]o tool operates in a vacuum; ontology allows for no action at a distance,”⁷⁸ middle to current Harman, in giving an account of the features of objects, recognizes that if objects necessarily withdraw from one another, then causation becomes an issue because it is unclear how objects interact. When a red billiard ball hits a green billiard ball, the balls, according to Harman, withdraw from one another. More specifically, the redness of one ball has no impact on the outcome of the collision. The green ball, when coming into contact with the red ball, caricatures the ball by encountering only its solidity; the rest of the ball is irrelevant to the interaction. However, the solidity cannot be said to be essential to the ball’s Being as the ball could be heated up to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁸ Harman, “The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead (1997),” 25.

the point of being malleable without it becoming a different object. In other words, the solidity of the red ball is merely a sensual quality that interacts with the sensual qualities of the green ball. The real qualities, as well as the real objects themselves, withdraw from one another both for the reason described above as well as because there is always more to the ball than is expressed in a given relation. The withdrawal of the object as well as its real qualities sparks a problem about causation about which Harman notes that “no substance ever comes in contact with another at all”.⁷⁹ The question becomes thus: *how* do objects make contact or affect one another at all?

The obvious answer to the problem of indirect causation seems to be that things do not touch directly, but rather it is the qualities of things that interact; this is the solution Francisco Suárez posits.⁸⁰ This answer, however, proves to be problematic for Harman insofar as it doesn’t really explain much (namely, *how* the qualities interact) and there are different levels of qualities (e.g. real vs. sensual) that must be accounted for. Further, Harman argues that “[a]n object is not a bundle of qualities”⁸¹ – that is to say, there is something deeper since qualities can change while the object remains the same. This means that, at best, some effects of an object interact with other effects. The next seemingly obvious answer to the problem is that objects only partly interact with one another. This answer seems promising as the tool-analysis elucidated how “humans have partial

⁷⁹ Harman, “The Revival of Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy (2002),” 119.

⁸⁰ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 71.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

access to hammers while using them,”⁸² but the partial-interaction solution is unsatisfactory for Harman as well. The reason for this is twofold: first, the real object cannot be thought of as even having parts, and second, things aren’t made up of X number of qualities where interaction occurs when Y% touch Y% of another object’s X number of qualities.⁸³ Thus we must ask the question again: *how* do objects make contact or affect one another at all? For Harman, the ‘solution’ lies in the sensual realm. As we saw above, while real objects necessarily withdraw from contact, they trigger sensual objects and sensual qualities and, since the sensual realm can only exist within the context of experience between at least two objects, that must be the site of contact.⁸⁴ We will explore this more momentarily, but the lingering question is if the sensual realm is the site of contact, how do changes in the sensual objects/qualities (e.g. the ripping of a piece of paper) lead to changes in the real objects/qualities? This is a problem that will, eventually, require a solution.

Before moving on to weirder interactions, however, it seems necessary to define four key terms in Harman’s thought: time, space, essence, and *eidos* (although we took a cursory look at how essence and *eidos* relate to Harman’s sensuality, it is time to examine, more in-depth, what he means by the terms). For Harman, time – that is to say, the “interplay of stability and change”⁸⁵ – is the

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 73-74.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 100.

relation between sensual objects and sensual qualities.⁸⁶ To understand this, we must think about temporality in commonplace understanding. We typically understand time as an ‘arrow’ where things change from one moment to the next. If we unpack this understanding and break it down further, all this really is is a shifting of qualities that we experience from one moment to another. In other words, the change in things from one moment to the next is the shifting of the qualities of a thing we experience (sensual qualities) in relation to the thing we experience (sensual object). Space, for Harman, is bit more complex as his definition works from the understanding that space is a site of “relation *and* non-relation.”⁸⁷ As he points out, although I am sitting at my desk in Ohio, “I am not entirely without relation to the Japanese city of Osaka, since in principle I could travel there on any given day. But this relation can never be total, since I do not currently touch the city, and even when I travel to stand in the exact center of Osaka I will not exhaust its reality.”⁸⁸ Given the relational and non-relational aspects of space, Harman notes that space can be thought of as the interplay between real objects and their associated sensual qualities.⁸⁹ The reason space is categorized as such is because the ‘profile’ (sensual qualities) of a real object will necessarily be different from the withdrawn real object itself. Further, Harman goes on to bring two more “sisters” into the mix: essence and *eidōs*. For Harman,

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

the essence of a thing is something that is “never accessible to human experience”⁹⁰ as it involves the two poles that infinitely withdraw. For him, essence is the relationship between real qualities and real objects.⁹¹ Since essence is necessarily inaccessible to us, there is not much more to say. The only other “sister” we have some kind of access to is *eidōs*. As mentioned above, *eidōs* is the aspect of an object that we only have an indirect relation to via metaphor or allusion. *Eidōs* is, fundamentally, the relationship between the sensual objects of experience and the real qualities of the real object that the sensual object indexes.⁹² *Eidōs* is, in other words, the ‘missing link’ between changes in sensual objects and changes in real objects. An understanding of space, time, essence, and *eidōs* helps provide us with some framework for understanding the mysterious nature of vicarious causation.

What’s more, it’s not just objects that interact indirectly, but the qualities objects have do as well, for sensual qualities must interact with sensual and real objects and real qualities must interact with sensual and real objects. Harman calls the processes by which these interactions occur fission and fusion as some qualities are intrinsic to some objects while others are not. Sensual objects, for example, necessarily have sensual qualities as they are entirely interaction-dependent. As one experiences sensual qualities from a real thing, a sensual object is formed and thus the two are interwoven. Separating them, as would occur if

⁹⁰ Ibid., 101.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

something is not what it seems and thus takes on new qualities in light of new information is what Harman calls *confrontation* and is an act of fission between the original sensual object and its original sensual qualities.⁹³ Another type of fission, *theory*, (one of the vaguest) occurs when a sensual object is created and it sheds its real qualities into the netherworld.⁹⁴ Fusion occurs on two fronts, the connection between real objects and sensual qualities, and real objects and real qualities. In the case of the former, when utilizing a tool, a sensual image is formed while the real object recedes, but the sensual qualities that come with the formed sensual object must fuse with the real object in order to give them meaning; Harman calls this *allure*.⁹⁵ Finally, and perhaps the vaguest of them all, is the fusion between real objects and real qualities. Harman remarks that “the object itself does not have its own essential features,”⁹⁶ – that is to say, there is not *one set* of qualities that make up an object, rather “each object must have a *multitude* of real traits.”⁹⁷ From this, select traits that become real qualities of an object must be fused with the real object. The question this obviously raises is from whence do the essential features come? Regardless, Harman terms the fusing

⁹³ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

of a real object with its real qualities (the creation of essence) *causation*.⁹⁸ The clearest these concepts get is in the following long quotation from Harman:

The basis of this book are the two kinds of objects and two kinds of qualities: real and sensual in both cases. What was interesting was the realization that qualities need not marry objects of their own kind. A real object obviously needs real qualities, as Leibniz and some of the Scholastics saw. And a sensual object is always linked with shifting sensual qualities, as Husserl's phenomenology convincingly established. But there were also the two cases of exotic mixture. For real objects are associated with sensual qualities too, as seen from Heidegger's tool-analysis in which the real object hides behind its accessible surface traits. And with equal strangeness, sensual objects were also found to have real qualities, as in Husserl's insight that sensual objects have an *eidos* made up of genuine real qualities, as opposed to the mere shifting perceptual adumbrations whose qualities are always sensual.⁹⁹

Ultimately, I think the question of relationality between the four poles of real object/quality and sensual object/quality has yet to be fully answered.

Harman does, however, provide us with a map for understanding the interplay between space, time, essence, and *eidos* and confrontation, theory, allure, and causation. I'm not entirely convinced that Harman's "ontography," as he calls it,

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

is fully fleshed out by the end of *The Quadruple Object*, but the insights he provides helps to push us towards a deeper understanding of objects and his notes about the poles of existence, while likely still a work in progress by Harman, give one much to think about and will be vital in the formulation of my own ontology of objects.

3.2 Harman's Ontology

It is at this point that we must discuss what I shall call the 'topology of ontology.' More specifically, what I mean by this is how objects are viewed as existing – that is to say, as strict constituents/correlated entities of other entities or as having an independent existence – and whether some objects 'exist more' than others. Before continuing, however, it must be made clear that discussions of ontological topology are *not* discussions about what counts as an object but rather *are* discussions about how things exist – that is to say, whether fictional/non-physical entities are less real than their physical counterparts. More concretely, ontological topology examines questions such as “is Donald Duck any more real than Donald Trump?” or “is the memory of Grandma's pumpkin pie that is triggered by the smell of cinnamon more real than an ice cube melting on the salt flats of Utah?” To answer these questions, we must understand what “real” means. If real means physically existing, for example, answering the aforementioned questions is easy. Surely, however, that cannot be the definition of “real.” Familial bonds, for example, are real. Members of one's family are

granted special privileges that friends are not. Familiarity, however, is just a concept, a construct of human devising. There are obviously biological linkages, but one can be married into a family and be afforded the same privileges, thus it cannot be *purely* biological. If a concept, a social construct no less, can be considered so real as to trigger State granted privileges, then what is the fundamental difference between it and an ice cube? Or it and a memorable childhood cartoon? The memory of the childhood cartoon, while not necessarily triggering State granted privileges, can have a very real effect on an individual. It can trigger trauma if associated with a traumatic event, thoughts of home, or it can cause a simple smile. Thinking of ideas in this way, it seems difficult to deny that they are just as real as physical objects (especially when they can be motivation, in the form of ideologies, to commit massive amounts of violence). This equality of existence is, ultimately, the thesis of what is called ‘flat ontology.’ Flat ontology can be read as an ontology “made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not ontological status.”¹⁰⁰ To be more specific, flat ontology affirms that “entities differ among themselves, yet they do not have the characteristic of being ‘more’ or ‘less’ beings[.]”¹⁰¹ Phrased differently, the thesis of flat ontology is that all things (e.g. ideas, concepts, numbers, physical objects, fictitious entities, etc.) equally exist – that is to say the

¹⁰⁰ Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science & Virtual Philosophy* cited in Levi Bryant, “The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology” in *The Speculative Turn* (Victoria: re.press, 2011), 269.

¹⁰¹ Levi Bryant, “The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology,” in *The Speculative Turn* (Victoria: re.press, 2011), 269-270.

number 7 is no less real than a bar of soap – despite the existence and degree of spatio-temporal differences, metaphysical differences, physical differences, etc. between them. Further, constituent parts of a thing (e.g. 1, 2, 3, and 6 making up the set of the number 6 or parts of a chair) exist equally when compared to their whole. In a word, flat ontology affirms that all things equally exist *despite* the vast differences between them. Donald Trump is no more ‘real’ than Donald Duck.

Thus the question becomes, is Harman’s ontology “flat” in this sense? I have found little textual support for claims to either a flat or non-flat ontology (what I have found will be summarized momentarily) and when I asked Harman in 2016 whether his ontology was flat, he replied by saying he endorses a “quasi-flat ontology.” This seems consistent with the few pieces of textual evidence I have found and with his changing metaphysics. Early Harman made no specific claims regarding the topology of his ontology as the focus was primarily centered around revolutionizing Heidegger’s tool-analysis. In middle Harman, however, we find a few references to ontological topology such as his five rules about objects referenced in 3.1.2 and his comment regarding Donald Duck and granite. Further, in a discussion of object-object relations in 2006 Harman said “we should be willing to say that any relation between two things at all is on the same footing.”¹⁰²

Despite those notes, current Harman seems more in line with his comment to me. While agreeing that the tensions between real and sensual qualities and

¹⁰² Harman, “Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities (2006),” 135.

their objective counterparts “encompass both real and fictitious entities,”¹⁰³ a hierarchy of Being seems to now be present as exemplified by a later comment where Harman says “the complaint might be heard that a neutron is more real than Popeye or unicorns. And here I would agree.”¹⁰⁴ Despite the seeming incongruity, Harman still maintains some flatness by asserting that the *concept* of one is not necessarily more real than the concept of another.¹⁰⁵ Harman’s ontological topology and his views on relationality are among the big things that differentiate him from other Object-Oriented Ontologists.

3.3 Harman’s Relationality

As we have seen, Harman’s views on relationality have changed over the years. He originally was more open to relations insofar as he thought objects were not islands and action could occur directly between objects. As his thought developed, however, he began to reject relationism, ultimately ending up with the position that objects cannot directly interact *at all*, and that everything must be indirect. This somewhat radical take on relationality, along with the ontological topology discussed above, makes Harman unique amongst the Object-Oriented Ontologists.

¹⁰³ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 102.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

From here, we turn to more recent Object-Oriented Ontologists whose views have been influenced by Harman and we will thus examine them in relation to him.

Chapter 4: Levi Bryant and Ian Bogost

4.1 Levi Bryant and Ian Bogost: Ontologists in Arms

Levi Bryant and Ian Bogost, both newer to the object-oriented scene than Harman, have extremely active online presences and are part of the younger generation of Speculative Realists and Object-Oriented Ontologists. Bryant has kept an active blog since 2006 which, thus far, has almost 4 million hits. On his blog, *Larval Subjects*,¹⁰⁶ he has written about everything from Nietzsche and the death of God to Lacan and Object-Oriented Ontology. As his views seem to be in flux more than the relatively established views of Harman and Bogost, his ‘official’ status as an Object-Oriented Ontologist in 2016 is uncertain. As Harman said when I asked what Bryant’s views were now, “we’ll just have to wait until his next book comes out.” Bogost, whose main focus lies with technology, keeps a website¹⁰⁷ where he has publicly accessible projects (e.g. his *Latour Litanizer* and “Object Lessons”), articles that he writes for *The Atlantic*, books, and video games he’s working on. The two, although obviously different people with different focuses and interests share enough in common (at least ontologically) that their theories shall be contained within one chapter.

¹⁰⁶ See Levi Bryant, *Larval Subjects*, last modified 7/18/16, accessed 7/18/16, (<https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/>)

¹⁰⁷ See Ian Bogost, *Bogost*, last modified 6/23/16, accessed 7/18/16, (<http://bogost.com/>)

4.1.1 Levi Bryant: Towards Onticology

Where Harman started from a Heideggerian/phenomenological perspective, Bryant began his journey into Object-Oriented Ontology from a Lacanian/psychoanalytic as well as Deleuzian and semiotic perspective. As such, he differs from Harman insofar as Heidegger's tool-analysis is more of a point of curiosity than one of profundity. For Bryant, the real fun lies in distinction and difference as is exemplified by his essay in *The Speculative Turn* entitled "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology"¹⁰⁸ to which we will turn first.

Bryant, along with Harman and the other realists, notes that philosophy has become so obsessed with questions of access to the world that as a discipline, it has become "sterile." Bryant points out that there are no shortages of critiques and points of entry; rather there is a shortage of solutions. While Kantians have one view of first philosophy, Foucauldians have another, and Marxists have yet another still. The problem with so many competing critiques, as is the case with the paradox of choice, is that each one "appears equally plausible and equally implausible, such that any choice takes on the appearance of being an arbitrary decision based on temperament, political orientation, and interest."¹⁰⁹ In the face of this, Bryant suggests that we do the unthinkable in modern philosophy: become

¹⁰⁸ Bryant, "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology," 261-278.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 262.

naïve and pre-critical. He wants us to again become first-year undergraduate students who have never taken a philosophy course and/or have never speculated about the world.

The first pre-critical question asked is ‘what is?’ which can be rephrased ontologically as ‘what is the nature of Being?’ Bryant takes this question as his starting point and examines Being *as* Being. In reflection upon philosophical questions in general, Bryant finds that “they all revolve around issues of difference;”¹¹⁰ questions of how we know one thing from another are epistemological questions, questions of differences in material kind are largely metaphysical questions, etc. Thus the most basic premise that we can make is the claim that “*there is no difference that does not make a difference*”¹¹¹ which Bryant rephrases ontologically as “to be is to make or produce differences:”¹¹² what he calls the Ontic Principle. Bryant argues that the Ontic Principle and subsequent ontological claims are prior issues to epistemology insofar as epistemic questions presuppose difference as already existing.¹¹³ For example, when asking questions such as ‘when a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?’ we necessarily presuppose the difference between us and the tree, or the tree and the ground, or even us and ‘nature.’ Stated

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 263.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., 264.

differently, for an epistemic question to be coherent, there must be at least two things being referred to, and therefore a difference between them.

From the Ontic Principle, Bryant derives the Principle of the Inhuman, his form of anti-humanism. This principle states that “differences that make a difference are not restricted to the domain of the human,”¹¹⁴ and the logic behind this is simple enough. Be it physical difference in the form of causation or material difference in the form of structures of objects, differences between things exist independently of humans. Returning briefly to Meillassoux’s note about ancestrality, scientific knowledge is possible because we can make comparisons between what is given now and what was anterior to us – the arche-fossil. In a word, the differences made by humans and by non-humans are only differences in degree, not in kind. The implication of the Principle of the Inhuman is that there is no supreme ‘difference-giver,’ – that is to say differences do not “trace back and relate all beings to either God, humans, language, [etc.]”¹¹⁵ – which means the ontology proposed is flat.¹¹⁶

Bryant, much like Harman, thinks Being is univocal – that is to say what is meant by ‘Being’ is only one thing, not many. While this position is arguably commonly accepted, Bryant draws upon his own interpretation of Aristotle’s definition of substance to support this claim. While Aristotle notes that we use

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 267.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 268.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

term ‘Being’ in different contexts and to refer to different things, the primary meaning of the word bottoms out in substance. In Bryant’s reading of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, all the various senses of ‘Being’ as referring to qualities as well as things, for example, “ultimately refer back to substance” as “all these other forms of being [e.g. qualities] reside in substances or are made possible by substances.”¹¹⁷ Given that, Bryant contends that Being *as such* refers to substance *as such*, not a multiplicity of things. The question that must obviously be raised then is ‘what is a substance?’ While Bryant agrees with Harman’s view that objects can ultimately be understood as substances, he takes the analysis a bit further. For him, substance is the basic ontological unit of existence insofar as it must always be a point of stasis. It itself cannot be reducible, for as Bryant says, “a substance is that which is not predicated of anything else, and which therefore enjoys *independent* or *autonomous* existence.”¹¹⁸ It is here that we get Bryant’s own understanding and ontology of objects which he calls “Onticology.” What’s unique about Bryant’s definition of an object (namely that it is a substance) is that it allows us to determine what is *not* an object; something we were more hard-pressed to do in Harman. Qualities, whose exact status in Harman’s fourfold structure examined above is unclear, are patently *not* objects under Onticology. The reason for this is twofold. First, qualities are predicated of something therefore they do not have independent existence. This is distinct from Harman’s view as what can be inferred in his fourfold structure is that sensual qualities are

¹¹⁷ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 72.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

not objects while real qualities enjoy an autonomous existence and thus would qualify as objects under an Onticological framework. Under Onticology, however, qualities are not objects because they necessarily must arise from something. Green is not an object as green is a feature found predicated *of* something.¹¹⁹ Second, qualities are, counterintuitively, “something an object *does*”¹²⁰ and as such, have no autonomous existence. The quasi-experiential nature of qualities is something that must be examined and is thus where we turn to next.

Similar to Harman’s concept of real objects, Bryant posits the existence of what he calls the virtual proper being of an object that can never be accessed directly due to the withdrawn nature of the object *in-itself*. Instead, what we have access to and understanding of, much like Harman’s sensual objects and qualities, is an object’s local manifestation.¹²¹ The local manifestation can be thought of as how an object gives itself to the world. In addition to this understanding, Bryant keeps the classical view that an object is not reducible to its qualities since qualities change but objects endure while also denying the classical view that the substantiality of an object is “bare substratum.” Instead, Bryant argues that the substantiality of an object consists of its power to produce given qualities. From this, Bryant concludes that “we should not speak of qualities as something an object *possesses, has, or is*, but rather as *acts, verbs*, or something that an object

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 72-73.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹²¹ Ibid., 88.

does.”¹²² This means that if I were to speak of my copy of Harman’s *The Quadruple Object* which sits next to me, it would be incorrect to say ‘it is purple;’ rather I should say that ‘the book *does* purple.’ While admittedly an odd way of speaking, from our understanding of qualities as not being the object itself, the discursive change follows. What’s more, as Bryant points out, qualities are object-dependent insofar as, phenomenologically, the color of something changes depending on a host of external circumstances. For example, I have dimmed the lights in the room I am working in and *The Quadruple Object* no longer looks as vibrantly purple as it once did. Further, since there is “no limit to the exo-relations into which”¹²³ an object can enter, there are a potentially infinite number of colors something could be. Ultimately, “qualities,” while being predicated of an object as they are something an object *does*, do not seem to be mind/experience dependent insofar as they are results of ‘actions’ objects that have an independent existence *do*.

In concluding our remarks on Bryant, Onticology’s understanding of objects is slightly deeper, although not necessarily stranger, than Harman’s Object-Oriented Philosophy insofar as more can said about objects *as such*. We must, however, move to our next ontologist, Ian Bogost, and his novel way of viewing things.

¹²² Ibid., 89.

¹²³ Ibid., 90.

4.1.2 Ian Bogost: Alien Phenomenologist

If I had to summarize Ian Bogost's seminal work, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, briefly, I would put it thusly: while I don't know if extra-terrestrial life exists, I do know that aliens exist and they are all around me. My stapler, my phone, my Harvey Milk United States Postal Service stamp, my unicycle, my Bug-Out-Bog squeeze toy, my vinyl copy of The Notorious B.I.G.'s classic album *Ready to Die*, and my watch are all aliens and they all 'experience' something.

Bogost's goal is to provide a phenomenology of objects. Not a phenomenology as is typical in Husserl or Heidegger – that is to say, in the first person – but an alien phenomenology. As such, Bogost wants to understand “objects by tracing their impacts”¹²⁴ and “to write speculative fictions of [objects'] processes.”¹²⁵ He wants us “to go where *everyone* has gone before, but where few have bothered to linger.”¹²⁶ Bogost begins his inquiry with a rather large summary of correlationism, a review of Harman and his critiques of philosophies of access, and explanations of flat ontology. Bogost then begins his process of alien phenomenology by drawing upon Thomas Nagel's question of “[w]hat is it like to be a bat?” by positing that this question can be asked about *all*

¹²⁴ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 33.

¹²⁵ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, 34.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

objects.¹²⁷ Moving from this, Bogost develops what he calls “ontography” (used in a slightly different manner from Harman’s usage of the term) as “a general inscriptive strategy” that “involves the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind;”¹²⁸ in other words, a list of some sort. For him, lists exemplify flat ontology insofar as members of a set are written out in no necessary hierarchy with each member maintaining its own autonomy. For example, creating a list of the nests in my Russian Leaders matryoshka doll would yield the following members: Vladimir Putin, Boris Yeltsin, Mikhail Gorbachev, Leonid Brezhnev, Nikita Khrushchev, Joseph Stalin, and Vladimir Lenin. While each member of the set helps make up something larger (in this case Russian leaders) and while each member is listed according to their location in the stack, the individual members themselves have an existence in their own right. The wood carving of Brezhnev is no more significant than the set of leaders that he is a part of. Both are equally significant; they just have different effects. The list of members of the set, however, is not all the matryoshka doll is; it is a *visual ontograph*. For Bogost, diagrams that show the relationship between various parts of a machine, games that allow for novel relations of ideas, or simply images of objects strewn about do ontological work as well.¹²⁹ Just as a list of Russian leaders with no explanation places them all, initially, on equal grounding, a photograph of the dolls lined up next to each other

¹²⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 45-59.

does the same thing. Both the list and the photograph allow the dolls to speak for themselves.

As a supplement to ontography, Bogost proposes metaphors as a way to begin to understand object's inner lives. Returning to the cited quotation by Nagel, Bogost attempts to utilize metaphors to understand what it is like to be various other objects. Reacting against physical reductionism to explain what it is like to be a thing, Bogost says

the very idea of experience requires this “being-likeness,” a feature that eludes observation even if its edges can be traced by examining physical properties. Because of this elusiveness (which OOO [Object-Oriented Ontology] calls *withdrawal*), physical reductionism can never explain the experience of a being.¹³⁰

The project is not hopeless, however. Despite our inability to reduce experience down to digestible chunks that will subsequently give us knowledge on the Being of the Other, Bogost points out that the use of metaphors and analogies can help us skirt the edges of understanding; “the bat, for example, operates like a submarine.”¹³¹ While we can never know what the experience of a sonar-sensing being is, we can begin to understand what it is like by *anthropomorphizing* it.

What makes Bogost unique is that he recognizes that, for humans, anthropocentrism is inevitable. Where other authors will try to break with

¹³⁰ Ibid., 62.

¹³¹ Ibid., 64.

anthropocentrism, Bogost recognizes its inevitability and examines what can be done to call it out. Citing Jane Bennett, he points out that anthropomorphizing objects “works against anthropocentrism” insofar as “a chord is struck between person and thing”¹³² which allows for the recognition of difference without superiority. Specifically, anthropomorphizing “helps remind us that object encounters are caricatures.”¹³³

Finally, in a somewhat radical move (as philosophers are often caricatured as avoiding action in favor of reflection), Bogost urges us to *do alien* phenomenology. The path cannot be dictated, but examples certainly guide the way. Bogost cites his own projects as different attempts at trying to understand what it’s like to be a thing. He has created what he calls the *Latour Litanizer* which, in his own words produces “ontrographs in the form of Latour litanies”¹³⁴ or extended lists such as the one I gave in my brief summary of *Alien Phenomenology*. The *Latour Litanizer*, which can be found on his website,¹³⁵ creates a list of about a dozen articles drawn from Wikipedia’s 5,000,000+ English entries and displays them in no particular order or hierarchy. In a different program, *I am TIA*, Bogost attempts to “[approximate] the [television interface

¹³² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* cited in Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 65.

¹³³ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*, 65.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³⁵ See Ian Bogost, *Latour Litanizer*, published 12/16/09, accessed 7/22/16, (http://bogost.com/writing/blog/latour_litanizer/)

adapter's] view of the world through a standard two-dimensional computer display."¹³⁶ Since we, of course, cannot know what it is like to *be* a TIA, Bogost anthropomorphizes it and creates a system where we can attempt to reach an understanding while still knowing that full knowledge is just outside our grasp. Bogost suggests we each attempt to build something, try to understand something, engage with a non-human other, and ultimately raise hammers as opposed to fists.¹³⁷ If Bogost were to write and direct a summer blockbuster, it would no doubt be called *The Secret Life of Objects*.

4.2 Bryant and Bogost's Ontology

Bogost, in *Alien Phenomenology*, does not lay out as thorough an ontological framework as Bryant does, but Bryant appears to be the mobilizing force behind Bogost's thought¹³⁸ and the framework Bogost does lay out ("Tiny Ontology") is sufficiently similar to Bryant's Onticology that we can group the two and discuss the topology of their ontologies collectively using Bryant as our frame of reference.

If we recall from our previous discussion of differences and the Principle of the Inhuman, we remember that humans are not the sole arbiters of difference.

¹³⁶ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, 103.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

That is to say, differences occur at all levels of Being and thus there is no reason why arbitration of difference ought to be human's responsibility. The fact that there is no difference-giver, so to speak, means that all relations between things that cause a difference are on equal footing. Further, if we recall Bryant's interpretation of the Aristotelian Being of substance as being univocal, we remember that there isn't a type of substance or Being that is any more essential than any other. For example, if we follow Bryant's interpretation, the Being of a concept in Aristotle is no more real than the Being of, say, a fish. It is this univocity of Being, however, that I wish to spend a bit more time analyzing.

Let us assume that Being is univocal (something that follows from the Ontic Principle whereby "to be is to make or produce a difference"¹³⁹ and the Principle of the Inhuman) – that is to say, "[b]eing is the same for [various] modalities, but [the] modalities are not the same. It is 'equal' for all, but they themselves are not themselves equal"¹⁴⁰ – and see what follows. As Bryant points out, if Being is univocal then it is conceptually incoherent to speak of a true reality of things and a 'less-true' one populated by objects of experience as in Plato's theory of the forms. As opposed to dualities of existence, "wherever we have difference made we have beings"¹⁴¹ and despite the fact that not all differences are the same, "there is not one set of differences that consists of the

¹³⁹ Bryant, "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology," 263.

¹⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* cited in Levi Bryant, "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology," in *The Speculative Turn* (Victoria: re.press, 2011), 269.

¹⁴¹ Bryant, "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology," 269.

‘true differences’ or ‘true reality’ and another set of differences that consists of only appearances.”¹⁴² Further, if Being is univocal and all things that make a difference *are*, then there are only two ways to maintain a hierarchy of Being (e.g. one thing exists more than another): first, impose an arbitrary hierarchy on the world that has no grounding, or second, to claim that relational differences and the degree to which a difference is created determines what is real and what is not. The latter also falls victim to pure subjectivity and arbitrary judgment, however, because a standard must be imposed on a whim that states ‘X didn’t make enough of a difference, therefore its Being is negated (or at least lessened).’ It is all this that leads to Bryant to say “[b]ecause both quarks and the character of Half-Cock Jack in Neal Stephenson’s *Quicksilver* both make differences, they both are, according to the Ontological Principle [and the univocity of Being], *real*.”¹⁴³

What’s more (and what adds to the intrigue of flat ontology) is that the constituent parts of an object are just as real and just as irreducible to one another or the whole or their own constituents as the whole is to them. Here we look at Bogost’s ontologization of a computer program when he takes the 1982 Atari video game adaptation of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* and asks “What is *E.T.*?” His slightly verbose, albeit enjoyable, answer is as follows:

E.T. is 8 kilobytes of 6502 opcodes and operands, which can be viewed by human beings as a hex dump of the ROM. Each value corresponds with a

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

processor operation, some of which also take operands. For example, hex \$69 is the opcode for adding a value.

An assembled ROM is really just a reformatted version of the game's assembly code, and *E.T.* is also its source code, a series of human-legible (or slightly more human legible, any-way) mnemonics for the machine opcodes that run the game. For example, the source code uses the mnemonic "ADC" in place of the hex value \$69.

E.T. is a flow of RF modulations that result from user input and program flow altering the data in memory-mapped registers on a custom graphics and sound chip called the television interface adapter (TIA). The TIA transforms data into radio frequencies, which it sends to the television's cathode ray tube and speakers.

E.T. is a mask ROM, a type of integrated circuit, on which memory is hardwired into an etched wafer. The photomask for a ROM of this sort is expensive to create but very cheap to manufacture in quantity.

E.T. is a molded plastic cartridge held together with a screw, covered with an adhesive, offset-printed label. It houses the mask ROM, which is flanked by a lever and a spring that reveals the chip's contacts when actuated by an Atari VCS console.

E.T. is a consumer good, a product packaged in a box and sold at retail with a printed manual and packing cardboard, hung on a hook or placed on a shelf.

E.T. is a system of rules or mechanics that produce a certain experience, one that corresponds loosely to a story about a fictional alien botanist stranded on earth, whom a group of children attempt to protect from the xenophobic curiosity of governmental and scientific violence.

E.T. is an interactive experience players can partake of individually or together when gathered around the television.

E.T. is a unit of intellectual property that can be owned, protected, licensed, sold, and violated.

E.T. is a collectible, an out of print or "scarce" object that can be bartered or displayed.

E.T. is a sign that depicts the circumstances surrounding the videogame crash of 1983, a market collapse partly blamed on low-quality shovelware (of which *E.T.* is often cited as a primary example). In this sense, the sign "E.T." is not just a fictional alien botanist but a notion of extreme failure, of "the worst game of all time": the famed dump of games in the Alamogordo landfill, the complex culture of greed and design constraint that led to it, the oversimplified scapegoating process that ensued thereafter—otherwise put, "E.T." is Atari's "Waterloo."¹⁴⁴

In other words, all these features of *E.T.* exist simultaneously *and* independently from one another without one being reducible to another.

¹⁴⁴ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, 17-18.

This topology of ontology differs slightly from current Harman as, if we recall, current Harman concedes “that a neutron is more real than Popeye or unicorns”¹⁴⁵ and current Harman defines himself as having a “quasi-flat ontology.” While this difference between Bryant/Bogost and Harman is not astronomical, it is worth noting that the former two have explicitly flat ontologies¹⁴⁶ while the latter, when pushed on the subject, concedes some hierarchy. The question thus becomes, what is the justification for Harman’s “quasi-flat ontology?”

4.3 Bryant and Bogost’s Relationality

It is here with the question of relationality that the other main difference between Bryant/Bogost and Harman can be found. As with the section on ontology, Bryant and Bogost’s views on relationality are sufficiently similar that we will use Bryant’s framework to explain them. The reason for the difference between Bryant/Bogost and Harman is that the latter ends up with the position that objects have no direct contact. For Harman, objects withdraw indefinitely and thus there can be no relation between two objects *as such*, there can only be relations between the sensual qualities of objects. For Bryant and Bogost, however, relationality is an outcome of the existence of objects, but objects are

¹⁴⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 142.

¹⁴⁶ See Levi Bryant, “The Four Theses of Flat Ontology,” in *The Democracy of Objects*, 245-290.

not defined by their relations.¹⁴⁷ As Bryant says in criticism of ontologies that argue that objects are nothing but their relations, “if every object is its relation to other objects and if the other objects are, in their turn, their relations to other objects, there turns out to be *nothing* to relate.”¹⁴⁸ Bryant, however, does not want to deny all relationality, he merely thinks that relations are a product of objects existing. Given this, Bryant notes that relations must be “made,” and that not all object are simply passive since “relations are dependent upon the powers of objects” as analyzed above.¹⁴⁹ Bryant sums up the differences between Onticology and Harman’s Object-Oriented Philosophy nicely when he says

[L]ike Harman's object-oriented philosophy, onticology argues that objects or substances are withdrawn from or independent of their relations to other substances. Like Harman's object-oriented philosophy, onticology rejects the thesis of holistic interrelations where objects or substances are understood to be *constituted* by their relations to other substances. Finally, like Harman's object-oriented philosophy, onticology holds that no relation ever deploys all of the forces contained within an object. The point where onticology and Harman's object-oriented ontology diverge is on the issue of whether the independence of objects or substances entails that objects never touch or encounter one another, or that objects, by virtue of their withdrawal, must be *vacuums*. Were this the case, it seems that it

¹⁴⁷ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*, 28.

¹⁴⁸ Bryant, “The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology,” 271.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 274-275.

would be impossible for any object to ever unleash the forces of another object. Given that objects often do unleash forces in other objects, it thus appears that objects must somehow be capable of perturbing one another, while the virtual proper being of an object forever remains in excess of this encounter and is nonetheless closed.¹⁵⁰

If relationism were a soft-drink, Harman would not be in the vending machine. Bryant and Bogost, on the other hand, would be labeled as ‘diet-relationists’ whereas Latour (who we will examine in the coming pages) would be a ‘full-sugar relationist.’

¹⁵⁰ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 70-71.

Chapter 5: Bruno Latour

5.1 Bruno Latour: ANT

Bruno Latour, whose official status as an Object-Oriented Ontologist is questionable but granted by Harman, can be called, as Harman has done, a King of Networks.¹⁵¹ The reason for this grandiose title is that for Latour, networks between objects are fundamental to all ontology and metaphysics. In Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* he lays out the framework for what eventually becomes known as "Actor-Network Theory" or ANT.

Latour begins his investigation by examining what he calls "hybrids." Hybrids, for Latour, are objects of any scale that are mixtures of nature and culture.¹⁵² The prime example of a hybrid that Latour gives at the start of his book is the ozone-hole. He points out that objective science backs up the existence of a hole in the ozone layer of the atmosphere above Antarctica, but the discourse surrounding the hole is not strictly scientific. Rather, as he turns to his newspaper, he finds discussions of chlorofluorocarbons and mechanical production and how they relate to the hole via their "crimes against the ecosphere." As he looks more, he sees that there is a dispute about the existence of the hole with heads of state,

¹⁵¹ Graham Harman, "brief SR/OOO tutorial," on *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, last modified 7/23/10, accessed 7/23/16, (<https://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/07/23/brief-srooo-tutorial/>) and Graham Harman, "Bruno Latour, King of Networks (1999)," in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 67-92.

¹⁵² Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10.

chemists, meteorologists, CEOs, etc. all being involved in this debate.¹⁵³ As he points out,

[t]he same article mixes together chemical reactions and political reactions. A single thread links the most esoteric sciences and the most sordid politics, the most distant sky and some factory in the Lyon suburbs, dangers on a global scale and the impending local elections or the next board meeting. The horizons, the stakes, the time frames, the actors - none of these is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story.¹⁵⁴

The question thus becomes ‘what is the ozone-hole?’ Is it an objective feature of the atmosphere over Antarctica, or is it, as Harman points out, “the locus of a power/knowledge struggle between competing interest groups?”¹⁵⁵ The answer is the same one students receive from anthropology and sociology professors all the time when they ask dichotomous questions: ‘yes.’ For Latour, it is fallacious to designate an object as either ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’ as, for him, all objects are both as they are intertwined between the two poles. Thus, attempting to rigidly define something as either nature or culture is, for Latour, an artificial dichotomy that he links with modernity.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 1.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Harman, “Bruno Latour, King of Networks (1999),” 74.

The ozone-hole is far from the only example, however. Gravitational waves are caused by two massive celestial bodies interacting in a binary system and exist whether humans observe them or not. But observing gravitational waves required the physical existence of the Laser Interferometer Gravitational Wave Observatory (LIGO) which required funding to be built. Further, the data captured by LIGO had to be translated from binary into English and then interpreted by humans. The ‘discovery’ of gravitational waves was thus thoroughly interwoven with politics, computation, language, and countless other human endeavors. Thus we ask, are gravitational waves objective objects or are they the result of human society? Yes. It is this dual feature of objects (especially scientific ones), the feature of being both natural and cultural, that led Latour to affirm Gaston Bachelard’s claim that “[f]acts are fabricated.”¹⁵⁶

At this point, however, we must take a brief aside to ensure there is no confusion. Although Latour affirms that “facts are fabricated,” that does *not* mean that he thinks reality is socially constructed. While our understanding of reality is contingent upon social circumstances and is, for Latour, necessarily intertwined with cultural phenomena, this does not mean that reality *as such* is a social construct. With the aforementioned in mind, Harman provides us with a warning that I would be remiss not to include in a chapter on Latour. Harman urges us to “never believe anyone who tells you that Latour holds that ‘all reality is socially

¹⁵⁶ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 18.

constructed”¹⁵⁷ and I think he is right in warning us of this. While the understanding of gravitational waves, for example, requires sentient agency and a mixture of cultural phenomena (e.g. sources of funding, scientific collaboration, etc.) such that the fact becomes fabricated within the laboratory space, that does *not* mean that the potential for a fact to be created – that is to say, an objective reality capable of being observed – does not exist independently. As I’ve noted elsewhere, “factuality is necessarily correlated with thought — as facts are products of thought and experimentation — while potential factuality is independent.”¹⁵⁸

Latour’s overall project is one that attempts to perform an anthropological study of modernity. He sees studies of so-called “primitive” cultures as pointing out that they have always mixed nature and culture (tribes “foolishly mix ancestor worship with the causes of hurricanes”)¹⁵⁹ whereas moderns have, supposedly, stepped beyond such antiquated understandings. Thus, for Latour modernity consists of an *attempt* to separate nature from culture by viewing the two poles as completely distinct.¹⁶⁰ His analysis of hybrids, however, shows that this is an untenable position to hold; despite attempts to be ‘enlightened,’ moderns still mix nature and culture while denying that they do so. What makes Latour unique is

¹⁵⁷ Harman, “Bruno Latour, King of Networks (1999),” 71.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Heft, “Latour and the ‘Arche-Fossil,’” on *Peter Says Stuff*, last modified 7/23/16, accessed 8/7/16, (<http://www.petersaysstuff.com/2016/07/latour-and-the-arche-fossil/>)

¹⁵⁹ Harman, “Bruno Latour, King of Networks (1999),” 80.

¹⁶⁰ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10-11.

that he argues despite our attempts to distance ourselves from the metaphysics of the tribes of the South Pacific, say, we utilize the very same rationale they do when explaining the world, we just don't recognize it.

What's more, the quintessential point of intersection for modern knowledge production – the area where we think we have successfully separated nature from culture – occurs in the laboratory space. In actuality, however, the laboratory space requires culture to give it relevance and meaning as observers must gather around, witness the experiments, and draw their own subjective conclusions based on their predispositions regarding what the data say.¹⁶¹ Further, the laboratory space intermixes nature and culture so much that non-humans are given a voice. Objects in experiments become testaments to their own validity and become signifiers of an objective reality. As Latour says, “we witness the intervention of a new actor [...]: inert bodies, incapable of will and bias but capable of showing, signing, writing, and scribbling on laboratory instruments.”¹⁶² These objects, linked together through networks of relations, take on powers greater than themselves and become explanatory forces in the structuring of human society. For example, the mercury in the thermometer becomes “a new actor” insofar as it is able to signify temperature and act in such a way as to produce knowledge. The inanimate instruments in the laboratory become independent actors capable of notating reality. Latour points out that

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁶² Ibid., 23.

networks of objects structure ontology, time, and ultimately become mediators between ever larger networks of objects.¹⁶³ Modernity, for Latour, becomes a network of actors and mediators all interwoven together. His analysis ultimately ends with the conclusion that despite attempts to break free from nature-culture hybrids, we've only managed to increase the rate that they are produced by unknowingly linking all things together.

5.2 Latour's Ontology

As implied during the discussions of Harman's as well as Bryant/Bogost's ontologies, Latour can be labeled a flat ontologist. While recognizing differences among different objects – that is to say, the air pump is different from the vacuum it is used to create – one does not exist more (or more primarily) than another insofar as they are all actors in a network. This leads him to say, in relation to nature and culture, that “Nature and Society are not two opposite transcendences but one and the same growing out of the work of mediation.”¹⁶⁴ Further, just as he views networks as objects, he views all objects as essentially being of the same kind – that is to say, a univocity of Being – while having “differences in size.”¹⁶⁵ In more recognizable terminology, for Latour objects differ in degree of the

¹⁶³ Ibid., 65-67, 73, 78.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 87-88.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 109.

effects they produce but *not* in their kind of existence as they are all equal parts of the networks which are equally irreducible.¹⁶⁶

As pointed out above, Latour's conception of the laboratory space affirms non-human objects as having equal say in creating an understanding of the world. Just as humans are mediators between events and nodes in networks, the objects of experiments are as well.¹⁶⁷ Further, in a radical move Latour proposes the overthrow of "modernity" in favor of an amodern Constitution that creates new modes of interaction between objects. While the nuances of Latour's "modern Constitution" and "amodern Constitution" are beyond the purview of this paper, we can end this section on Latour's ontology by noting that within the amodern Constitution, Latour wants to create what he calls a "Parliament of Things."¹⁶⁸ While it is not entirely clear what this Parliament would look like, Latour seems to imply that objects ought to take a more active role in describing the world, as "[w]e shall never know whether scientists translate or betray"¹⁶⁹ the world they see, and networks and hybrids ought to be openly recognized. As Latour says,

[n]atures are present, but with their representatives, scientists who speak in their name. Societies are present, but with the objects that have been serving as their ballast from time immemorial. Let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another represent the Monsanto chemical

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 113.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 142-145.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 143.

industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions; let still another speak in the name of the State; what does it matter, so long as they are all talking about the same thing, about a quasi-object they have all created, the object-discourse-nature-society whose new properties astound us all and whose network extends from my refrigerator to the Antarctic by way of chemistry, law, the State, the economy, and satellites. The imbroglios and networks that had no place now have the whole place to themselves.¹⁷⁰

5.3 Latour's Relationality

While it would be incorrect to say that objects, for Latour, are *entirely* composed of their relations, he is certainly no Harman when it comes to object-object interactions. Where Harman ended with the position that there can be no direct contact between objects (hence some sort of vicarious causation is needed to explain interactions), Latour argues that all objects, be they abstract concepts such as pragmatism or physical books such as William James' *Pragmatism*, are enmeshed in relations with one another: objects make up networks or "imbroglios," as Latour says. To expand slightly, concepts are related and tied to the historical context in which they are developed while also being tied to specific

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 144.

individuals who are tied to contingent social circles which are located in various spatial locations, etc. For Latour, in a word, everything is interconnected.

Earlier we noted that Bryant and Bogost think relationality is something objects *do*. Latour, in contrast, thinks that objects are always already in relationships and that there can be no such thing as passive objects that are isolated from one another. While Bryant and Bogost argue for some sort of intrinsic withdrawal of objects from one another, this concept seems absent in Latour as, for him, objects are always in some sort of relationship. Latour wants us to examine interactions and networks with the same rigidity that we examine ‘discrete’ objects.¹⁷¹ As Harman notes, Latour becomes half-philosopher half-engineer as he flips Western metaphysics on its head by turning philosophy into “an infra-physics.”¹⁷²

As we recall from the end of the previous chapter on Bryant and Bogost and our discussion of soft-drinks, Latour’s relationality is not tempered and thus, where Bryant and Bogost would be ‘diet-relationists,’ Latour becomes an example of the marketed ‘full-sugar relationist.’

¹⁷¹ Harman, “Bruno Latour, King of Networks (1999),” 91.

¹⁷² Ibid.

Chapter 6: Reflections and a Reimagined Ontology

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will be different from the previous 5 chapters both in structure and in content. It will be divided up into three sections: an introduction, a section that will take on a first-person narrative structure as I reflect on the arguments for Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology presented above, and a section where I attempt to establish my own ontology of objects by synthesizing the views of Harman, Bryant, Bogost, and Latour.

6.2 Reflections and Worries

As empirical science advanced with Galileo and justifiable explanations of the way the world worked could now be given, philosophy seemed to retreat from its ancient position as a natural science. The cause of this, I suspect, was a fear that after the scientific revolution, philosophical musings on the nature of the world would be taken less seriously than empirical studies and thus philosophers wanted to avoid falling prey to the same fate as the alchemists or astrologists. As methodologies of empirical science were established, open questions without a strict methodology fell by the wayside and the scientific method became the hegemon in discussions of knowledge about the world. While I do not wish to discount the beauty and success of empirical science (before choosing philosophy I wanted to study astrophysics), I merely want to say that questions without

answers (e.g. kōans), such as is the case in much of philosophy, can be just as valuable as solved equations.

Given the shift away from explanations of the world and the ceding of empirical knowledge to science, intersubjective philosophy began to take root. While there were, of course, the classical or ‘common sense’ realists such as Thomas Reid, philosophy largely became a meditation on human knowledge – that is to say, questions of epistemology – as opposed to a discussion about the world as it is. Given this, Western philosophy really has been a philosophy of the human-world relation for the past 400 some years. Despite earlier attempts in other adjacent disciplines to break free from the Circle of Correlation, when pushed upon, all their questions ultimately led back to human knowledge and access to the world. As such, Kant’s Copernican Revolution implicated everyone. As philosophy retreated from discussions about the real world, correlationism began to take hold.

Meillassoux’s attempt to revive realism in light of the Correlationist Circle is a noble task and while I think he does succeed in *After Finitude*, I do not think he has established his goal of a truly new sort of realism. While his mathematical ontology in the latter half of the book (an ontological view that is not relevant to our current examination of objects) might succeed in bringing speculation back to realism, I do not think I am able to judge that. I do, however, think that his analysis of the arche-fossil gets him to naïve realism. While not a bad thing, Meillassoux’s arrival at naïve realism breaks with his goal of completely avoiding it. The reason I think he doesn’t escape any sense of naïveté is because his answer

to the problem of correlation – that is to say, pointing out that objects really do exist and must exist in order for scientific statements to make sense – seems to be a modern version of Samuel Johnson’s refutation of George Berkeley’s immaterialism wherein Johnson replied to Berkeley’s claim that no material objects exist by kicking a boulder and saying “I refute it thus.”¹⁷³ Replacing names, Meillassoux could just as easily be Johnson and instead of kicking a boulder, he points to fossils of dinosaurs to refute correlationism. While obviously an oversimplification of the arguments presented in chapter 2, I think that when breaking down Meillassoux’ arguments for realism, the best we get is a form of naïve realism.

Despite that, I do think the issue of correlation – that is to say, the Circle of Correlation where we cannot think of anything that is not a thought – is a serious one. Although Harman views it as a weak argument and likens it to Meno’s Paradox (which I think has some merit when facing *certain* articulations of correlationism), I think some deeper argumentation is needed to dismiss it as a form of Meno’s Paradox.¹⁷⁴ It is here that I am willing to accept, perhaps too simply, Meillassoux’s naïve realism and potentially take a pragmatic approach. While I do not know how ‘weird’ my acceptance of realism is, I am inclined to say that objects exist independently of the human mind and that our knowledge of them may or may not be an accurate representation of the world as it really is. I

¹⁷³ James Boswell, *Life of Johnson Abridged and Edited* (Web: Project Gutenberg, 2006), 70.

¹⁷⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 60-68.

suppose the uncertainty about our knowledge of objects independent of us opens the door for speculation, but that is water to be treaded another time.

Harman's analysis of objects seems to be largely accurate and I think his unorthodox reading of Heidegger's tool-analysis really is profound. While I'm unsure of the extent to which objects withdraw from one another, I think the phenomenological description (even if it is somewhat alien when referring to object-object interactions) of at least partial withdrawal seems correct and I am willing to accept it. Harman's analysis of the "as-structure" as being univocal and of all objects caricaturing other objects in the same way, albeit in differences of degrees, seems to be correct as well. I do not see any fundamental difference – that is to say a difference in kind – between the way I relate to the steps on my back porch and the way my dog Max relates to them. Further, I do not see any fundamental difference between my relation to the sun and *Stachys byzantina*'s or even a rock's relation to the sun. Where I begin to get worried about Harman's metaphysics is the supposedly completely inexhaustible nature of objects as they withdraw and the issue of vicarious causation; an alternative view needs to be presented. I am still unsure as to the nature of vicarious causation and *how*, if Harman's thesis is correct, things interact indirectly.

Bryant's Onticology seems to stem largely out of Harman's conclusions while approaching an ontology of objects from a different theoretical framework (i.e. where Harman approached objects from a Heideggerian view, Bryant approaches them from a Derridian and Deleuzian view). While I think the Ontic

Principle (“to be is to make or produce differences”)¹⁷⁵ has a lot of merit and while I think the conclusions derived from it – namely the Principle of the Inhuman and the univocity of Being – are correct, I’m not entirely sure what Bryant means by “difference.” That being said, I am slightly worried as to the ultimate justification behind the Ontic Principle. While it’s well defended from claims of epistemology as first philosophy, I’m not sure what the justification is for the principle *itself*. That, however, is a minor issue that can likely be overcome or completely ignored as the principle seems to be phrased axiomatically. Ultimately, I think Bryant’s explanation of objects as substances that *do* qualities is likely accurate and, for reasons he didn’t explicate, helps break down an anthropocentric view of objects. There are two glaring problems in Bryant’s ontology, however. First, if Bryant holds his thesis that qualities are not objects and objects are only substances, then it is hard to argue for a univocity of Being. The reason this is the case is because substances are understood as existing independently – that is to say, having a unitary and independent Being – while qualities are predicated of substances. If this is the case, then ‘Being’ is used bivocally when discussing qualities and substances (objects). Second, and a bigger issue, is that Bryant’s claim that qualities are not objects does not work with his formulation of the Ontic Principle. If we recall, the Ontic Principle lays out the bare minimum for what is and that minimum threshold is making a difference. As Bryant says, “wherever we have difference made we have

¹⁷⁵ Bryant, “The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology,” 263.

beings.”¹⁷⁶ Qualities make differences, however, and as such they ought to be classified as beings but Bryant affirms that qualities are predicates of substances and are *not* beings. Something has got to give. A possible rejoinder that Bryant could make to this objection would be thus: ‘the Ontic Principle is only a principle about existence, not about objects and as such I am affirming the existence of qualities without saying they are objects.’ While this is a possible solution, it seems to run up against the bivocity of Being issue stated above.

While I think it is less philosophically dense, Bogost’s alien phenomenology provides much to think about and I have few worries regarding his thought. I’m unsure what exactly “Tiny Ontology” is, but it seems to be a Bogostian version of flat ontology (which he explains wonderfully) and thus I see no need for another phrase. The more relevant, and serious worry is *do* objects experience things? Or, phrased differently and closer Bogost’s language, *do* objects have inner lives? I do not know the answer, but I think that assuming they do experience something (which no doubt will require a change in the definition of ‘experience’) paves the way for interesting discussions about how objects relate to one another and how we relate to objects. Bogost’s ontography and metaphorism both seem like wonderful ways of understanding flat ontology and objects’ ‘experiences,’ respectively. Further, the view Bogost adopts from Bennet on anthropomorphizing is refreshing in the post-humanities. I think there is still much more to explore in regards to actually *doing* alien phenomenology, but

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 269.

Bogost points way and allows each individual to determine their own way of doing it.

Finally, while Latour's relationality is very promising, relationalizing everything seems like a strategy of overmining objects, to use Harman's term. While networks could, in theory, be made solely of objects, it seems that for Latour humans are still very present in them in some shape or form. While he's still a realist, I'm not entirely convinced that Latour, at least in *We Have Never Been Modern*, breaks out of the Circle of Correlation and thus it seems hard to fully embrace a Latourian ontology. That being said, it would be a lie if I were to say I fully understood all (or even most, for that matter) of Latour's book and so there are likely hidden gems that I missed. At the end of the day, I think the ideal position to take, in respect to relationality, is one between Bryant/Bogost and Latour. That is to say, the ideal position is to embrace networks as objects to be examined, but not to privilege networks above their individual constituents. This is one of the key things that I think Bogost's analysis of *E.T.* does as *E.T.* is, as Bogost describes, a network of many parts where a given constituent is not reducible to another or to the whole or to its own constituents.

6.3 A New Understanding of Objects

I am a realist. 'Common-sense,' 'naïve,' 'speculative;' the adjective before the word 'realist' is largely a pedantic concern that already presupposes certain

knowledge of the Real. All that matters is that I believe that objects exist independently of subjectivity. In other words, if all consciousness – and we use the word ‘consciousness’ very carefully and very specifically to refer to a subject’s perception of a thing – were extinguished from the cosmos, all would not disappear as if a God turned off all the lights. Rather, if all consciousness were extinguished, unimaginably small strings would still vibrate inside quarks, binary black holes would still continue their cosmic dance, the relationship between frequency and wavelength would remain unchanged, and a lump of plutonium sitting in Yucca Mountain would continue to decay. Consciousness does not cause existence.

The charge often leveled at post-humanist critiques and object-oriented thought is that they seek to ignore humans and privilege non-humans. Nothing could be further from the truth. An Object-Oriented Ontology seeks to flatten the plane of existence. Where, in correlationist and materialist philosophies, Being has been traditionally considered as a vertical ladder with the lowest rung being the most simple of things while the highest represents complex thought, Object-Oriented Ontology supports flipping the ladder and laying it on its side: the string on the ‘bottom’ rung is now no higher than human thought on the ‘top’ rung. All objects equally exist. The question that logically arises out of any discussion of objects is, of course, ‘what is an object?’ Ultimately, everything is an object be it the bottle of Soylent sitting next to me, a refrigerator in an abandoned house in Newark, Ohio, Batman, an idea, a number, or the League of Nations. A charge that could be leveled against this claim (and I’ve certainly made this argument

before) is thus: ‘if everything is an object, then all becomes one and *nothing* is an object.’ Following a structuralist understanding of reality, if there are no opposites (nothing binary) then whatever is being discussed, supposedly, loses all meaning. While I am sympathetic to this position, the outcome is not that of the structuralist or her ilk. Rather, the outcome of everything being an object is that nothing becomes more primary than anything else. That is not to discredit constituents, as we will shortly see, but it merely serves to flatten ontology. If everything is an object and we are working within an object-oriented framework, then nothing can be said to be objectively more important or more real than something else. All that being said, however, I do not hold onto the belief that everything is exactly the same and in order to maintain a flat ontology one cannot talk about constituent parts. Rather, I hold that the constituent parts of, say, the wooden desk upon which my computer rests – that is to say, the wood which is made up of cellulose, hemicellulose, and other molecules or the metal screws that are likely iron – are equally as real as the whole they make up. The table is no more important or real than the wood from which it is constructed, and the wood from which it is constructed is no more important or real than the molecules that make up the wood, etc. In a word, I maintain an egalitarian view of constituency.

Saying that everything is an object only does so much explanatory work, however. Questions and issues still arise from that claim which we will attempt to tackle here. The first issue that arises has to do with the status of typically ‘unreal’ objects – that is to say, if consciousness ceases to exist what happens to Batman? To examine this, we must dichotomize objects by dividing them into what I call

‘objective objects’ and ‘correlational objects.’ Objective objects are what the layperson thinks of when one mentions the word ‘object.’ They are physical objects of any shape or size that have an *independent* and *unitary* reality. For example, a bottle of Coca-Cola, a vinyl figure, an igneous rock, and a blade of grass are all objective objects. Correlational objects are what would often be dismissed as objects by the layperson. They are qualities or concepts that are correlated with, and potentially predicated of, an objective object. As such, correlational objects do not necessarily have an *independent* reality, but are still *unitary*. For example, the idea of Batman, the color blue as a quality, NATO, and fatherhood are all correlational objects. The creation of each of them is contingent upon at least one objective object. That does not mean, however, that they are reducible to their initial contingent causes. Just as Batman’s initial creation was contingent upon Bob Kane’s mind, an igneous rock’s initial creation was contingent upon the cooling of magma/lava. Consequently, just as the igneous rock is not reducible down to the magma/lava that initially created it, Batman is not reducible down to Bob Kane. All that being said, however, the longevity or continual existence of a given object helps place it in one of the two categories. At this point, one might be tempted to ask what category universals (e.g. numbers) fall into. Numbers can be thought of in similar terms to qualities; namely, they are predicates. The number 1, for example, is a predicate of singularity or a single object, the number 2 is a predicate of duality or dual objects, etc. Given this, numbers are correlational objects that are no more or less primary than the things to which they point. ‘What about mathematical relationships such as pi?’ a

questioner may ask. Pi is a relation between a circle's circumference and its diameter and as such is a correlational object. If there were no entities in existence, 1 would be a non-existent thing as well since there would be no such thing as singularity. If there were no circles in existence, there would be no circumferences and diameters to relate and as such there would be no ratio between the two – no pi. This returns us to the original question of what happens to Batman if consciousness ceases to exist. The answer to this question can only be that Batman ceases to exist. This difference between a correlational object and an objective object does not mean that the correlational object is any less of an object. Just as Batman would cease to exist if all consciousness were extinguished, igneous rocks (and all known matter for that matter) would cease to exist if all protons decayed at once. Consequently, igneous rocks are correlated to *something* – in the case of matter it is a large network of subterranean relations between 'primary' particles – in some way and are thus no different in kind than correlational objects. The difference between a correlational object and an objective object can largely be thought of in terms of the degree of correlation to something else. While Batman is one step removed from Bob Kane, an igneous rock is many steps removed from protons.

An objection may arise here which states 'by affirming some sort of correlation, you are ultimately undermining objects in the way Harman critiques.' To this charge, I reply that I am not. While it is true that a correlational understanding of objects *relates* them to other objects, it does not *reduce* them to other objects. For example, I do not claim that the proton is more fundamental

than the igneous rock, simply that one might impact another asymmetrically.

Further, I do not claim that Bob Kane is more fundamental than Batman, simply that one might impact another differently. After hearing this, it might be tempting to call all objects correlational objects since every object is, in some way, correlated to another. While the sentiment behind this temptation is genuine, calling all objects correlational objects will ultimately do a disservice to understanding objects as there is clearly some difference between a refrigerator and an idea. While a refrigerator might look different (or be completely unrecognizable) if protons did not exist, there is still the possibility for a refrigerator-being to exist. On the contrary, however, if consciousness did not exist, ideas could not exist in any form. As such, the degree of correlation between objective objects and their constituents and correlational objects and their constituents is less rigid in the former case – that is to say, matter might still be possible without protons – while being more rigid in the latter case – that is to say, ideas would not be possible without thought. Further, despite the refrigerator being correlated to a host of different objects, it has a more stable existence than an idea. In our universe, and this claim *only applies* to our universe, objective objects on the macro-scale – that is to say, *larger than the quantum scale* – tend to be durable and the constituent parts of objects tend to not cease to exist randomly. While quantum mechanics allows for very weird relationships between particles and existence, we will bracket discussions of ‘quantum philosophy’ until quantum mechanics is better understood and possibly reconciled with general relativity and instead focus on macro-level objective objects. While I leave an explanation of

the cause of this up to physicists, macro-level objective objects are largely more durable than ideas insofar as they tend not to randomly decay. As such, it makes sense to speak of objective objects as having what I shall call a ‘soft correlation’ to their constituents – that is to say the degree of correlation between objective objects and their constituents is less rigid – as they are both constituted by larger networks of relations and are more durable. Consequently, correlational objects can be said to have a ‘hard correlation’ to their constituents – that is to say the degree of correlation between correlational objects and their constituents is more rigid – as the correlation is more direct with a smaller network of relations and are less durable. At least for now, however, the concepts of hard and soft correlation are of little concern to us.

The next question that may arise is ‘how does this understanding account for relationality?’ Phrased differently, and in two parts, it could be asked ‘how does this view of objects account for qualities – that is to say, are they *in* an object or are they something an object *does*?’ and ‘how does this view of objects work with Latourian relationism?’ As qualities are correlational objects, they are not *in* another object so to speak, but rather are impacts or effects of an objective object existing. In this sense, qualities (as well as correlational objects as a whole) can be thought of as something that an objective object *does*. Here an objection might be raised that would go something like this: ‘if correlational objects are something an objective object *does*, then correlational objects are undermined.’ To this argument I respond by denying that I am undermining correlational objects. While correlational objects are strongly *related to* objective objects, they are not

reducible to them. To understand this, we can look to almost any cause and effect relationship in the world. When I sneeze, air pressure changes, my chest tightens as mucus and saliva bond, and, ultimately, I eject a mist of mucus-saliva mixture. The mucus-saliva mixture is clearly *related* to me via the act of sneezing, but it is not *reducible* to me insofar as it takes on its own existence. The expulsion of the mucus-saliva mixture from my body is something I *do*, but the objects that are the outcome of this action (in this case the mucus-saliva mixture) are not me. In other words, the mucus-saliva mixture is not undermined. Likewise, when a ball *does* green, it produces the correlational object of green, but that correlational object is a product of the ball, it is not *the ball*. Thus, while the act of greening is obviously *related* to the objective object of the ball, the correlational object of green is not *reducible* to the ball. To address the second question above – namely that of how this understanding of objects works with Latourian relationism: everything is in relation with something else. As Harman’s reading of Heidegger’s tool-analysis shows, all objects rely on others in an infinite number of possible ways. While Harman will likely reject this interpretation of his reading, I will maintain that the outcome of his reading of the tool-analysis is not simply that objects withdraw from one another but that objects are in constant present-at-hand and ready-to-hand relations with one another. A bookshelf is related to the floor upon which it sits, the builder of the shelf, the objects it holds, etc. While the specifics of the various relations may be unknowable as they withdraw, the relations are nevertheless there. Consequently, I affirm the thesis that no object is an island, rather ‘parts’ of objects withdraw.

This leads us directly to the next issue: the question of withdrawal. What is the nature of an object's withdrawal? What withdraws when one object interacts with another? When two objective objects interact, the parts of them that are not relevant to the interaction – that is to say, the qualities they do that are not involved in that specific relation – withdraw. For example, when a wave breaks upon a fjord, the color each objective object does withdraws as it is not relevant to that specific relation. The qualities that are relevant – namely the speed of the wave, the solidity of the fjord, etc. – become foregrounded in that specific relation. In this sense, the wave caricatures the fjord, and vice versa. More questions arise, however. The two questions that arise out of Harman are 'does the wave exhaust the fjord and vice versa?' and 'what is the nature of the relation between the wave and fjord?' The answer to the first question is no, the wave does not exhaust the fjord nor does the fjord exhaust the wave. As both have a potentially infinite number of things that withdraw from one another, there is always something left in reserve. The answer to the second question (the question about the nature of the relationship between the wave and fjord) is a bit trickier. I worry about positing an indirect or vicarious relationship between the wave and fjord as I feel that leaves too many doors open as some sort of "vicarious medium"¹⁷⁷ or equally spooky meta-object needs to be posited to explain the relationship. I prefer to say that the nature of the relationship – that is to say, *what* interacts – are the relevant features of each. While that might be labeled 'indirect' insofar as the features that the objective object does are not the objective object, it

¹⁷⁷ Harman, "Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities (2006)," 131.

seems far from vicarious. Ultimately, the interactions between objective objects occur on the level of the relevant correlational objects. The question that statement obviously raises is ‘what is the nature of correlational object-correlational object interactions?’ These interactions are largely contingent upon the specific circumstance, but a few things can be broadly said about them. Very likely, interactions between correlational objects *do* exhaust the correlational objects as, in most cases, there is nothing to withdraw. The relationship between fictional characters in one’s mind is entirely within the mind and thus there are no aspects which are not thought or are, at least, contingent upon thought. As such, there is likely no subterranean level where aspects of my daydreams recede to. Further, correlational objects likely interact with one another less frequently than objective objects due simply to the fact that they do not have many relevant parts that overlap. Like neutrinos passing through the Earth and interacting with barely any matter, correlational objects often pass one another like two ships in the night.

Although much can be said about objective and correlational objects, a more robust framework must be developed first and while there are a slew of potential questions waiting to be asked, they may or may not have answers. Further, as humans who are relegated to our own form of thought (despite the ability to anthropomorphize) and who are not Gods with full knowledge of the world, our discussions of objects will necessarily be limited. Perhaps, at the end

of the day, the best we as mortals can say about objects is what Eric Francisco noted of the Joker, they “cannot be explained but only understood.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Eric Francisco, “Why DC's Rebirth Revealing The Joker's Real Name Is a Bad Idea,” on *Inverse*, last modified 3/28/16, accessed 7/26/16, (<https://www.inverse.com/article/13410-why-dc-s-rebirth-revealing-the-joker-s-real-name-is-a-bad-idea>)

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