

Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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Object-Oriented Ontology's View of Relations: a Phenomenological Critique

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Abstract: This paper is focused on the possibility of a dialogue between Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and phenomenology, a dialogue concerning the problem of objects and relations. In the first part, the author shows what is interesting in OOO from a phenomenological perspective and why it should be considered as a challenge for contemporary philosophy. The second part develops the phenomenological perspective of the author, a perspective based on Merleau-Ponty's "carnal" phenomenology, as well as some suggestions coming from the Italian school of Gaetano Kanizsa. The third part is dedicated to the objections of the author to the OOO view regarding the separation between objects and relations: a separation which leads to Harman's quadruple object. In the concluding portion, the author shows that, despite evident differences between phenomenological and OOO's views of relations, OOO offers new starting points for phenomenological reflections, thanks to its specific focus on objects and its pluralistic view of reality.

Keywords: phenomenology, object-oriented ontology, Italian phenomenology, realism

1 Introduction

When I started to read Graham Harman's books and papers, my first impression was that the author was trying a new way among the philosophical approaches to the world. Those who like the phenomenological perspective – as I do – linger on their living experience (as a sort of aristocratic pleasure) but there comes a moment when they start reflecting. I mean that, despite the interest that this approach can raise in our vision of the world and in the philosophical debate, I find a huge problem with one of its premises: OOO's strong difference between objects and relations. Since I come from a phenomenological background, the possibility of such a separation sounds weird. Harman likes the term "weird" (he explicitly defines his philosophy as "weird realism"), so maybe he would take this as a compliment.¹ "Weird" could be used as a synonym for "different," and when one approaches something different, it forces us to call our view of the world into question. Phenomenologists are extremely happy to do so, just as Husserl was when he theorized his *epoché*, his suspension of judgement, through which the individual subject puts into brackets its faith into the existence of the world: its "natural attitude."² Harman made me do this for my own views, so I put into brackets my phenomenological assumptions and read what he tried to communicate. Unfortunately for him, the ghosts of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Schütz, and Levinas came to reproach me with acritical thinking and made me write this paper.

¹ Harman, "On Vicarious Causation", 187.

² Cf. Husserl, *Ideas I*, §32 and Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 43.

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In the first place, I will write about what is interesting in Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and why it should be considered as a challenge for philosophy. Secondly, I will explain the phenomenological perspective to which I adhere concerning the subject, object, and relations. This is necessary in order to understand the objections I will raise to OOO in the third part of this paper. Finally, I will express my view of the relation between phenomenology and OOO.

2 The relevance of OOO's perspective

First of all, it should not be ignored that Harman defines his OOO as a subset of Speculative Realism (SR); this is a group of thinkers who have very different perspectives and agree on only one assumption: the opposition to correlationism, according to which “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”³ This is the only commitment shared in common by Meillassoux, Brassier, Harman, Grant, and others, though according to Brassier himself, there is no such thing as a speculative realist movement, and he openly dissociates himself from it.⁴ Being aware of this disagreement, I prefer to write about Harman's OOO without referring to other speculative realists.⁵

Harman, as the leading thinker of OOO, is a realist: he thinks that there is an external world outside the human mind, and that this world is made of objects. These include not just physical things, as common sense and materialism both hold, but also fictional ones.⁶ Harman also thinks there is a gap between the objects of thought, called “sensual objects”, and independent objects themselves, called “real objects.”⁷ Moreover, the difference between them is that the former can be thought in a relational way, whereas the latter withdraw from every “sensual” (Harman's version of “intentional”) grasp and are unreachable. Since Harman states that matter is not the only property of reality, but that every object has a psyche once it enters into relation, he cannot be considered as a reductionist or materialist. But he defines his view as “polypsychism” rather than as “panpsychism,” since he does not conceive of a unique psychical entity or force permeating all things indifferently, but holds that there are as many different psyches as there are real objects coming into relation.⁸

Without entering now into a criticism of these statements – as I will do in the third part – I could start from the latter assumption: that there is not a single unique entity, but many of them. In this way, Harman goes against every form of monism, be it subjective (the I, Spirit, or Absolute in German Idealism) or objective (the Spinozan substance). Harman has a plural view of the cosmos, which for him is made up of multiple different entities. Notwithstanding this plurality, there is no hierarchy between them: Harman, inspired by

³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

⁴ Ray Brassier's view of Speculative Realism can be considered very argumentative. His exact words are: “The ‘speculative realist movement’ exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don't believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze's remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a ‘movement’ whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity.” Brassier, “I Am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in Truth.”

⁵ I would like to point out that Harman is not the only philosopher who develops an Object-Oriented Ontology. The collection of essays *Object-Oriented Feminist*, edited by Katherine Behar, is an example of its application to gender issues. Even Ian Bogost follows Harman's path and uses a phenomenological method based on OOO. He likes to define his thought an “alien phenomenology”, because it leaves “behind the human as solitary consciousness like the Voyager spacecraft leaves behind the heliosphere on its way beyond the boundaries of the solar system.” (Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 32) I will show in this paper that phenomenology and OOO have affinities, but also unavoidable differences, so that calling OOO an “alien phenomenology” should be considered inappropriate, or at least a very wide and unorthodox interpretation of phenomenology itself.

⁶ According to Harman, an object is a unified thing that cannot be reduced to its components or effects. Cf. Harman, *Speculative Realism*, Chapter 3, Part A.

⁷ Cf. Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 193.

⁸ Cf. Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 213.

Latour, thinks that dignity should be granted “even to the least grain of reality,”⁹ so that every being whether living, non-living, vegetable, animal, or human are all considered on the same level (flat ontology).¹⁰ This is an explicit criticism of both theocentricism and anthropocentrism, even if the former could be considered as just a heightened version of the latter. As Feuerbach states, “*theology is anthropology*: in other words, the object of religion, which in Greek we call *theos* and in our language God, expresses nothing other than the essence of man; man’s God is nothing other than the deified essence of man, so that the history or religion or, what amounts to the same thing, of God [...] is nothing other than the history of man.”¹¹

Western thought is mostly either theocentric (especially in Medieval philosophy) or anthropocentric (from Socrates to contemporary thought). Early ancient philosophers could be considered as “cosmocentric” and Harman, inspired by them, has decided to follow their path as an “objectocentric” thinker. What is interesting in OOO is the attention it pays to non-human entities and their dignity. Maybe phenomenologists have spent too much effort on understanding the human subject, the human other, and the human world. This effort was and remains necessary, but paying attention to what is (or is perceived as) non-human is already essential in phenomenology. Non-humanity is real otherness: the dog, the rosemary, the piece of coal, the table are *clearly different* from me, whether this difference be radical or partial; they are more different from me than any other human being could be.

The second interesting point in OOO is contained in its name, which contains a specific attention to the object. Phenomenologists love objects: even if they usually share an egological perspective (a subject-centered line of thought), there could be no subject without something to which it relates. Consciousness is intentional.¹² All phenomenologists, starting from Husserl, agree on the fact that there is no such thing as a *tabula rasa*, as a subject without an object. Even when I think of myself, I am directed to myself as an object. Even if I can bracket my faith in the outer existence of the world (and its objects), I cannot deny that the objects are there. I am a stream of thoughts, feelings, emotions, so that I am, as a concrete subject, a living experience or *Erlebnis*. But all this experience is experience of something, and that “something” is objects. Phenomenologists should then be curious and interested in what object-oriented ontology says, given that they want to understand objects, their structure, and qualities. Harman tries to do this, writing about the relations between (sensual and real) objects and (sensual and real) qualities. His efforts are all directed to understanding what they are and how they interact –if they can– with each other. A problem now arises, one that will be discussed in the third part: is it possible to separate objects from relations, even if they can be conceived as external to the subject? More radically, can an object *as such* be conceived as separated from a subject?

The third interesting aspect of OOO is its peculiar form of realism. A wide definition of realism asserts the existence of entities which are independent from us, especially from our thoughts: realists believe that there are things outside the human mind, and that these things would be there even if the subject faded away.¹³ To be realist does not imply a belief in any specific nature of things (whether material, psychic, or spiritual), but in Western thought there are many authors who are both realist and materialist: Democritus, Hobbes, Diderot, Feuerbach, and Marx for instance. They all think that matter constitutes the substratum of the things or their appearance, so that realism must take on its most reductionist form. But Harman explicitly counters that materialism ruins realism, since “it either undermines objects from below, reducing them downward to their material underpinning, or it overmines them from above, reducing them upward to their appearance for human beings.”¹⁴ Harman, who is not a reductionist, stands for realism but not for materialism.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰ Simon Mussell, from a background of Critical Theory, criticizes flat ontology for its ignoring of social, political, historical, and cultural content in its analysis of objects (cf. Mussell, *Critical Theory and Feeling*, 88). Phenomenologists agree with Critical Theory on the importance of the social and historical background of an incarnate subject; however, they also try to focus on the constancy of phenomena, of objects as they appear.

¹¹ Feuerbach, *Lectures on The Essence of Religion*, third lecture, 17.

¹² According to Husserl, intentionality “expresses the fundamental property of consciousness” (Husserl, *Ideas I*, §146, 357), which is “the peculiarity of experiences [*Erlebnissen*] ‘to be the consciousness of something’” (Ibid., §84, 204).

¹³ The first principle of realism is: “The world is independent from the mind.” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism”, 53).

¹⁴ Ibid., 52. The conceptual couple undermining/overmining is constitutive of Harman’s OOO.

It is right to specify that not all realist thinkers are materialist: Plato and Aristotle are two thinkers who state that existence in an outer world does not imply that this world is made of pure matter (they both believe in the existence of immaterial forms). Even Medieval Christian philosophy could be considered as realist: things exist outside the human mind, because it is God who creates them and He is also the creator of mankind. In all these cases, the psychic or spiritual part of reality is considered as superior to material one. The same could be said about Descartes, or other dualist or pluralist thinkers. What is interesting in Harman is that he refuses monism and is inspired by a plural understanding of reality, which gives the objects their independence,¹⁵ without imposing any definite nature on them. Moreover, Harman explicitly writes that objects can have a psyche whenever they interact with each other; it means that his concept of pluralism implies not only that there are many things independent from each other (pluralism of entities), but also that these things can be made in different ways (pluralism of natures or substances): ontological pluralism is what constitutes his realism, and this too can be interesting from a phenomenological point of view. According to Husserlian phenomenology, which stands in opposition to naturalism and reductionism, there are different layers of subjectivity and reality: the physical, the psychic (and their relation as psychophysical), and the spiritual— there is also the transcendental layer, as a purely theoretical one.¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that the mind and the body, the subject and the object, the I and the other, I and the world are different, even if the boundary between them is not well defined (because of the ambiguity of reality).¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas states that the subject separates itself from the general “there is” (*il y a*), that it relates to the elemental world nature, matter as an independent being, and that the other person is someone radically different from it.¹⁸ Schütz writes about intersubjectivity as the fundament of subjectivity itself and about “finite provinces of meaning”— which are similar to William James’ “sub-worlds”— of the living experience.¹⁹ In all these cases, phenomenology is far from reductionism, from both the ontological and the epistemic point of view: this is the reason why the pluralist version of Harman’s realism could be considered interesting from a phenomenological perspective.

In brief, Harman’s OOO contains two aspects which should inspire curiosity in those who support the phenomenological view: its pluralist ontology, which is a medicine against both anthropocentrism and reductionism, and its attention to the object, which is given a central role at the heart of philosophical reflection. However, there are also some aspects which could not be accepted, not even by the so-called “carnal phenomenologists,”²⁰ who are well-known and much-appreciated by Harman—the first part of *Guerrilla Metaphysics* is dedicated to them— but who are distant in many respects from OOO. The second part of this article will be dedicated to the phenomenological perspective, especially the “carnal” one, in order to understand the objections towards OOO that will be developed in the third part.

3 A phenomenological perspective on subject, object, and relations

According to its founder Edmund Husserl, phenomenology has one specific aim: “Meanings inspired only by remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions – if by any intuitions at all – are not enough: we must go back to

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The second book of Husserl’s *Ideas* is completely dedicated to the developing of this difference. Cf. esp. Husserl, *Ideas II*, §§20-21.

¹⁷ “This ambiguity is not some imperfection of consciousness or existence, but the definition of them” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 387).

¹⁸ Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, sect. II A-C about enjoyment and the elemental and, more specifically, 36-39, 59-60, 100-101 about the individuation of the subject from *il y a* and the encounter with the other person.

¹⁹ Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 167 and “On Multiple Realities”, in *CPI*, 230.

²⁰ Harman defines “carnal phenomenology” as the thought of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Lingis, since in “all three of these authors, we find ourselves mesmerized by the objects in the world, rooted in a carnal setting where our bodies meet with the voluptuous textures of entities” (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 3).

the ‘things themselves.’²¹ Husserl is not interested either in an individual or a social meaning, but rather to the intersubjective meaning we give to our experience of the world. To this purpose, we must go back to the objects of experience itself: namely, to the things. However, the only way we can approach them is through their appearance, through their being manifest to us. Phenomenology derives its name from the Greek *phainomenon* (“that which appears”) and *logos* (“discourse”). Phenomenology is thus, from the beginning, a study of the object as it appears to the subject, as it is related to it. Husserl does not place into question the existence of external entities, but considers it irrelevant: what matters is the reference to the object and its representation.²² Even if we perceive a world external to us, we have no means of understanding things outside our thought, but can only do so from our own point of view, from a subjective perspective. Husserl does not say that there are no things in themselves or things existing independently from the human subject: he just asserts that things can be known only as objects, as related to a subject. Subject, object, and relation are strictly bound to each other. Objects are not conceived of as existing independently of the subject, but even the opposite: since the subject is considered as a conscious being and consciousness is intentional, there could be no subject without an object to relate to.

These lines of thought are shared by the phenomenological tradition; however, they can be interpreted in several ways. Starting with the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl seems to be interested in an understanding of the structures and processes of human thought, and its approach to the objects as phenomena. He analyzes the constitution of the object in its pre-predicative sphere,²³ but he seems more concerned with the ego. Husserl is focused on the subject not only as the “who” of thinking, acting, and living, but also as an object itself: the major concern of the father of phenomenology is to grasp the transcendental ego, a subject purified, through the process of *epoché*, of its individual features. Whereas in the *epoché* of psychological phenomenology only the faith in the existence of external world is suspended, in the transcendental one Husserl tries to reach the pure structure of the human subject.²⁴ However, this is a very difficult task to accomplish, and the author seems to fail.²⁵ It can be said that, notwithstanding his programmatic intent, Husserl is more interested in the subject than in the object: or broadly speaking, in what is thought as being outside the ego. He also encounters a problem in understanding alterity,²⁶ and limits himself to a definition of the other as an *alter ego*, thus assimilating him to the subject: “all that which holds for me myself holds, as I know, for all other human beings.”²⁷ This is the reason why Husserlian thought, especially in its late period, could be considered solipsistic: even Alfred Schütz, who shares many views with Husserl as to the constitution of subjectivity, points out that the problem of intersubjectivity remains unsolved in his work.²⁸ Even if Husserl tries to throw light on it, he reduces intersubjectivity to a generic transcendental halo, related to the monadic dimension of the individual ego. Husserlian thought leaves open the problem of the relationship to human alterity. Schütz criticizes it in order to offer a foundation for the social sciences, whereas Levinas does it because he is interested in the foundation of ethics. The latter can be rooted only in otherness, which is not the general alterity of the world, but the singular alterity of the other person: through the Face, Infinity is revealed and forces the ego to leave aside its egoism and to give itself to the other person.²⁹ This is not the place to develop this issue further. I would only like to point out that Husserlian thought, in its programmatic intention of going back to the things themselves, goes back only to the subject

²¹ Husserl, *Logical Investigations I*, Introduction to Vol. II, Part I of the German edition, 168.

²² Ibid., First Investigation, §15. As Dan Zahavi points out, “for Husserl the distinction to keep unto is not the one between the intentional object and the real object, but the one between the merely intentional object, and the real and intentional object” (Zahavi, “The End of What?”, 299).

²³ Cf. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 51-52, 67.

²⁴ Cf. Husserl, “Phenomenology,” 83-85.

²⁵ Cf. Brand, *Welt, Ich und Zeit*, §9 and Armando Rigobello, “Dio nella modernità: Husserl,” 279.

²⁶ Harman hates this word, just saying that it is horrible (cf. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 259). I disagree with him, since “alterity” has Latin origins and can easily be adapted to many languages, more so than the Anglo-Saxon-centered “otherness.” In any case, I use both as synonyms in my English-language works.

²⁷ Cf. Husserl, *Ideas I*, 55.

²⁸ Cf. Schütz, “Scheler’s Theory of Intersubjectivity,” in *CPI*, 165-166.

²⁹ “The face arrests totalization. The welcoming of alterity hence conditions consciousness and time.” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 281).

and its particular way of approaching objects. From this perspective, Schütz's and Levinas' criticisms seem to be well-founded.

However, neither of these authors is any better in developing their own thoughts on objects. Schütz seems to have different interests, since his concern is to understand intersubjectivity – in my opinion he and Ricoeur offer the best such positions in phenomenological thought³⁰ and to develop an understanding of social action. Schütz leaves us with no specific thought about objects and admits his ignorance about reality,³¹ whereas Levinas seems to have little concern about it. The latter's approach to the external world is shown in *Totality and Infinity*. Here the subject is separated from the *il y a*, which is not the external world, as Harman writes,³² but the indifferent Totality of Being: or better, Being according to onto-theological thought. The anonymous “there is” is conceived as a reduction of external reality to Sameness, to “existence without existents,”³³ thus denying the alterity of things and of other human beings. Once the ego is separated from this misconception of reality, thanks to the general alterity of the world, it feels at home.³⁴ At this stage the subject, which is a unity of body and soul, meets the world as it is, as the element, through its flesh. Here Harman's critique is well-developed, since it points out how Levinas' approach to the things goes beyond Heidegger's *Zuhandenheit* and is directed toward a pure quality rather than to definite entities.³⁵ Levinas' thought, despite its carnal bond with the things through the element, cannot overcome the danger of a monism of being and anonymity regarding things themselves; Levinas thus prefers to focus on the alterity of the other person, rather than that of animate and inanimate entities.

A better understanding of the object in phenomenology is offered by Merleau-Ponty and the thinkers inspired by his theory of perception. Merleau-Ponty dedicates his whole career to the study of perception, to the way in which objects come into contact with the subject; for this reason, he writes a lot of pages on what an object is and how it is approached by the ego. Just as Levinas does, he thinks that the ego is literally “in touch” with the world: the psyche cannot be separated from the body, but on the contrary: “I am my body.”³⁶ Merleau-Ponty thinks of the body as a medium between the subject and the object of perception. These objects can be “external” things (plants, animals, rocks, instruments, artworks), other people (through an original intersubjective experience), but also the subject itself as an objective body or in its psycho-physical sensations. They all have in common their reference to the subjective body, which is “in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.”³⁷ Merleau-Ponty refuses a purely intellectualistic perspective and thinks that space, time, things, and other people can be conceived only through the *Leib*: the “one's own body,” as distinguished from the *Körper*, the objective body (the Cartesian *res extensa*). Merleau-Ponty borrows this distinction from Husserl,³⁸ who defines one's own body as the *Nullpunkt*, “the zero point of orientation, the bearer of the here and the now, out of which the pure Ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses.”³⁹ It means that every object must be constitutively in relation to one's own body. However, the distinction between objective and subjective body is ambiguous even in Husserl, who recognizes that when the body perceives itself, its two aspects are confused. If I touch my left hand with my right, the right hand feels the left hand, which feels the right one in turn. In this way the right hand, which

³⁰ I am referring especially to Schütz's “Scheler's Theory of Intersubjectivity,” where the We-relation is considered the root of both Thou-relation and subjective foundation, and to Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*, where reciprocity – founded on imperative and responsibility – is an equilibrating answer to Levinas' asymmetrical ethics.

³¹ “I am afraid I do not know exactly what reality is, and my only comfort in this unpleasant situation is that I share my ignorance with the greatest philosophers of all time.” (Schütz, “The Problem of Rationality in the Social World”, in *CP II*, 88).

³² Cf. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 40. As Harman writes, Levinas states that “the elements extend into the *there is*” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 142). However, this does not mean that the external world is completely anonymous, but that the general and unidentified nature of the element can be reduced to the Same.

³³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 142.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 30.

³⁵ Cf. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 36-39.

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 202.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

³⁸ Cf. Husserl, *Ideas II*, §§12-15, 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

should be an organ of *Leib*, is also *Körper*, and the same could be said for the left hand, which should be the touched one but also touches the right one.⁴⁰ Thus the subjective body can change itself into the objective one, and vice versa.

Merleau-Ponty is very attentive to this ambiguity and dedicates his later thought to this problem: leaving aside the classical words “one’s own body” (*corps propre*) and “phenomenal body” (*corps phénoménal*) used in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, he prefers the term “flesh” (*chair*) to indicate the *Leib*. It is so indistinct that it turns itself into the object, thus being a medium towards my perception of myself, of other entities, and the whole world: it is the *chair du monde*, “the flesh of the world.”⁴¹ Harman points out how this flesh “is the intertwining, interlacing, interfacing of I myself with the sensible world” and “the medium through which the visible and the invisible, or the visible and the tangible, pass over into each other and melt back into one another.”⁴² The concept of ambiguity becomes stronger in Merleau-Ponty’s later works, since the difference between the subject and the object, the inner and outer world seems to be increasingly less delineated. Despite this possible inclination to monism, Merleau-Ponty seems to suggest –according to Harman– the existence of different levels of reality. This idea is developed by Alphonso Lingis, a famous philosopher and translator of Levinas’ and Merleau-Ponty’s works into the English language.⁴³ Lingis conceives of the levels not as belonging to the perceptive structure of the human subject, but to reality itself.

However, he is not the only thinker who addresses phenomenology towards a realist perspective. The Italian psychological and phenomenological school of Kanizsa, followed by Paolo Bozzi, his disciple Luca Taddio and the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris, theorizes an autonomous structure of perception due to objects outside us.⁴⁴ This idea is inspired by the *Gestalttheorie*, which also influences Merleau-Ponty, and is proved by several experiments concerning the way in which we approach things, depending on the change of perceptive conditions. Through these experiments the constant structures of perception are shown, pointing out how it remains the same, if the conditions are the same for all the subjects. There is a constancy in the perceptive phenomenon, showing that it does not depend on the individual subject, but on the interaction between our structures as human beings and the object.⁴⁵ In this way, the appearance of the phenomenon can be studied “as it is,” giving birth to a descriptive discipline that is independent from the natural sciences, metaphysics, and their conceptualizations. This kind of experimental phenomenology is focused on the object, to which thought is brought back,⁴⁶ and presumes their external reality, whose truth is “«inside» them, in their invisible essence”.⁴⁷

However, the task of phenomenology is not to produce metaphysical hypotheses on how the external world is made, what substance is (if it exists), and what the boundaries are between one thing and another. Phenomenological thought does not deny the existence of an outer world made up of outer entities, but cannot assert it with absolute certainty. The only thing that can be stated is that *I perceive things as external and different from me*, so that I can identify the object in front of me as –for instance– a book: as something that can be seen, touched, and smelt by me. I can see its white cover, the black writings on it, and the image of a cube in the middle; I can open it, put my hand inside, and feel the smoothness of the paper, and also smell the ink of the printed pages. I perceive this object as a book, not as an extension of myself: if I get up and go to another room, the book is not with me anymore. I can presume that it is on the same table where I left it, but am not sure if someone took it and moved it to another place. I can perceive the book as

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 105 and Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §44.

⁴¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 83-84. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, instead, the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* is still there, some ambiguity notwithstanding. “In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore neither be seen or touched. What prevents its ever being an object [...] is that it is that by which there are objects.” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 105)

⁴² Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 54.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, chap. 5, par. C.

⁴⁴ Among the many works of this Italian school see Gaetano Kanizsa, *Vedere e pensare*, Paolo Bozzi, *Fenomenologia sperimentale*, Maurizio Ferraris, *Il mondo esterno* and *Manifesto of New Realism*, and Luca Taddio, *Fenomenologia eretica*.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ferraris, *Il mondo esterno*, 94.

⁴⁶ Cf. Taddio, *Fenomenologia eretica*, 30.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34. The English translation from the original Italian is my own.

something different from me, just as I can perceive a feeling of anger starting out from my chest and going through my limbs and head as a feeling of anger. Internal and external perception are different from each other: in the former the object perceived is inseparable from the subject, whereas the latter considers the object as separate.

Perception is nothing but *the awareness of the alterity of the object*: in inner perception, it is something bound to me but not coinciding with me, whereas in outer perception the object is independent from me, is a thing. Objects and things do not coincide with each other and this distinction is very important, since I can call something an object only if it is related to a subject (whether me or someone else), whereas a thing is perceived as external and independent from a subject. It means that the ego cannot change a thing only through the ego's own modifications, as happens with objects of inner perception, but only through actions. If I am angry and after a certain lapse of time calm down, I cannot perceive my anger anymore, whereas the book does not change its shape or its position if I change my state of mind: only if I take scissors and cut the pages will the book change. My anger is a feeling, the book is a thing, but both are objects. An object can thus be defined as that to which consciousness is directed, in both its visible and invisible aspects. According to Merleau-Ponty, it can be considered as the “projections of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives,”⁴⁸ as a sum total of perspectives. Does this mean that, if every subject (human or non-human) disappeared, that objects would disappear as well? Of course they would cease to appear, for there would be no phenomena without someone or something to appear to. Yet the opposite is true as well: if phenomena disappeared, the subjects would disappear with them. However, the question could be posed differently: if all subjects ceased to exist, would things cease to exist as well? Could there be a non-subjective world? A phenomenologist cannot answer this question. He or she can only say that, as long as there are subjects there will be objects, and vice versa. Phenomenology tends toward realism more than idealism, since it is based on perception: things appear to us as being outside us, not as creations of a universal subject, since they do not change according to subjective changes. However, phenomenology cannot be assimilated to an ingenuous realism, since it cannot believe in something it cannot approach or prove – the real existence of things outside the subject. Phenomenology is based instead on the relations between the subject and the object, and on the awareness that the former has of the latter: it is a form of perspectivism.

4 A phenomenological criticism of OOO's view of relations

The main problem posed by OOO consists in its basic model of the cosmos, which implies three points that are questionable from the standpoint of phenomenology: the first is its sharp distinction between real and sensual objects, the second is the absence of relation between two real objects, and the third is the distinction between objects and relations.

The first issue consists in a dualistic vision of reality, implying a clear difference between the object-in-itself and the object as it appears. Harman, replying to those who accused him of Kantianism,⁴⁹ asserts that this distinction should be accepted, and that “the problem with Kant is not that he left us stranded in finite ignorance by positing a thing-in-itself beyond all access, but that he restricted this thing-in-itself to human experience.”⁵⁰ Unlike Meillassoux, who goes against the Kantian philosophy of limits, Harman has no objection to accepting boundaries to our knowledge. Moreover, he extends the same structure to non-human entities. This extension can actually be accepted by phenomenology, since intentionality, through which a subject is directed towards an object, does not only concern human beings. Husserl asserts that animals do have a psyche,⁵¹ and it is not difficult to conceive that even plants show a certain kind of

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 77.

⁴⁹ This is one of the objections Peter Wolfendale makes to Object Oriented Philosophy and to Harman's alternative to a supposed “correlationism” in Continental Philosophy (cf. Wolfendale, *Object-oriented Philosophy*, 293). A similar objection is also made by Andrew Cole in “Those Obscure Objects of Desire.”

⁵⁰ Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 114.

⁵¹ Cf. esp. Husserl, *Ideas II*, §§30-33.

intentionality (the sunflower, for instance, follows the direction of the sun). However, a phenomenologist may well be skeptical as concerns the intentionality of inanimate objects. According to Harman, his model “allows any real entity, from sand to bacteria to the Exxon Corporation, to have such an intentional life.”⁵² A phenomenologist cannot assert with certainty that sand or marbles are subjects of intentional acts, because intentionality implies consciousness and inanimate objects do not show any sign of this.⁵³ Since the inner life of inanimate objects is unknown, it cannot be either accepted or excluded; a phenomenologist can only suspend his or her judgement on this issue. Since Harman does not push his statements too far, and refuses to assert that inanimate objects are conscious, he changes the usual meaning of intentionality: the latter is defined as the fact of entering into relation with a sensual object.⁵⁴ The psyche should not be conceived as a form of vitality and awareness, but as a medium which comes and goes, according to the presence of relations themselves.⁵⁵ This is the reason why phenomenology and OOO do not agree on their definition of intentionality, and this discrepancy is reflected in their two different theories of knowledge.

Husserlian phenomenology entails that intentionality is a subjective act, through which consciousness turns its attention to a phenomenal object, operating a meaning-bestowal (*Sinngebung*):⁵⁶ the relation between a subject and an object is not only conscious, but also productive. On the other side of this issue, Harman seems to theorize an immanent objectivity, a sort of neutral (or passive) encounter between a real object and the appearance of another object (the sensual object). It is true that Husserlian phenomenology points out the existence of a pre-predicative ground of intentionality (the passive synthesis),⁵⁷ which is to be considered in relation to the activity of consciousness, to that which constitutes its productivity. Harman seems to focus his attention on the passive side of intentionality, on its grounds more than its activity, thus extending it to inanimate objects. Even if the passive synthesis is of great interest for phenomenologists after Husserl, especially Merleau-Ponty,⁵⁸ it cannot be conceived as separated from consciousness. This is the reason why Harman’s use of the term “intentionality,” in my opinion, should be rejected: the word “intention” (from which “intentionality” is derived) indicates an awareness of a thought or an act, so that an intentional relation should involve consciousness (including its passive ground as well). Maybe Harman should use a different word, such as “relationality” or, in a more specific sense, “connection,” which does not necessarily imply any form of awareness.

Following on from the problem of dualism in Harman’s philosophy, it should be said that Husserl seems to theorize the existence of objects out of their phenomenal dimension, even if he does not consider it a real problem for phenomenology: “It makes no essential difference to an object presented and given to consciousness whether it exists, or is fictitious, or is perhaps completely absurd.”⁵⁹ The judgement on the existence of the noumenon is suspended, but the problem is still there. Husserl would not agree with an ontological positing of the object-in-itself; that is, Harman’s real object. Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, goes beyond this suspension of judgement and tries to deepen the relation between real and sensual objects, no less than the one between subject and object. Since we connect to the world through our body, our carnal dimension, we cannot define clear boundaries between what is ours and what is external, what is physical and what is psychical, what is subjective and what is objective: this is the ambiguity of reality, which is the ground of our rooting in the inner and outer world.⁶⁰ The visible and the invisible are thus in relation with each other, and we are constantly connected with it. Even if we cannot obtain an all-inclusive grasp on ourselves and the world, we can have an experience of the objects through our body, our flesh, which is the flesh of the world. Since the boundaries between objects and their different levels are not sharp, there is a way of acceding to the object-in-itself without reifying it, without reducing it to an immanent and powerful

52 Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 211.

53 Cf. note 12 above.

54 Cf. Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 114.

55 Cf. Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 213.

56 Cf. esp. Husserl, *Ideas I*, §55, 124.

57 See Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, Part II: *Analyses Concerning Passive Synthesis*.

58 Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 496.

59 Husserl, *Logical Investigations II*, Investigation V, 99.

60 Cf. note 17 above.

subjectivity. When I touch a book, I am in contact with both the perceptible and non-perceptible parts of it: the difference is that the former are clear to my consciousness, whereas the latter are not, but the body is not reducible to its conscious or intellectual parts. Sensitivity is the way in which every subject can connect to the world and to every object which constitutes it.

Since I share this phenomenological perspective on reality, I cannot agree with Harman's statement that real objects cannot undergo change due to contact with other objects. This point needs to be deepened in reference to the second questionable aspect of OOO: that is, the absence of relation between two real objects. According to Harman, the "relation between real objects is one of *withdrawal* or mutual seclusion."⁶¹ Here the author goes back to Heidegger's concept of giving and withdrawal of Being: whereas Western tradition has focused on the disclosing of Being in beings, giving birth to onto-theological thought, Being has been subject to oblivion. True ontology (not ontic thought) must come back to Being as such, in order to understand its manifestation through beings to the human *Da-sein*, the being who makes the questions on what Being is: this is the Heideggerian way to phenomenology.⁶² It does not mean that Being becomes disclosed at all, but that the movement of concealment (*lethe*) and unconcealment (*a-letheia*, the Greek word for "truth") of Being can be better understood through its various manifestations (poetic language and the arts, especially).⁶³ Harman is thus trying to apply Heidegger's giving and withdrawal of Being to singular objects, writing that sensual objects are disclosed to the subjects, whereas real objects are hidden. However, when Heidegger writes about withdrawal, he is not referring to separate objects, but to Being as such. Objects are not separated from relations to *Da-sein*, on the contrary: if ontology is phenomenology, then one must study how objects relate to the human subject, the only one to which *Sein* discloses itself. During its being disclosed in objects Being is, at the same time, hidden. The mystery (*Geheimnis*) of this withdrawal does not concern singular objects, but Being as such: because of its sacredness, it cannot be objectified. The problem here is not Harman's difference with Heidegger, since he expresses it clearly: whereas Heidegger conceives a negative relation between *Sein* and *Da-sein*, between Being and beings, Harman states that there is no relation at all.⁶⁴ However, using the word withdrawal implies a *withdrawal from* something: Harman does not write about simple unknowability, which requires no relation with anything, but withdrawal, which includes a preceding relation of disclosure. Withdrawal is not a static situation, but a dynamic movement. Harman seems to have understood this problem and, even if he has not abandoned the term "withdrawal", he has started to use the word "withholding": which does not require any movement or relation, but only a "staying there", a static situation.⁶⁵ Maybe this term is more coherent with his idea of "no relation at all" between two real objects.

In my opinion, the use of better terminology would be welcome, but the problem of the absence of relation would remain nonetheless. Phenomenology does not imply that every object must be in relation with every other: a teacher living in Los Angeles may have no relation with a specific rock in the Caucasus Mountains, if he or she does not touch it, see it, or even just think about it. The absence of some relations, according to phenomenology, can be there or thought of, since it is not a holistic or hyper-subjective view of reality. However, some of the examples used by Harman seem questionable: "When hailstones strike village roofs, they strike *phenomenal* roofs, not the roofs-in-themselves that are a permanent surplus beyond any relation anything might have to them."⁶⁶ If the object-in-itself could not be modified by any kind of relation concerning its phenomenal level, then it should be something which is permanently untouchable and

⁶¹ Harman, "Seventy-Six Theses," no. 50. Cf. also Harman, *Speculative Realism*, Chapter 3, Part A.

⁶² "Ontology is possible only as phenomenology" (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 33).

⁶³ An analysis of *lethe* and *aletheia* is well "disclosed" in Heidegger, "The Essence of Truth," 100-101. Heideggerian studies on arts, language, and poetry are developed in two famous collections of essays: *Off the Beaten Track* and *On the Way to Language*.

⁶⁴ Cf. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 97. I do not agree with Harman's idea that the difference between giving and withdrawal of Being coincides with their *Zuhandenheit* ("readiness-to-hand") and *Vorhandenheit* ("presence-at-hand"). According to this position, what is not usable should, according to Heidegger, be completely unknowable. I thus support the position of Bernasconi, who also refers to Heidegger's later works and states that *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit* are two different modalities of presence, of unconcealment. Cf. Harman, *Tool-Being*, 111-112 and Robert Bernasconi, *Heidegger in Question*, 22.

⁶⁵ Cf. Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 105-107, 118, 121.

⁶⁶ Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 121.

remaining the same. However, is this true for every kind of phenomenal relation, even the ones implying the partial or total change of the object? According to the aforementioned example, the real roof struck by the hailstones should be exactly the same as the real roof before the hailstorm. However, if the hailstones struck a shingle of the roof and this shingle fell down on earth, what would we say about the roof? Would it be exactly the same as before, even if it had lost one of its pieces? What would we say about the separated shingle? The relation between the shingle and the roof has changed, because they do not constitute the same object anymore. If no one climbs the roof and puts it back where it was before, they will be considered as two separate objects, having two different system of relations. In this way, the phenomenal impact of the hailstones on the phenomenal roof would also cause an impact on the real roof.

However, let us suppose that the “essence” of the roof does not change with the hailstorm and that it only gives birth to a separate object: the shingle without the roof. But what would happen if a fire burned the whole house to the ground, with the roof falling down and being reduced to pieces of plaster and ash? This is a case of total change of the former object, now constituted by several pieces which can have a separate existence of their own. A phenomenologist would say that the object “roof” has turned into other objects, and would have no difficulty in accepting the idea that change can affect the things of the world. What does Harman think about it? He does not seem to share a scientific view, according to which there are no real objects as such, but only aggregates of molecules, atoms, and their components (electrons, protons, neutrons, and subatomic particles). Maybe he is referring to the essence of things, which constitutes them as objects: in this way, he would share the Aristotelian perspective. However, even Aristotle thought that certain changes of a being, the ones concerning the *per se* accidents or the essence as such, would give birth to a different entity.⁶⁷ Theoretical relation may have no consequences, just as might be true of light contact between two objects: seeing a book or touching the cover does not imply an evident change in the book itself. However, there are also cases where a substantial modification is implied: in the two examples concerning the partial or total change of the object “roof,” it has been shown that a phenomenal impact can affect real objects as well. Harman’s perspective on the absence of relation between two real objects as such must be rejected by a phenomenologist (and not only by a phenomenologist, I dare say). Even if not all objects are in relation with each other, when they come into relation they do not always interact on a superficial, sensual level, but also on a deeper one. Therefore, the object as a phenomenon is involved just as much as the object as a noumenon, because there is no sharp distinction between them, as stated above.

The connection between the real and the sensual object is analyzed by the Italian school of Kanizsa, which take inspiration from Merleau-Ponty’s studies on *Gestaltpsychologie*.⁶⁸ Even if Merleau-Ponty criticizes the realism of Köhler, who thinks that the whole form of the mind is a part of nature, his studies have given rise to a different kind of realism that is not modeled on scientism.⁶⁹ Starting from the idea that our perception of the world is structured according to *Gestalten*, the Italian phenomenologists of Kanizsa’s school have made many experiments on perception, in order to understand its structures according to the way in which the object presents itself. Phenomenology is not considered as a quest for essences anymore, as it was in its Husserlian version, but as an analysis of the phenomena *iuxta propria principia*.⁷⁰ Phenomenology is a study of phenomena themselves, as a return to the objects of perception, which are not considered as separate from the thing-in-itself, but as an authentic part of it— as the visible alluding to the invisible. In this way, the phenomenological study of the object is not considered incompatible with the scientific one, but as the pre-condition of it. Briefly, a scientific study of objects which relies on

⁶⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I 4-6.

⁶⁸ There are several phenomenological approaches in Italy. One of them is focused on the existential view of the relation between the subject and the world (Banfi, Sini, Semerari, etc.), another has a logical and epistemological perspective (Melandri), whereas still others share a pedagogical view (Bartolini, Caronia, Zoletto, etc.) or a structuralist one (Piana). In this paper I am referring to the standpoint that takes inspiration from *Gestaltpsychologie* (Kanizsa, Bozzi, Musatti, Taddio, etc.). A good book on the Italian phenomenological tradition is the collection of essays *Phenomenology in Italy*, published by Springer in 2019.

⁶⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 54-59.

⁷⁰ This is the main thesis developed in Luca Taddio’s book *Fenomenologia eretica*, which considers phenomenology as an effort to understand the phenomenon according to its own principles. This book contains references not only to Merleau-Ponty, Paolo Bozzi, *Gestaltpsychologie* and Wittgenstein’s later thought, but also to several experiments on vision.

interpretation should be developed according to the results of phenomenological research, thus avoiding to contradict the phenomenal manifestation of reality. The basic assumption of this theory is that phenomena are not deceiving us, and that they must be understood in order to obtain a solid scientific knowledge. The Italian school of Kanizsa is oriented toward realism, since it believes in the truth of phenomena and in their reflecting the characteristics of the real object.⁷¹

As concerns the relation between real and sensual objects, Harman metaphorically writes that “just as only the opposite poles of magnets make contact, and just as the opposite sexes alone are fertile, it is also the case that two objects of the same type do not directly touch one another.”⁷² However, sticking to the same metaphor, a man and a woman have different genitals and can give birth to children, but cannot be considered as “opposites,” since they belong to the same species (a male and a female of two different species, a bull and a mare, for instance, cannot procreate), so that similarity in fecundity is required as much as difference. According to this statement, a sharp distinction between phenomena and noumena should be rejected by a “carnal phenomenologist.” Therefore, if there is a relation between real and sensual objects, as Harman admits, and there are no clear boundaries between the sensual and the real object, as Kanizsa’s school of phenomenology points out, then the interaction of two real objects must be considered possible. Even Husserl, who seems to be closer to Harman as concerns the distinction between the intentional and the real world, asserts that the real I interacts with real objects through a real relation: “the Object T stands in a real-causal relationship to me, to me as a human being, thus at first of all to that Body which is called mine, etc. The real relation collapses if the thing does not exist.”⁷³ Therefore, a phenomenological perspective would certainly put into question Harman’s theory of withholding.

At this point, there is only one more issue to write about: the distinction between objects and relations in OOO. According to Harman, “we know that a sensual object is detachable from its accidents and relations. The interesting question is whether it can also be detached from its qualities, which seem to belong to it more intimately. By qualities I mean the essential qualities, without which we would regard an object as no longer the same thing.”⁷⁴ This passage is very dense and should be analyzed carefully. Here Harman theorizes a distinction between qualities and accidents, which reflects the Aristotelian difference between substance (the necessary substratum of things) and accidents (contingent qualities).⁷⁵ Aristotle theorizes also the *per se* accidents, which do not coincide with substance, but are strictly bond to it:⁷⁶ if, for instance, my heart stops or someone removes it from my chest, then I am not this being (and a general human being) anymore, so my heart is a *per se* accident. My hair, on the other side, could be cut off without affecting substance, so that hair is just a regular accident, whereas my compound of matter and form (*synolus*) is the substance. There are separable and inseparable qualities, so that the definition of substance depends on the latter. Harman shares this perspective, but he also develops an ontology of separation: he theorizes a detachment of qualities from the object, giving birth to a fourfold theory of reality, including real objects, sensual objects, real qualities, and sensual qualities.⁷⁷ From the phenomenological perspective, it should be said that according to Husserl, qualities are perceived together with the object, in their multiplicity and adumbrations, so that they cannot be separated from it: this is the reason why the distinction between primary and secondary qualities does not make much sense.⁷⁸ Qualities are what we perceive of the object (the visible), so that they belong to the phenomenon, whereas their adumbrations are what we do not

71 Cf. notes 45-47 above.

72 Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 220.

73 Husserl, *Ideas II*, 227.

74 Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 213.

75 The problem of qualities is not easy to approach, from the times of Democritus, who tries to understand the relation between the “hard core” of the things and their manifestation to the human subject. He is the first thinker to show the difference between primary (objective) and secondary (subjective) qualities: this distinction seems to have had an influence on Aristotelian thought. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I 4, 985b, *On Generation and Corruption* I, 2 315b, and Simplicius of Cilicia, *Simplicii in Aristotelis De Caelo Commentaria*.

76 Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I 4-6.

77 See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*. The development of such an ontology is criticized by Andrew Cole, who accuses Harman of neo-medievalism in his article “The Call of Things.”

78 Cf. Husserl, *Ideas I*, §41, 87.

immediately grasp in our perceptual experience (the invisible), but “is there” anyway. The object is perceived together with its qualities, and this is the only way in which we can approach the thing. Harman’s fourfold distinction between real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities should be viewed with suspicion, essentially because there cannot be an object conceived as separated from its qualities. There could not be the concept of red without red things where the red is manifest, and the same could be said about extension or hardness. How can I say what extension is without seeing extended things? And how can I separate the red from the extended thing? This happens in thought and language, so that I can nominate “red,” “hard,” and “extension” separately. However, as Merleau-Ponty writes, when I give names to qualities I am doing nothing but expressing my experience as an incarnated subject, who perceives things as red, hard, and extended, thus trying to communicate them to myself and to other people.⁷⁹ There is a disagreement between phenomenology, especially in Merleau-Ponty’s version, and OOO: whereas the former conceives the distinction between an object and its qualities as purely logical, the latter considers it as ontological.

If Harman thinks that an object can be ontologically detachable from its qualities (“which seem to belong to it more intimately”), this is all the more reason for him to theorize a separation between objects and relations. This distinction turns out to be problematic when one considers the nature of intentionality, since intentional relations are the most important ones for phenomenology. According to Harman’s theory of vicarious causation, “two entities influence one another only by the meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side by side until something happens that allows them to interact.”⁸⁰ Objects can relate only through the phenomenal realm, so that the third entity is the intention, considered as a real object: one real object influences another object, which is conceived as a sensual one, through intention, which is inhabited by both. For instance, the real I sees the sensual pine tree in front of me through intention, where the subject (the real I) and the object of intention (the sensual pine tree) are.⁸¹ It seems strange that Harman brings into play a third element because, according to his statement that a real object can only interact with a sensual one, there should be no need of another object of mediation.⁸² In phenomenological theory, the subject is directed, through its consciousness, to a real object and this direction gives rise to an intentional content (Harman’s sensual object).⁸³ Husserl writes that, if the object is a real (not an ideal) one, “the intentional object of a presentation is the same as its actual object”: a duplication of objects is then rejected.⁸⁴ In any case, the relation between the subject and the intentional object takes place inside the subject itself: intentionality is a relation between the subject and the intentional object, and is therefore not an object. Intentionality is an object only when the subject reflects on intention itself; however, in this specific case, intentionality as an object is distinguished from intentionality as a relation, which is the basis of the theoretical and practical approach of the subject to the world. The disagreement between Harman and phenomenology here is evident: intentionality cannot be an object containing other objects (the real and the sensual objects interacting), but constitutes the direction of their interaction. The objectification of intentionality cannot be accepted either by Husserl or by other phenomenologists: intentionality is a fully aware modality of approaching an object: it is “the fundamental property of consciousness”.⁸⁵

According to phenomenology, not every kind of relation is intentional, since there are also real relations.⁸⁶ However, a living subject is in relation to everything it experiences, therefore a separation between the subject and its relations is inconceivable: the subject is always in relation to something else. This “something else” is the object, which is not only the necessary condition of self-perception and hetero-perception, but also the necessary condition of the existence of the subject: as stated earlier, the relation between subject and object is what constitutes the world as such, so that neither of the two poles

⁷⁹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 273.

⁸⁰ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 190.

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 197-198.

⁸² Cf. Harman, *ibid.*, 220 and *Prince of Networks*, 221.

⁸³ Cf. Husserl, *Logical Investigations II*, Investigation V, 113.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸⁵ See note 12 above.

⁸⁶ Cf. Husserl, *Ideas II*, §54, esp. p. 227.

is eliminable. If one refers to the subject, and the subject –according to Harman– is to be considered as a kind of object, then this particular kind of interaction cannot be separated from the objects involved. Nevertheless, an objection could be legitimately raised from OOO's side: not all objects are subjects as well, since Harman's intention comes and goes according to the situation in which objects are involved. However, even objects as such should be conceived in a system of relations. "As constitutive of wordliness, this 'system of relations' does not volatilize the being of innerwordly beings at all. On the contrary, these beings are discoverable in their "substantial" "in itself" only on the basis of the wordliness of the world."⁸⁷

Referring to everyday experience, when I see a book on a table, the book is in relation to the table and to the other objects in the room, but also in relation to the room (the living room, for instance), where the table is, and to who is reading it. Most importantly, the book is in relation to the observer. However, the system of relations is not always the same: for example, if I lent my book to a friend, he would change many things related to the book (the place where it stays, the objects near it, the people who touch and read it, etc.). However, that book would remain a book, even if I lent it to someone else: so that it could not be perceived as a television, as a dog, or as a fan. The book is not in my power, so that the relation to a subject does not imply dominance. The book could change only if there were a strong action performed on it: burning it completely, for instance, could transform it into ashes. In that case, I could still have access to the former book, which would now be perceived as ashes. However, if the wind blew, then every grain would separate from every other and enter into a different system of relations. The object "book" would not be there anymore: there would be grains of ashes, which are different objects with different systems of relations. The transformation of the object as such implies a transformation of the system of relations in which it is placed, but the contrary is not true. The constancy of an object, notwithstanding perceptive variations (due to angulation, light, etc.) is recognized by phenomenology, which considers the possibility of its real existence outside the subject. However, phenomenology cannot assert it with certainty, because the subject cannot go outside of itself to verify it.

According to what Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, *Da-sein* conceives objects as constituting a system of relations, according to which the Husserlian *Sinngebung* is directed to the world. Even if the system of relations does not exhaust the object-in-itself, every being-in-itself presupposes a system of relations as the "basis" of substantiality. Using a different argument, it could be said that one can think the existence of objects outside thought, through an allusion to the adumbrations of the thing, to the parts that are temporarily or permanently hidden to the subject.⁸⁸ However, this allusion can be considered as a form of relation between the known and the hidden parts of the object. Harman, on the other hand, denies this relation and refers only to a side-by-side proximity of real and sensual objects,⁸⁹ which seems quite reductive and takes no account of the intimate bond between what is visible and what is invisible.

5 Conclusion

From a phenomenological perspective, Harman's separation between objects and relations cannot be accepted. When we consider a thing as an object and not as a simple entity, we are already putting it into relation with a subject.⁹⁰ Even when we do not refer explicitly to a subject, there are allusive relations between the real and sensual object, and real relations between two real objects, according to Husserl, or the faded distinction between the real and sensual object according to Merleau-Ponty and his followers. As a "carnal phenomenologist," I prefer the latter perspective and, looking sympathetically at the Italian school of Kanizsa, I also think the phenomenon does not deceive us and is helpful in orienting scientific research, which tries to know the real object (notwithstanding the limits of its interpretative view).

⁸⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 87.

⁸⁸ Phenomenology does not agree with German Idealism and its followers, according to which "we cannot think things-in-themselves without thinking them" (Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 164).

⁸⁹ Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 201.

⁹⁰ A similar objection has been raised by Slavoj Žižek, who points out that by denying the subjective perspective, OOO misses the in-itself of the objects (cf. Žižek, "Objects, Objects Everywhere," 191).

This does not mean that OOO has nothing to say to phenomenology; quite the contrary. As was stated in the first part of this paper, Harman can give some new starting points to phenomenology in order to nourish its tendency to Rilke's *immer wieder*, or "starting again" with its foundation. One of these points is a specific attention to objects, to which phenomenologists should give more attention, since they are usually more interested in the subjective side of the theoretical relation. The Italian school of Kanizsa also shares Harman's interest towards aesthetics, considered as "first philosophy."⁹¹ Other positive elements in OOO are its anti-scientism and anti-monism: these are a very good medicine against reductionism and anthropocentrism, so that reality can be seen from a richer perspective. Pluralism, in my opinion, is more respectful of the objects and allows them "to be themselves" and to be studied in their genuine appearance, while also considering the possibility that there could be unknown sides or layers of them. This is particularly true for what concerns non-human entities, since they constitute the real alterity of the world. However, such a perspective could also be applied to other human beings, laying the basis for a pluralistic ethics. This direction has been followed by Ricoeur, Levinas, Marion, Lingis, and others, but their work is not yet finished, and needs to be continued. Maybe phenomenology will always be a form of correlationism, since it considers objects as related to a subject, and vice versa. However, it can choose to focus its attention on either the subjective or the objective side of reality. Thus, according to the perspective adopted in this article, a greater inclination to realism is possible.⁹²

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⁹¹ Harman thinks that aesthetics should be considered as first philosophy, because it approaches the "allure" of objects (the separation between sensual objects and their qualities). "Until now, aesthetics has generally served as the impoverished dancing-girl of philosophy – admired for her charms, but no gentleman would marry her. Yet given the apparently overwhelming scope of allure, aesthetics may deserve a rather vast role in ontology." (Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 216) Thomas Lemke is extremely critical of the importance Harman attributes to aesthetics, since it puts aside ethical and political concerns (cf. Lemke, "Materialism Without Matter," Fourth Part).

⁹² In this way, an indirect response to Sparrow's book *The End of Phenomenology* is given. Even if Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is not realistic enough, as Sparrow points out (Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology*, 137-138), there are phenomenologists who share a more realistic view, such as Italian philosophers of Kanizsa's school. Phenomenological and OOO realism are certainly different, since phenomenology does not leave aside the relation between subject and object. Zahavi has published a good critique of this book, pointing out that phenomenological reflection goes on for as long as it is able to renew itself (cf. Zahavi, "The End of What?," 305). However, Zahavi does not mention that both Harman and Sparrow pay great tribute to phenomenology and acknowledge its influence on OOO.

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