

Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

Editorial

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Editorial Introduction for the Topical Issue “Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics”

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Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) has existed since the late 1990s as an outgrowth of my interpretation of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.¹ As a group research program it is less than a decade old, stemming from a pair of conferences held in 2010 at Georgia Tech (April) and UCLA (December). Since then it has become one of the leading theoretical discourses in contemporary architecture, and has been almost as influential in the visual arts. This no doubt owes much to the central philosophical status accorded by OOO to aesthetics. Within the discipline of philosophy itself, although OOO’s references are largely continental in character, it has received a rather cool reception from mainstream American continental philosophy as embodied by SPEP (Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy). Nonetheless, it has received a more eager hearing from philosophers in continental Europe itself.

OOO is usually characterized as insisting upon the “withdrawal” or unknowability of entities. Yet this is not sufficiently precise, given that the same could easily be said about Heidegger and Immanuel Kant, without even searching for less prominent figures. Perhaps a more helpful formulation would be that OOO in my version –as opposed to that of Levi R. Bryant– stresses the intersection of two distinct dualities.² The first of these is indeed the Heideggerian distinction between the revealed and the concealed, which I now prefer to call “withholding” rather than “withdrawal,” given that the latter term falsely suggests a supplemental act of movement rather than the non-presence of entities from the outset. Perhaps the bigger problem is that for Heidegger as for Kant, finitude is treated as a unique burden haunting human beings alone, while for OOO even brute causal relations fail to deploy the full reality of the objects taking part in them. OOO’s second main duality is that between objects and their qualities. The model and inspiration on this point is Edmund Husserl, who distinguishes between the “intentional object” of experience (OOO’s “sensual object”) and two different types of qualities: the accidental qualities found in the “adumbrations” (*Abschattungen*) of objects as perceived by the senses, and the deeper and more important qualities that Husserl –though not OOO– holds can be intuited by the intellect.

As mentioned, the first axis of withdrawn/present is usually taken to be the key concern of OOO. But in many ways it makes more sense to interpret OOO as preoccupied with the four basic forms of object/quality tension: real object-sensual quality (RO-sheds light the central status of aesthetic SQ), real object-real quality (RO-RQ), sensual object-sensual quality (SO-SQ), and sensual object-real quality (SO-RQ).³ OOO’s focus on the tense relations between objects and their own qualities, which both do and do not belong to them, sheds light on the central status of aesthetics in this philosophy; the aesthetic sphere gives us an unusually clear case of the production of objects that cannot be reduced to literal paraphrase or other prose explanation. The artwork remains inexhaustible, as seen already by Kant in his suspicion of rules

1 Harman, *Tool-Being*.

2 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*.

3 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*.

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and criteria for the production of beauty.⁴ Furthermore, OOO interprets Socratic *philosophia* as a closer cousin of the arts than of the natural sciences, whose successive triumphs over the past four centuries have misled modern philosophy into thinking that it, too, must be regarded as a search for knowledge. From a OOO standpoint, the problem with knowledge is that it must proceed either by “undermining” an object downward to its pieces or causal backstory, or by “overmining” it upward to its effects on the human mind or on something else.⁵ Such “mining” is of course not something to be shunned, since knowledge is one of the most important pursuits of the human species, which owes its health and survival in mass numbers in large part to the modern progress of the sciences. What OOO rejects is simply the assumption that knowledge exhausts the sphere of mental life. Instead, we turn to the arts and other forms of indirect discourse as a way of developing a richer model of the cognitive ecosystem.

Although the prolific authors associated with OOO are engaged in numerous ongoing debates with opponents, there are perhaps three conflicts that recur most frequently, and are thus worth mentioning here: OOO has been subjected to a rationalist critique, a Marxist critique, and a process philosophy critique. The rationalist critique adopts a basically scientific outlook on philosophy, holding that philosophical problems are best handled through such pursuits as relativity and quantum theory, with other approaches doomed to “armchair” status.⁶ The Marxist critique charges us with “commodity fetishism,” given OOO’s interest in objects cut off from the relational systems that surround them.⁷ The process philosophy critique accuses OOO of a fixation on “static” or even “eternal” entities rather than doing justice to the creative flux and flow that process philosophers see as the deep character of reality itself.⁸ Since I have already dealt with these charges in publications footnoted in this paragraph, there is no need for a full discussion of them here. Instead, I will conclude this Introduction with a brief summary of the articles that follow. Though I am not in agreement with everything said by the authors of these pieces, each of them made me consider one or more problems from a new angle, and our diligent army of peer reviewers seems to have agreed.

In “Object-Oriented Baudrillard?” by Matthew James King, the author takes issue with the views expressed in my 2016 article “Object-Oriented Seduction,” which complements the apparently anti-realist Baudrillard of simulacra with a more nuanced Baudrillard of human seduction by objects.⁹ His primary way of doing so is by steering Baudrillard away from the idealist Husserl and towards the quasi-realist Heidegger. King links Baudrillard’s theory of symbolic exchange with Heidegger’s tool-analysis (and perhaps less controversially, with the work of Marcel Mauss).¹⁰ Although Baudrillard’s largely negative views on art clash with the central place OOO gives to aesthetics, King reads Baudrillard as an early critic of what OOO will later attack as “duomining,” and sees him as having anticipated certain aspects of the object-quality splits found in ontography.¹¹

“The Obstinate Real,” authored by Michael Feichtinger, begins by contrasting OOO with the relational ontologies of Karen Barad and Arturo Escobar.¹² Feichtinger argues that “OOO is able to avoid the pitfalls of relational ontologies without rejecting their major benefits.” By contrast, in their efforts to escape the essentialism of the realist tradition, Barad and Escobar lapse into what OOO calls “overmining” by generating an entirely new cosmos corresponding to every viewpoint. Feichtinger notes further that OOO already rejects the harmful features of traditional essentialism, without indulging in the constructivist excesses of Barad and Escobar’s positions. This deprives them of any way to account for common discussion and deliberation – about global warming, for instance – among the occupants of the countless self-enclosed worlds on which they insist.¹³

4 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

5 Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects.”

6 Ladyman & Ross, *Every Thing Must Go*; Harman, “I Am Also of the Opinion that Materialism Must be Destroyed.”

7 Phillips, “The Future of Speculation?”; Harman, “Object-Oriented Ontology and Commodity Fetishism.”

8 Bennett, “Systems and Things”; Shaviro, “The Actual Volcano”; Harman, “Response to Shaviro.”

9 Harman, “Object-Oriented Seduction.”

10 Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*; Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Mauss, *The Gift*.

11 Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duomining.”

12 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*. For an existing OOO critique of Barad see Harman, “Agential and Speculative Realism.”

13 Harman, *Bells and Whistles*, 27.

C. J. Davies devotes his article, “The Problem of Causality in Object-Oriented Ontology,” to an attempt to refute OOO’s arguments for indirect causation.¹⁴ Identifying four separate arguments to this end, Davies concludes 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.” Needless to say, I hold that in using the word “truism,” Davies misses what is truly distinctive in the arguments for indirect causation offered by me and Morton. But this disagreement can be settled elsewhere. For the purposes of this topical issue, Davies provides an unusually clear and civil account of what he sees as the problems with OOO’s case for *vicarious* rather than direct relations between separate entities.

My own article, entitled “The Coldness of Forgetting,” responds to some criticisms of my book *Immaterialism* by the Nordic archaeologists Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen.¹⁵ True to their disciplinary commitments, these authors fault my book for relying exclusively on written sources concerning the Dutch East India Company (VOC), rather than examining ruins or other physical relics of the company. In response, I argue that archaeology deals with ruins only accidentally, since its true subject matter is what Marshall McLuhan calls “cold media”: situations of low information density, in which the human mind is drawn into ever-greater participation in an effort to fill information gaps.¹⁶ Equally relevant, though for slightly different reasons, is Morton’s concept of “hyperobjects”: entities so vast in spatial or temporal scale that humans can only make contact with their most general background features.¹⁷ On this basis, the procedures of *Immaterialism* are shown to be fully in keeping with the “coldness” that is more proper to archaeology than physical artifacts themselves.

“Precariousness and Philosophical Critique,” by André Arnaut, was one of two successful submissions from Brazil, where interest in OOO has been on the rise in recent years. Characteristic of this article is its use of ideas from the Brazilian philosopher Hilan Bensusan, and even more so from the French “non-philosopher” François Laruelle, about whom I once wrote a critical review.¹⁸ Works written in a Laruelian spirit must inevitably employ that author’s daunting terminology, and this holds true for Arnaut’s article as well. Even so, he always keeps the main point clearly in view: the question of whether OOO fully allows its own presuppositions to be opened up for debate through a recognition of what Arnaut terms their “precariousness.”

The second Brazilian article in the collection is Otavio Maciel’s “A Case for the Primacy of the Ontological Principle.” The author begins with a novel defense of Whitehead from the reservations I expressed in an article entitled “Whitehead and Schools X, Y, and Z.”¹⁹ While I criticize Whitehead for the overly relational character of his ontology, Maciel sees the author of *Process and Reality* as an even closer potential ally of OOO than I acknowledge.²⁰ By shifting our attention away from Whitehead’s perpetually perishing “actual entities” and towards his enduring “societies,” we end up with what Maciel regards as substantial agreement on the “ontological principle” (or focus on individual entities) first formulated by Whitehead himself. To this end, Maciel makes use of some ideas from the philosophically inclined sociologists Gabriel Tarde and Niklas Luhmann.²¹

Megan Sherritt’s article “Silent Spaces” aims at a dialogue between OOO and the contemporary American artist Haim Steinbach, known for his works arranging various objects on custom-made shelves.²² While OOO writings on aesthetics have tended to emphasize indirect allusion to missing objects as the

14 Harman, “On Vicarious Causation”; Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic*.

15 Harman, *Immaterialism*; Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Theory Adrift.”

16 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*; Harman, “The McLuhans and Metaphysics”; Harman, “Some Paradoxes of McLuhan’s Tetrad.”

17 Morton, *Hyperobjects*; Graham Harman, “Hyperobjects and Prehistory.”

18 Bensusan, *Being Up for Grabs*; Laruelle, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*; Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*; Harman, “François Laruelle, *Philosophies of Difference*.”

19 Harman, “Whitehead and Schools X, Y, and Z.”

20 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*.

21 Tarde, *Monadology and Sociology*; Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*.

22 Steinbach, “Haim Steinbach.”

root of all art, followed inevitably by the beholder’s theatrical replacement of these objects, Sheritt takes a different approach.²³ As she sees it, the aesthetic effect in Steinbach’s works comes from the spacing between the shelved objects themselves. She then proceeds to link such spacing to the phenomenon of silence.

In Henry Bartholomew’s “Estranged Strangers” we have a colorful contribution with a notably interdisciplinary flavor. At issue is the famous concept of “the uncanny,” as in the psychological works of Freud and Ernst Jentsch, the philosophy of Heidegger, and earlier in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s celebrated tale *The Sandman*.²⁴ “By splicing OOO into the history and practice of Gothic scholarship,” Bartholomew summarizes, “this article traces the outline of an ‘object-oriented uncanny,’ pushing the ‘uncanny’ out of Freud’s shadow and into the ‘great outdoors,’” referring to a key realist phrase of Quentin Meillassoux.²⁵

Simon Weir and Anthony Dibbs, in “The Ontographic Turn,” give a fine discussion of OOO’s relation to Salvador Dalí, building on Roger Rothman’s breakthrough article on the topic.²⁶ In so doing, they assess a refreshingly wide range of topics: from OOO’s habitual use of “Latour Litanies” or random groupings of objects, to its employment of José Ortega y Gasset’s theory of metaphor, to a consideration of the Japanese Stone Garden of Ryōan-ji in Kyoto.²⁷ As the authors report in their substantive conclusion: “Idealism, as expressed in the Surrealism of [André] Breton, [Georges] Bataille and [Louis] Aragon, as well as in Dalí’s earlier surrealist formulations, is oppositional to OOO. We believe that Dalí’s shift towards Realism during this period was a reaction to the ontological limitations he perceived in the symbolic preoccupations of his contemporaries.”

“Hyletic Phenomenology and Hyperobjects,” authored by Seth Daves, draws on Clayton Crockett’s plausible argument that Morton’s term “hyperobjects” is applicable to *all* objects rather than just unusually large or aged ones.²⁸ But whereas Crockett’s case relies heavily on the writings of Derrida and Lacan, Daves has recourse instead to Husserl’s notion of *hyle* or matter, as found in cases of non-intentional experience.²⁹ One of his sources for this argument is an interesting article by the scholar Patrick Whitehead.³⁰ As Daves argues, whereas Crockett’s Derrido-Lacanian interpretation of hyperobjects fails to capture all five of their key features according to Morton – viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing, and interobjectivity– Husserl’s hyletic phenomenology is able to do justice to them all.³¹

“The Two Times of Objects” marks the welcome return to *Open Philosophy* of Arjen Kleinherenbrink, who published two articles in the journal last year, and soon thereafter provided a fine object-oriented reading of Deleuze in his book *Against Continuity*.³² The present article develops his concern that the OOO model of time as a tension between sensual objects and sensual qualities leads to contradiction. Both Peter Gratton and Peter Wolfendale had made analogous critiques as far back as 2014.³³ But while Kleinherenbrink is somewhat sympathetic to their objections on the topic of time, he also holds that OOO can be supplemented with Deleuze’s famous distinction between *aion* and *chronos* in *The Logic of Sense*, and the problem with OOO’s theory of time thereby easily remedied.³⁴ Though I will respond to Kleinherenbrink’s argument on a later occasion, let it be said here that I find him to be a more careful and objective thinker than either Gratton or Wolfendale, both of them addressed in a book already in press.³⁵

²³ Harman, “A New Sense of Mimesis.”

²⁴ Freud, “The Uncanny”; Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny”; Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*; Hoffmann, *The Sandman*.

²⁵ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

²⁶ Rothman, “Object-Oriented Surrealism.”

²⁷ Ortega y Gasset, “An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface,” 139.

²⁸ Crockett, *Derrida After the End of Writing*.

²⁹ Husserl, *Ideas*.

³⁰ Whitehead, “Phenomenology Without Correlationism.”

³¹ Morton, *Hyperobjects*.

³² Kleinherenbrink & Gusman, “The Ontology of Social Objects”; Kleinherenbrink, “Fields of Sense and Formal Things”; Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*.

³³ Gratton, *Speculative Realism*; Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*.

³⁴ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*.

³⁵ Harman, *Skirmishes*.

Raino Isto comes next, with his contribution “How Dumb Are Big Dumb Objects?” The term “big dumb objects” is used in science fiction studies to refer to huge entities –generally of hyper-intelligent alien origin– whose sheer scale astounds the humans who encounter them. The parallel with Morton’s hyperobjects should be obvious, and that parallel is precisely what Isto aims to explore. Isto relates the origin of the “big dumb objects” concept in Roz Kaveney’s 1981 article on the classic Larry Niven novel *Ringworld*; Kaveney’s term was later enshrined by Peter Nicholls in an initially tongue-in-cheek entry in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.³⁶ Isto’s article is especially timely given the increasing influence of OOO on science fiction and horror studies.³⁷

Floriana Ferro defends phenomenology from OOO in her contribution, which is entitled “Object-Oriented Ontology’s View of Relations.” Although Ferro’s argument draws in part on such well-known phenomenological sources as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schütz, more characteristic of her article is its deployment of such lesser-known figures (at least in the Anglophone world) as Gaetano Kanizsa, Paolo Bozzi, and Luca Taddio.³⁸ Maurizio Ferraris, an Italian friend and fellow traveler of OOO, also appears in Ferro’s pro-phenomenological mix of authorities.³⁹

The large number of submissions this year for “Object-Oriented Ontology and its Critics” has led us to repeat the same call for papers for 2020. In addition to articles on topics not previously treated in *Open Philosophy*, we will also be happy to consider submissions that amplify or counter the arguments found in the 2019 articles summarized here.

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³⁶ Kaveney, “Science Fiction in the 1970s”; Niven, *Ringworld*; Nicholls, “Big Dumb Objects.”

³⁷ See Harman, *Weird Realism*; also Willems, *Speculative Realism and Science Fiction*.

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*; Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*; Schütz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*; Kanizsa, *Vedere e pensare*; Bozzi, *Fenomenologia sperimentale*; Taddio, *Fenomenologia erotica*.

³⁹ Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*.

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