

## Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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# The Problem of Causality in Object-Oriented Ontology

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**Abstract:** Object-oriented ontologists understand relations of cause and effect to be sensory or aesthetic in nature, not involving direct interaction between objects. Four major arguments are used to defend an indirect view of causation: 1) that there are analogies between perception and causation, 2) that the indirect view can account for cases of causation which a direct view cannot, 3) an Occasionalist argument that direct interaction would make causation impossible, and 4) that the view simply fits better with object-oriented ontology's own premises. However, each argument is fallacious or otherwise unconvincing. The first affirms the consequent. The second fails because the relevant cases can easily be accounted for with a direct view. The third makes false assumptions about the relation between parts and wholes. And the fourth can also be used to argue against object-oriented ontology. Many of these problems can be traced to the methodological aspects of object-oriented ontology and might be avoided by emphasizing the role of non-argumentative justification in metaphysics.

**Keywords:** metaphysics; causality; realism; objects

## 1 Introduction: Objects and arguments

Object-oriented ontology (OOO from here on) is an influential part of the turn toward constructive metaphysical theorizing in recent European and European-influenced philosophy, impacting visual art,<sup>1</sup> architecture,<sup>2</sup> and even video game design.<sup>3</sup> Distancing itself equally from the Kantian paradigm of epistemology-focused philosophizing and the deconstructive paradigm of text- and language-centered critique, OOO and associated forms of speculative realism build encompassing theories of reality as it is in itself.<sup>4</sup> For OOO, as the name suggests, reality consists of distinct units whose existence and essential characteristics are independent of their relations to other such units and are irreducible to the processes or interactions in which they happen to be involved.<sup>5</sup> Given the way this view emphasizes the radical separateness of things—though no man is an island, every object is—it is not easy to explain how causal interaction is possible. The solution upon which Harman and Morton have hit is to treat causation as sensual or aesthetic in nature, involving indirect, partial, and representational relationships between objects.

1 Eastham, "The Return to Objects," no pagination.

2 Betsy, "The Triple O Play," no pagination.

3 Ennis, "Interview with Ian Bogost," 51. Bogost ran a video game design company himself.

4 As is clear from the sub-title of Harman, "Object-Oriented Ontology."

5 This is clear from the substantial claims about objects made by object-oriented ontology rather than from explicit definitions of the term 'object'. Harman provides two explicit definitions. In one text, he writes that "Objects are units that both display and conceal a multitude of traits." In another, he writes that an object is "a reality whose full depths can never be exhaustively probed." See, respectively, Harman, "The Quadruple Object," 7 and Harman, "Towards Speculative Realism," 131.

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Harman and Morton give four major arguments in favor of OOO's theory of causation.<sup>6</sup> First, there is what I will call the 'Perceptual Argument', which appeals to analogies between human sensation and causal relations. Second, there is the 'Explanatory Power Argument', which claims that OOO's view can better explain common causal phenomena than the alternative, direct view of causation. Third, there is an 'Occasionalist Argument' adapted from Islamic and Buddhist sources. And, finally, there is the 'Theoretical Fit Argument' that this view of causation simply follows from the premises of OOO.

Methodologically, it is crucial to note that these are *arguments* in the strict sense: truth claims alleged to follow from premises containing evidence for those claims. As will become clear, they can even be represented formally. Constructing theoretical systems through direct—often deductive—argumentation is one among many modes in which philosophy can be practiced. Harman's own corpus of work includes other such modes, as in *Circus Philosophicus*, where myth, parable, and metaphor are used to concretize and make vivid philosophical ideas.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Cogburn argues that, at bottom, Harman is committed to the view that "metaphysical accounts are themselves works of art", so that "the philosopher is more akin to the artist than the natural scientist."<sup>8</sup> If this is Harman's view, then I suspect that Harman is right, but it is nonetheless true that putting forward explicit arguments invites a certain type of critical evaluation. Even if one's goals in arguing are, artist-like, to shift a person's view of the world or to engage in Deleuzian concept creation,<sup>9</sup> the use of arguments commits one to following the usual standards of good argumentation (soundness, validity, inductive cogency, and so on). So, a straightforward logical evaluation of the arguments given by OOO seems in order whatever non-argumentative modes of philosophizing are paired with them.

The result of such an evaluation is that Harman's and Morton's arguments fail to show that OOO's view of causation is true or superior to a commonsense picture of causation. At best, they prove the truism that, when two things interact causally, not all of their properties are relevant to the interaction. In the next section, I outline the problem of causation in more detail and describe the contrasts between OOO's view of causation and a traditional or commonsense view of causation. I then examine each of the four arguments in turn. In a concluding section, I suggest that it must be the non-argumentative modes of philosophizing that bear the greatest weight of justification for OOO.

## 2 Excess and withdrawal

The defining thesis of OOO is that "being is composed entirely of objects or substances."<sup>10</sup> On the face of it, this might not seem like a terribly radical claim, only pushing Aristotelian substance metaphysics a step further by treating processes, relationships, and interactions as derived rather than equiprimordial. But OOO interprets the thesis and its consequences in a particularly strong fashion. Objects are to be conceived as "existing in their own right, as autonomous from their relations with other things."<sup>11</sup> An object is a unit of being which is what it is and has its own reality independently of its relationships. Indeed, objects are autonomous not just from relations with other objects, but even from their own qualities or properties. Harman writes that "Their reality consists solely in being what they are, not in some sort of impact on other things. An object is not a bundle of qualities, and for this reason a thing cannot be reproduced

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes certain passages from Harman or Morton might be read as hinting at other arguments. However, I have not been able to discover any passages in which it is completely clear that the ideas are irreducible to the arguments I discuss, rather than being alternative ways of putting the same points. I will also use terms like 'causal interaction', 'causation', and 'causal relations' interchangeably as the context demands.

<sup>7</sup> Harman, "Circus Philosophicus," throughout. Thanks are due to Jon Cogburn for pointing out to me the importance of this aspect of Harman's work.

<sup>8</sup> Cogburn, "Aesthetics as First Philosophy," 32 and 31 respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze, "What is Philosophy?," 2.

<sup>10</sup> Bryant, "The Democracy of Objects," 185. Note the plural. Morton, Bryant, and Harman all repeatedly use the term 'objects' (rather than 'object'), suggesting that their view is variety of pluralism rather than monism. This will be important for the Occasionalist Argument.

<sup>11</sup> Harman, "The Quadruple Object," 69.

simply by duplicating all of its qualities...”<sup>12</sup> The language of the ‘reality of’ an object and the worry about reproduction/duplication, which itself applies to the reality of an object, suggests that Harman is pointing to the ‘this-ness’ or quiddity of objects. So, to say that being consists of objects is to say that it consists of units the reality of which is not reducible to anything else or graspable by anything else, even the list of characteristics which (we might be tempted to say) make it up. Objects are unities beyond and separate from their constitutive parts.

Imagine, for instance, fire burning cotton. As Harman has it, “My perception of fire and cotton fails to use up the total realities of these beings, since they are describable at infinite length in a way that I can never approach.”<sup>13</sup> Since an object is something that stands apart from its qualities or relationships, its full identity is not captured or absorbed by any of those qualities or relationships. If I describe cotton in, say, chemical fashion, it is clear that I will have left out the particular ‘this-ness’ of cotton itself. If I go on to add an economic description, the same will still be true. No matter how many descriptions I add or how exhaustively I list the properties of cotton, its ‘total reality’ will not be captured—some aspect of the cotton, actual or potential, will be left out.<sup>14</sup> Here, it seems not so much the ‘this-ness’ of the cotton that is at issue so much as the totality made up of the cotton’s ‘this-ness’ *along with* its whole set of properties.

OOO often describes this feature of objects as withdrawal. Bryant, for instance, writes that “entities or substances withdraw from one another insofar as no entity encounters another entity in terms of how that entity itself is, but rather every entity reworks ‘data’ issuing from other entities in terms of the prehending substance’s own unique organization.”<sup>15</sup> The metaphor is rather apt. If you turn on the light and spot a bug scurrying back to a dark corner, we might say it has withdrawn from your view. But notice that objects, unlike bugs, need not *do* anything to ‘withdraw’ from other objects. The object itself is not changed by its relationships, after all. It might be more accurate to say that objects are excessive: their reality is in excess of their qualities and relationships. They might always surprise us.

As I’ve noted, the exact claims being made by OOO about the nature of objects are not perfectly clear. It may be either ‘this-ness’ or ‘this-ness’ plus all of a thing’s myriad properties that resist the reduction of an object to its relationships and it may be either withdrawal or excess that best captures the main ontological principle of OOO. But on whatever interpretation, this general principle of OOO applies to all relationships, so it should be no surprise that it applies to causal relationships as well. The web of cause and effect relationships in which objects are enmeshed does not exhaust their reality any more than other kinds of relationship. But OOO goes farther, suggesting that a traditional model of causal interaction is ruled out by the excess of objects. On a traditional model, causal interaction involves direct, material contact between interacting physical objects themselves or between the objects and some intermediary that transmits effects between them. This means that causal interaction happens between entities that are spatially contiguous and involves what one could call the ‘primary qualities’ of those entities. This would seem to be the default model of causation both in Western philosophy and in commonsense—when we see an object appearing to float in midair, we look for spatially contiguous intermediaries like thin wires. And the traditional model seems to fit our intuitive sense that when one billiard ball smacks into another to move it, the surfaces of the balls touch or that when fire burns cotton, the flame touches the filaments of the cotton. But according to the last argument, the curved surface of the billiard ball is not the ball itself and the filamented quality of the cotton is only one of its huge variety of characteristics. It follows that the things themselves or their ‘total realities’ are not interacting. So, a consequence of OOO’s central thesis is that “no object truly contacts another one,” or “real objects cannot touch.”<sup>16</sup> Though the language of touch or contact might seem metaphorical, in cases of causal interaction between physical objects—the sort I will be focusing upon later—this would be literally the case. Even if the surfaces of two objects make physical contact with each other, the objects themselves do not because the objects themselves are not identical to their surfaces.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>13</sup> Harman, “Towards Speculative Realism,” 124.

<sup>14</sup> I have doubts about the validity of this argument—one could make a similar argument for why people must have immaterial, immortal souls—but will grant it for now.

<sup>15</sup> Bryant, “The Democracy of Objects,” 136. Bryant refers here to Whitehead’s concept of prehension.

<sup>16</sup> Respectively Morton, “Realist Magic,” 23 and Harman, “The Quadruple Object,” 73.

But what could causal interaction be other than direct, material contact between objects? If “it is impossible for objects to directly encounter one another,”<sup>17</sup> what’s going on when the billiard balls smash into each other or the fire burns the cotton? For OOO, the solution is to turn from direct, material contact to indirect, partial, and representational interaction. Harman concludes that “an intermediate form of contact between things must be possible. This contact can only take a *sensual* form, since it can only encounter translated or distorted versions of other objects.”<sup>18</sup> Morton, likewise, asserts that causality is “a matter of how entities manifest themselves for other entities...Nuclear radiation-for the flower turns its leaves a strange shade of red,” though it might cause cancer in a human being.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the impossibility of direct contact points in the direction, instead, of distorted representation, with one object only encountering a particular perspective on or aspect of the other objects with which it causally interacts.

I don’t think it is a coincidence that both Harman and Morton use terms—sensual and aesthetic—that have sensory, cognitive, or psychological connotations. On its own, talking about indirect relationships does not sound particularly psychological in nature. But Harman carries with panpsychism, avoiding it only partly by saying “I will speak of *polypsychism*, in order to stress that the roster of experiencing entities must indeed balloon beyond all previous limits, but without quite extending to *all* entities. ...not all objects perceive at all times...”<sup>20</sup> So, Harman really does seem to be saying that objects, though lacking the kind of consciousness possessed by the average adult human being, do undergo experiences or have something akin to perceptions. The way in which the claim that “Access to the things themselves can only be indirect”<sup>21</sup> gets fleshed out, then, is via a form of access that involves representation and distortion. Though some of the passages above seem to imply that this follows directly from OOO’s insight about indirect relationships, it does not. Some reason needs to be given for why partial or indirect relations must have intentional qualities. In short, there are two distinct claims that OOO needs to prove: that causation is indirect and that its indirectness is intentional in form.

### 3 The perceptual argument

The Perceptual Argument appeals to certain analogies between phenomena like human perception, sampling, and translation, on the one hand, and indirect causal interaction, on the other. Though the analogies are suggestive, the argument built upon them is invalid.

Consider first Harman’s version of the argument. He writes

If all relations are on the same footing, and all relations are equally inept at exhausting the depths of their terms, then an intermediate form of contact between things must be possible. This contact can only take a *sensual* form, since it can only encounter translated or distorted versions of other objects. ...Perhaps fire does not think about the cotton that it burns, and perhaps it feels no guilt or pity over its violent actions. But the fire still makes indirect contact with the cotton, since direct contact is impossible (as the Ash’arite occasionalists first saw). This leaves the sensual realm as the only possible field of contact.<sup>22</sup>

It’s worth tracking throughout this passage whether Harman is referring to indirect contact or representational relationships. In the first sentence, the reference is only to indirect contact, repeating the point that the excess of objects means that no object ever interacts directly with another object itself. But in the second sentence, there is a shift to sensual contact or representation. Why? Because indirect contact between objects means that some information about each object is left out of the interaction, so only a partial version of each object is interacting with the other. And that must be a sensual form of interaction.

<sup>17</sup> Bryant, “The Democracy of Objects,” 136.

<sup>18</sup> Harman, “The Quadruple Object,” 120.

<sup>19</sup> Morton, “Hyperobjects,” 39.

<sup>20</sup> Harman, “Towards Speculative Realism,” 122.

<sup>21</sup> Harman, “The Quadruple Object,” 73.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-1.

The final two sentences of the passage reiterate the point: if direct contact is impossible, that leaves only indirect contact, which must be sensual in nature.

At first, it might seem like this passage simply assumes that all indirect relations are sensual or representational in nature, moving in this way: (1) direct or non-partial relations are impossible, (2) so causal interactions must be indirect or partial, (3) all indirect or partial relations are sensual, so (4) causal interactions are sensual. If this were so, Harman would simply be asserting without proof that the indirect/partial and the sensual are the same, which was what he was supposed to be arguing. But notice his claim that “This contact can only take a *sensual* form, since it can only encounter translated or distorted versions of other objects.” This provides the missing step of the argument. The thought seems to be that the indirect/partial interaction does not involve the very being of objects in their entirety, meaning it always leaves something out. And if it leaves something out, it is distorting.<sup>23</sup> This distortion implies the relation is sensual in nature, because bodily sense perception also distorts or translates, leaving out all sorts of information about the thing perceived.

A similar argument can be found in Morton, though he employs a different analogy. Morton writes

Consider the phenomenon of sampling in music. The sampler translates the sound into a regularly perforated version of the sound: the preferred sampling rate is 44 000 times a second, so there are 44 001 little holes in between and on either side of each tiny piece of sample. Every sample is a translation, in that it chops a sensual slice out of an object and thereby creates another object. To that extent, causality is a kind of sampling.<sup>24</sup>

In sampling, a continuous analog sound is broken into a finite number of discontinuous digital pieces. Information is lost as a result. In this sense, the sample puts the sound into a different form (it ‘translates’ the sound). Sampling, then, is certainly partial. In this passage, Morton assumes that causality too is partial and distorting, leaving out some information about the objects interacting. He concludes, in the final sentence, that causality is akin to a sampling of one object by another.

Notice, then, the pattern displayed by both arguments. It is rightly assumed that in a partial or indirect relationship, some information about the related things is irrelevant to the relationship. This is surely true in the case of causation. The fact that one billiard ball was manufactured in Bangladesh or was once owned by a billiards champion has no relevance to the angle at which it ricochets off of a second billiard ball. In Harman’s case, the thought is that if some information is left out of the relation, then a distortion occurs. And if a distortion occurs, the relation must be sensual, since sensual relations also involve distortion. In Morton’s case, the thought is that the case of sampling involves leaving information out and because causal relations also leave information out, they too are a sampling. The pattern of both arguments is the following:

1. If a relation is sensual/sampling, then it involves distortion/information loss
2. Causality involves distortion/information loss
3. So, causality is sensual/sampling

But this affirms the consequent. The fact that sensual encounters or sampling have a certain property doesn’t mean anything else with that property is a sensual encounter or a case of sampling. At most, it would mean something else with the same property is similar or analogous to sensual encounters or sampling in a particular respect. But this is a tautology: if two things have a shared property, they are by definition similar.

<sup>23</sup> It is not clear to me why leaving out information automatically counts as distorting. I suspect leaving out information only distorts one’s view of something if including the missing information would change that view in some important way. Would only an omniscient, God’s eye perspective avoid distortion? But here again I will grant this for the sake of argument.

<sup>24</sup> Morton, “Realist Magic,” 145.

## 4 The explanatory power argument

Still, one might think that the sensual or sampling interpretation of causation is meant to be a suggestive analogy, the truth of which is then defended separately. Morton suggests an argument that might do the trick. His view, in sum, is that OOO's view of causality "can include all kinds of phenomena that other theories have trouble with. An OOO theory of causality can, for instance, include shadows and fear, language and lipstick, alongside billiard balls and photons."<sup>25</sup> In other words, the view that causality is sampling, aesthetic, or sensual in nature can better account for both everyday and unusual cases of causal interaction than the direct, material contact view. Morton mentions a number of such cases, including quantum action at a distance<sup>26</sup> and acts of omission.<sup>27</sup> I am not competent enough in physics or the philosophy of physics to assess Morton's claim in the quantum case, so rather than comment on all of these cases or on the more unusual ones, I will focus on Morton's case of a light sensitive diode detecting a shadow. The case should be telling since it is a common physical occurrence where the traditional view and the OOO view of causation directly compete. Morton also mentions it a number of times, so he seems to take it as a particularly good illustration of OOO's strengths. If OOO can better explain common cases of interaction between physical objects, it should do so here.

As Morton presents the example, the detection of a shadow by a diode shows that causality should be interpreted as an aesthetic phenomenon because shadows are aesthetic phenomena and, in this scenario, they clearly have causal power. He writes that

The aesthetic form of an object is where the causal properties of the object reside. Theories of physical causation frequently want to police aesthetic phenomena, reducing causality to the clunking or clicking of solid things. It is not the case that a shadow is only an aesthetic entity, a flimsy ghost without effects. Plato saw shadows as dangerous precisely because they do have a causal influence. When my shadow intersects with the light sensitive diode, the nightlight switches on. ... Aesthetics, perception, causality, are all almost synonyms.<sup>28</sup>

And again:

Some phenomena such as moving lights, shadows and so on can exert real causal effects, yet these are what positivistic clunk causality tries to rule out. This is evident, since they are the effects of certain causes themselves, and we should expect them to act on things in their turn. A shadow can hit a light sensitive diode and turn on a nightlight. Why this is ruled out as a causal event beats me.<sup>29</sup>

Morton's thought seems to be that a traditional view of causality as involving contact between contiguous material things cannot account properly for the diode case because the shadow breaks the chain of contiguity. But, OOO's theory of causality can account for this case. If all causal phenomena are aesthetic, then there is nothing strange about an aesthetic phenomenon like a shadow having causal power.

The problem with this argument is that the diode case actually can be accounted for by appealing to contact between contiguous material things. Light sensitive diodes are made from materials that react in specific ways when impinged upon by photons. If the rate at which photons impinge on the diode is above a defined level, the diode generates electrons and thus current. If the rate is below that level, it doesn't. That current travels through wires to circuits which are forced closed when they receive a current from the diode, but which are open otherwise. This means there is an easily traceable sequence of contiguous material objects when Morton's shadow causes the nightlight to come on. There is a beam of photons from the sun that is absorbed by Morton. As a result, the stream of photons hitting the diode is below the critical level, consisting only of background radiation. The current received by the circuits is not enough to keep

<sup>25</sup> Morton, "Realist Magic," 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

them closed, so they open and nightlight turns on. Here we can speak of photons, bodies, and current and do just fine.

It might seem that, on this view, the causal power of the shadow itself (the absence of light) has been denied, replaced with the causal power of presences. Saying ‘the shadow caused...’ would then be a *façon de parler* rather than a true account of causal processes. Perhaps it is this move to which Morton objects? Then he could claim that, even though the usual view of causation can explain the sequence of events leading to the nightlight coming on, it still hasn’t attributed any causal power to the shadow itself. Since OOO’s view of causation does attribute causal power to the shadow itself, it is superior.

But then it would be hard to identify why attributing causal power to the shadow is advantageous. If one can explain the sequence of events in the diode case without appealing to the shadow, then it isn’t as if appealing to the shadow helps us explain more. And merely attributing causal power to a greater number of things is not a theoretical advantage. If it were, then attributing causal power to ghosts, demons, and other fictional entities would be better than attributing power only to the human beings who believe in them.

To be clear, I do not wish to defend the traditional view of causation. I am not particularly drawn to any particular view about the nature of causation. Indeed, I incline enough toward the anti-metaphysical philosophies rejected by OOO to wonder whether I should have a metaphysics of causation at all. The point is only that if OOO has more explanatory power than the traditional view, then the traditional view should do clearly worse in some non-exotic instances of causal interaction. It doesn’t seem to me that it actually does. At worst, it seems that we have a tie.

## 5 The occasionalist argument

Because they view causation as indirect in nature, it is no surprise that both Harman and Morton find kindred spirits in the occasionalist philosophies of Medieval Islamic thinkers like Al-Ash’ari and Al-Ghazali and, in Morton’s case, Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna. However, neither Harman nor Morton appeal to the arguments of the Islamic thinkers, given the theistic assumptions of those views.<sup>30</sup>

Morton, though, does appeal to Nagarjuna directly. In a long passage worth quoting in detail, he writes

Nagarjuna, the great philosopher of Buddhist emptiness (shunyatā), argued that a flame never really touches its fuel—nor does it fail to touch! ...If it did so, then the fuel would be the flame or vice versa, and no causality could occur. Yet if they were totally separate, no burning could take place. Nagarjuna argues that if something were to arise from itself, then nothing would happen. Yet if something were to arise from something else that was not-itself, then nothing can happen either. A mixture of these views (both—and and neither—nor) is also possible, since such a mixture would be subject to the defects of each one combined. For instance, on this view, the idea that things arise neither from themselves nor from something else is what Nagarjuna calls nihilism, on which basis anything at all can happen. ...We see flames spurting out of candles all the time, but if the candle were to be touched by the flame, it would simply be part of that object, and a flame can’t be burnt—it is the act of burning. Yet if the flame and the candle were separate, we would never see flames jiggling about on top of candlewicks. Causality, according to this view, is like a magical display— there is no physical reason why it is happening. Rather, the reason is aesthetic (magic, display).<sup>31</sup>

Because Nagarjuna’s work is rather cryptic,<sup>32</sup> I will leave aside the issue of whether Morton has interpreted it correctly, assuming that he would stick to the argument in the above passage even if it turned out Nagarjuna himself had intended something different. As Morton presents it, the thought seems to be that the usual theory of causation as direct material interaction cannot be true because of contradictions that arise from its emphasis on spatial contiguity. When a flame burns a candle, either (a) the flame touches the candle or (b) the flame does not touch the candle. If (a), then the flame and the candle are a single thing. But if the

<sup>30</sup> Morton writes that when it comes to the vicarious force causing things to interact “We don’t need it to be God—in fact, we don’t need God at all. All the vicariousness we want can be found in the aesthetic dimension in which things are enmeshed.” Harman also points out that he uses the term ‘vicarious’ causation rather than ‘occasional’ causation “so as to avoid needless theological overtones...” See Morton, “Realist Magic,” 73 and Harman, “Towards Speculative Realism,” 131, respectively.

<sup>31</sup> Morton, “Realist Magic,” 73-4.

<sup>32</sup> Nagarjuna, “The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way,” 28-30. This is the same edition to which Morton refers.

flame and candle are a single thing, then the flame burning the candle would be the flame burning itself, which is absurd. If (b), then there is no spatial contiguity and the flame cannot burn the candle at all, which is also absurd. Either way, we end up with an absurdity.

Unfortunately, the horn of the dilemma that stems from option (a) rests on false assumptions. First, why would the flame and candle touching make them a single thing? Touching and identity are distinct concepts. The candle, we can imagine, also touches the candle holder on which it sits, which touches the table on which it rests, which touches the floor, and the ground, and so on. If touching were enough to make two things a single thing, then we would eventually end up with only one object in the universe. Though this conclusion might be available to some (like Schaffer<sup>33</sup>), it is not available to Harman or Morton. As we've seen, they each repeatedly speak of objects in the plural and identify many more objects than commonsense suggests—Harman, for instance, holds that the Dutch East India Company was as much an independent object as the people who worked there, the products it imported, and so on.<sup>34</sup> This pluralism about objects means neither Harman nor Morton can bite the monist bullet.

Second, why would the flame and candle being a single thing—even if they were—mean that the flame burning the candle is equivalent to the flame burning itself? Things can have parts, aspects, regions, or features that can be distinguished and referred to separately. Notice that even Morton's phrasing is that "it would simply be part of that object...". So even if the flame and candle were a single thing, we could still say they are distinct parts of the same thing. What we would have then is the flame burning another part of the thing of which it too is a part, rather than the flame burning itself.

So, option (a) seems perfectly viable. Though Nagarjuna's original argument might have been targeting views of causation that could not reject the assumptions that touching makes for identity and that objects don't have parts, I see no reason why we ourselves can't reject them. Even if Nagarjuna's own argument successfully showed what it was trying to show, Morton's version has not.

## 6 The theoretical fit argument

It is interesting that the Occasionalist Argument swings free of OOO, aiming to establish the indirect view of causation independently of object-oriented assumptions. But perhaps this is not, deep down, the strategy of Harman and Morton. Perhaps, instead, they only wish to claim that a specific view of causation fits with OOO.

There is some textual support for this understanding of their intentions. Harman writes that "If all relations are on the same footing, and all relations are equally inept at exhausting the depths of their terms, then an intermediate form of contact between things must be possible."<sup>35</sup> The 'if' in this passage might suggest that Harman only means to claim that his view of causation follows from his metaphysical premises. Relatedly, Morton states about Harman that he "decided that the only way to explain causality, given withdrawn objects, was through some kind of aesthetic process..."<sup>36</sup> Here too, the claim only looks to be that certain assumptions lead to a certain outcome. And Morton says, in his own voice, that "If things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses, they can only affect each other in a strange region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension."<sup>37</sup> There's the same 'if' here as in Harman.

Thus, Harman and Morton might be making the point that an indirect, aesthetic view of causality coheres better with OOO than the traditional, direct view of causality. Taking for granted that there is causation, the argument would then be:

<sup>33</sup> Schaffer, "Monism," 32.

<sup>34</sup> Harman, "Immaterialism," 41.

<sup>35</sup> Harman, "The Quadruple Object," 120-1.

<sup>36</sup> Morton, "Realist Magic," 82.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

1. OOO is true
2. The only way there could be causation if OOO is true is that it is sensual/aesthetic
3. So, causation is sensual/aesthetic

Good exploratory reasoning in the natural sciences sometimes follows a similar structure. If a well-supported theory is found to have counterintuitive consequences, it is reasonable to accept those consequences if no way to block them can be found. If we find that our physics implies the existence of counterintuitive entities like dark matter, there seems to be nothing wrong with rejecting our intuition and operating on the assumption that dark matter is real. We happily proceed to conceive experiments about whether dark matter is hot or cold, what sort of particles it consists of, and so on.

Of course, the case is somewhat different in philosophy. We usually can't come up with experimental data to confirm that our counterintuitive consequences are right. And our theories are rarely as well supported as those in physics. This leaves philosophers vulnerable to the "G.E. Moore shift," a logical tactic also captured by the saying that "one philosopher's modus ponens is another philosopher's modus tollens," which Moore famously used as a tactic to reply to the skeptic.<sup>38</sup> The skeptic argues: skepticism is true; if skepticism is true, then I don't know that this is my hand; so, I don't know that this is my hand. Moore replies: I know that this is my hand; if skepticism is true, then I don't know that this is my hand; so, skepticism is not true. How do we choose which first premise to adopt? Moore seemed to prefer the premise he knew, the one more likely to be true, or the one least likely to involve error (as complex philosophical theories sometimes do). The thought seems to be that we should pick the starting point that has the greatest weight of evidence in its favor in the context of the present concern.

Moore's tactic can be applied to the Theoretical Fit argument that I just outlined. Harman and Morton seem to be arguing:

1. OOO is true
2. The only way there could be causation if OOO is true is that it is sensual/aesthetic
3. So, causation is sensual/aesthetic

But one could instead argue:

- 1\*. Causation is not sensual/aesthetic
2. The only way there could be causation if OOO is true is that it is sensual/aesthetic
- 3\*. So, OOO is not true

The question then becomes whether OOO or the traditional view of causality has more weight of evidence in its favor. That is, should we prefer 1 above or 1\*? First, the other three arguments for the OOO view have severe problems, so there is no independent support for 1. Second, 1\* is the default view both in Western philosophy, in commonsense, and in practice—as I mentioned before, we tend to look for spatially contiguous items when causation appears to be indirect. Third, like the skepticism targeted by Moore, OOO is a complex philosophical theory which claims to be novel, surprising, and counterintuitive, while the traditional view represented in 1\* does not. So, though it is difficult to calculate probabilities here, they do seem to lean in favor of the direct view.

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<sup>38</sup> The term 'G.E. Moore shift' is actually due to Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 339. Rowe points to the chapters on Hume in the book *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* as an example of Moore's use of the technique. The quip about modus ponens and modus tollens is sometimes attributed to Putnam, "Words and Life," 280. Putnam himself calls it a "well known maxim."

## 7 Conclusion: The modes of metaphysics

The four arguments above fail to support the conclusion that causation has the sensual or aesthetic quality Harman and Morton claim. The Perceptual Argument is fallacious. Though it rightly captures the fact that not every property of a thing is involved in each of its causal interactions, this is a trivial truth. The Explanatory Power argument does not show that the sensual/aesthetic view of causation has any theoretical advantages worth wanting. The Occasionalist Argument has false premises which ignore basic distinctions between physical contact and identity and between parts of things. And the Theoretical Fit argument is vulnerable to inversion because of the greater plausibility of the direct view of causation. The upshot is that we're left with the commonsense view that causation involves things and parts of things bumping into each other, much like we would've expected.

But my goal was not to defend the commonsense view of causation, nor any other view of causation. Rather, the goal was experimental: to see what would happen if OOO's theory of causality is assessed on its own terms, its arguments examined in the way it seems to invite. It turns out that OOO seems not to meet its own standards. The attempt to construct an object-oriented, realist metaphysics via strict argumentation can be undermined by one who cloaks himself in similar methods.

In my introduction, I noted that Harman practices various modes of philosophizing, both argumentative and non-argumentative. Non-argumentative modes of philosophizing need to be evaluated differently than argumentative modes. Fictions need not be deductively valid, but should be interesting, insightful, or creative. Hypotheses need not be backed by argumentative rigor, but by helpfulness in solving problems, productiveness, or consistency with established knowledge. If the argumentative mode does not provide enough support to OOO's view of causality, then what support there is will need to come from the non-argumentative modes. If OOO is to be a conceptual framework worth adopting, perhaps the reasons can't be the traditional ones—that it is true or supported by evidence—but instead that it is interesting, original, helpful, and so on. Though causation might not really be aesthetic in nature, maybe philosophy must be.

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