Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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The Battle of Objects and Subjects: Concerning Sbriglia and Žižek's *Subject Lessons* Anthology

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Abstract: This article mounts a defense of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) from various criticisms made in Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek's co-edited anthology *Subject Lessons*. Along with Sbriglia and Žižek's own Introduction to the volume, the article responds to the chapters by Todd McGowan, Adrian Johnston, and Molly Anne Rothenberg, the three in which my own version of OOO is most frequently discussed.

Keywords: Ljubljana School, Object-Oriented Ontology, Slavoj Žižek, G. W. F. Hegel, Jacques Lacan, thing-in-itself, materialism, realism

Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek's co-edited collection *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism* has long been awaited in circles devoted to Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).¹ All twelve chapters in the anthology (eleven plus the editors' Introduction) are written from the merciless Lacano-Hegelian standpoint that defines the Ljubljana School, one of the most fruitful trends in the continental philosophy of recent decades.² The Slovenian core of the group is here – Žižek, Mladen Dolar, and Alenka Zupančič – as are many of their most capable international allies (though Joan Copjec is keenly missed), along with some impressive younger voices. As a rule, the book is most impressive when making a positive case for what G. W. F. Hegel and Jacques Lacan still have to offer contemporary philosophy; all of the chapters are clearly written, and some are among the most lucid statements I have seen from the Ljubljana group. Their central concern is to defend the paradoxical claim that idealism is the surest route to a genuine materialism. In this connection it should be noted that while nearly all of the authors are eager to flash their materialist credentials, not one makes a defense of philosophical realism. From the Ljubljana standpoint, realism is apparently too reminiscent of the old “naïve” realisms that merely insist on the existence of a world outside the mind without passing through the twin furnaces of psychoanalysis and Immanuel Kant's Copernican Revolution.

As for the critical dimension of Sbriglia and Žižek's anthology, its various disputes with New Materialism, OOO, and Speculative Realism (SR) are more of a mixed bag. An overriding problem is that the authors in *Subject Lessons* are generally too indiscriminate in mixing various figures under the “New Materialist” label, often suppressing crucial differences. The most direct attempt to justify such bulk treatment comes in a footnote to Nathan Gorelick's chapter, where the author announces that he will avoid

¹ Sbriglia and Žižek, eds., *Subject Lessons*. All in-text page numbers in parentheses refer to this volume.

² The only occurrence of the phrase “Ljubljana School” I can recall in the anthology appears in Mladen Dolar's chapter, “What's the Matter?”, 39. Dolar places the phrase in quotation marks, which I take to be a sign of modesty on his part rather than sarcastic incredulity. In any case, it strikes me as a perfectly accurate designation.

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the “nominalist temptation” of drawing distinctions between the three aforementioned groups. Given that all of the New Materialists are trying “to retrieve the question of the object from the conception of the transcendental subject,” one name is enough for them all. Moreover, he adds without elaborating, the New Materialists are guilty of similar conflation in their own work, and therefore have no right to complain about being blended together (187n1).³ Predictably, this leads to a number of problems. For example, to say that New Materialism, OOO, and SR are all attempting to “retrieve the object” suppresses the fact that OOO is a philosophy of full-blown individual objects, while Jane Bennett’s version of New Materialism downplays such entities in favor of what she calls a “single matter-energy.”⁴ It is hardly a “nominalist temptation” to recognize a difference this basic; it closely tracks the historical gap between Aristotle and Spinoza, thinkers who few would group together merely because they both speak about “substance.” Furthermore, use of the term “New Materialism” is almost comically unsuitable in my own case, given that I have published articles with titles as blunt as “I Am Also of the Opinion That Materialism Must Be Destroyed,” “Realism Without Materialism,” and “Materialism is Not the Solution.”⁵ There are also a number of cases in the book where a failure to draw internal distinctions leads to statements that are simply false: as when Todd McGowan calls the anti-object monist Bennett an “object-oriented ontologist,” (80n13) or when Molly Anne Rothenberg’s opening sentence ascribes to me a view belonging to Quentin Meillassoux that I explicitly reject (190).⁶

That said, Gorelick seems clear-headed enough about what the “New Materialists” stand for. Whereas Zupančič argues that Deleuze is the shared root of all three trends, that is really only true of New Materialism, and not of OOO (other than Levi Bryant) or Speculative Realism (other than Iain Hamilton Grant).⁷ I find Gorelick closer to the mark when he says that the unifying figure behind the new opponents of Ljubljana is actually Alfred North Whitehead (171). Whitehead’s central innovation, the one that makes him largely *persona non grata* in both the continental and analytic traditions, is his insistence that we speak about the relations between two inanimate things in the same way that we speak about the human subject’s relation with things: in short, a firm refusal of any transcendental exceptionalism for human thought. OOO simply departs from Whitehead – and from his contemporary advocates Didier Debaise, Steven Shaviro, and Isabelle Stengers – by finding fault with the English philosopher’s excessive relationism.⁸

Even so, Whitehead is seldom mentioned in the pages of *Subject Lessons*. In order to gain some sense of who is mentioned, the following list is helpful. It ranks all authors according to how many lines they take up in Sbriglia and Žižek’s index (five lines minimum):

99	G. W. F. Hegel
71	Jacques Lacan
53	Immanuel Kant
35	Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx
19	Gilles Deleuze
15	Graham Harman
10	Quentin Meillassoux
8	Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek
7	Levi Bryant, Martin Heidegger
6	Jane Bennett, Friedrich Engels
5	Adrian Johnston, Virginia Woolf

³ Gorelick, “Why Sex is Special.”

⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 122.

⁵ Harman, “I Am Also of the Opinion That Materialism Must Be Destroyed”; Harman, “Realism Without Materialism,” Harman, “Materialism is Not the Solution.”

⁶ McGowan, “Objects After Subjects;” Rothenberg, “Twisting ‘Flat Ontology.’”

⁷ Zupančič, “Ontology of the Death Drive;” Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*; Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling*.

⁸ See Debaise, *Speculative Empiricism* and Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead*. See also Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, as well as the following exchange: Shaviro, “The Actual Volcano” and Harman, “Response to Shaviro.”

Given the topic of *Subject Lessons*, the only surprise on the list is the famed novelist Woolf, who comes up exclusively in Kathryn Van Wert's chapter "Becoming and the Challenge of Ontological Incompleteness." Van Wert's strategy is to link Woolf with Lacan positively, against a Deleuze who is treated negatively, and her chapter is well worth a read. But if we exclude Woolf for now as a peripheral figure in the present debate, we can arrange the indexed authors into four basic groups, as seen from the Ljubljana standpoint:

DEAD ALLIES (304 lines): Engels, Freud, Hegel, Kant, Lacan, Marx

LIVE ENEMIES (38 lines): Bennett, Bryant, Harman, Meillassoux

DEAD ENEMIES (26 lines): Deleuze, Heidegger

LIVE ALLIES (21 lines): Badiou, Johnston, Žižek

These groupings give us an accurate sense of what *Subject Lessons* is really about. As seen from the top line of the list, the authors in the anthology are primarily interested in defending their joint allegiance to German Idealism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. Secondly, they offer critiques of New Materialism (Bennett), Object-Oriented Ontology (Bryant and Harman), and Speculative Realism (Harman and Meillassoux). Other important authors in these three currents receive either minimal treatment or none at all, but there is no time to question those decisions here.

Since this article is written for a special issue on Object-Oriented Ontology and its Critics, I will focus primarily on how *Subject Lessons* portrays and disagrees with my own position. This occurs in four chapters in particular: (1) Sbriglia and Žižek's editorial Introduction, (2) McGowan's "Objects After Subjects," (3) Johnston's "Fear of Science," and (4) Rothenberg's "Twisting 'Flat Ontology'." I will briefly cover each of these chapters before offering some final remarks on the current state of the battle of objects and subjects.

1 Sbriglia and Žižek's Introduction

In keeping with editorial convention, Sbriglia and Žižek spend a number of pages summarizing the chapters of their various authors.⁹ Before doing so, they lay out their own general position from pages 2 through 16, beginning gently and progressing gradually toward the technical heart of their argument. The editors note that from the 1980s until recently, "materialism" in the humanities and social sciences referred to a *cultural* rather than physical materialism, as embodied especially in the works of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault: "cultural materialism holds that subjects are by-products of their respective cultural milieus – epiphenomena of socio-symbolic networks and matrices, ideological state apparatuses, and disciplinary techniques and epistemes" (3). They capably observe that at least two different strands of opposition to cultural materialism have emerged, as embodied in two prominent anthologies now roughly a decade old. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost introduce their *New Materialisms* collection by rejecting "substantialist Cartesian or mechanist Newtonian accounts of matter [...] [as] simply passive or inert."¹⁰ A year later, in *The Speculative Turn*, Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and I emphasized the need for a *realist* turn against cultural materialism's obsession with "texts, discourse, social practices, and human finitude."¹¹ Nonetheless, Sbriglia and Žižek assert, "whatever their differences from cultural materialism, the materialisms and realisms that Bennett and Bryant advocate alongside Coole, Frost, and Harman [...] not only share in but also *advance* the cultural materialist project of placing the subject under

⁹ Sbriglia and Žižek, "Introduction: Subject Matters."

¹⁰ Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 6.

¹¹ Bryant et al., "Towards a Speculative Philosophy," 3.

erasure" (5). On this basis, they claim that the truly novel position in contemporary philosophy is not "New Materialism," but Ljubljana's defense of the subject against any of its fashionable erasures.

In one sense, this assertion of genuine novelty against the hidden traditionalism of one's opponents is simply the sort of thing that philosophers do. Everyone places a more or less educated bet on where the crux of contemporary philosophy is located; this having been done, all those who fail to follow our own preferred bet are proclaimed to be victims of the same traditional presupposition that we ourselves have overcome. In precisely this way, Heidegger depicts the entire previous history of philosophy as a long forgetting of Being countered only by Heidegger himself, and Kant's Copernican Revolution treats his illustrious chain of predecessors as equally "dogmatic" through their assumption that the thing-in-itself is accessible to rational proof. There is always a dose of exaggeration in such tactics, but also – in successful cases – the glimmer of a new insight that leaves philosophy different from what it was before. The "wager" of the Ljubljana School – to use a term so dear to their fellow traveler Badiou – is that the path forward for philosophy leads not through a rejection of the subject, but instead through a "doubling down" (9) on Hegel's claim that substance is subject. Additionally, there is a further wager that we must also replace the lucid modern "Cartesian subject" with a "barred" Lacanian subject traumatized by its disgusting encounter with the real: a model said to be already at work in both Hegel and his one-time friend F. W. J. Schelling. Ljubljana's commitment to this twofold vision is famously durable, intense, and prolific.

Must we now follow the lead of the Ljubljana School and push forward with subject-oriented philosophy grounded in psychoanalysis, or should we instead view this current as a once-refreshing challenge to continental orthodoxy that is now showing its age in the face of one or more newly emerging trends? These are the stakes of the half-declared war of *Subject Lessons*. As a helpful analogy, let's imagine that the pre-Socratic thinker Thales of Miletus, famous for his doctrine that water is the first principle of everything, had lived to see Kant's Copernican Revolution replace the Wolffian rendering of Leibnizian philosophy that preceded it in Germany. We might well picture Thales speaking as follows, in the manner of Sbriglia and Žižek: "Whatever Kant's differences from Leibniz, the transcendental philosophy he advocates not only shares in but also *advances* Leibniz's project of placing water under erasure." Since water is no longer taken seriously as one of the building blocks of philosophy, we would probably just laugh at Thales and move on. Yet the claim would be far from laughable for any odd soul who might still think that water is the root of all existence. There is a crucial difference from the present case, of course, since water is philosophically irrelevant to both Kant and Leibniz, while the subject is anything but irrelevant to the "New Materialists": for all of them, the supremacy of the human subject is the chief obstacle to any philosophy that foregrounds the object. Yet the point remains: to claim that cultural materialism and the "New Materialisms" are united in "erasing the subject" is only relevant to those who assume in advance that the subject is the necessary core of a genuine contemporary philosophy. It makes no difference whether we accept the "Cartesian subject," replace it in cultural materialist fashion with "ideological interpellation and discursive formation," (3) or embrace an edgier, Ljubljanized subject characterized by a "tarrying with the negative," plunged into "the night of the world," betrayed by the "cunning of reason," standing at the mercy of the unconscious, or haunted by a death drive (3). The problem is that in all three of these cases, we have *human thought* on one side and *everything else* on the other, no matter how turbulent our model of the subject may be.

What neither Foucault, nor Althusser, nor Kant, nor Hegel, nor Schelling, nor Husserl, nor Heidegger, nor Žižek himself is able to think is the interaction of two non-human entities when not under some sort of human surveillance: this is simply ruled out of court as a form of pre-Kantian dogmatism. It will be said, according to the old post-Kantian trope, that even to think this interaction is already to put it under surveillance, so that the very idea is nonsensical. This attitude is precisely what OOO rejects as "onto-taxonomy," referring to the assumption that there are two and only two basic kinds of things in the cosmos: (1) humans, and (2) everything else.¹² This is what makes it so pointless when Sbriglia and Žižek complain that "from the Hegelo-Lacanian perspective, what new materialists and realists understand as

¹² See Harman, "The Only Exit from Modern Philosophy."

‘subject’ simply fails to meet the criteria of the subject” (14–15). For by the same token we could say that from Thales’ perspective, what Leibniz and Kant understand as “water” is merely a minor chemical substance, and therefore simply fails to meet the criteria of water as the *arche* of everything. Perhaps more to the point, from a OOO perspective what Hegelo-Lacanian call *objet petit a* simply fails to meet the criteria of the object, since it reduces the object to a correlate of the subject’s desire. This sort of dispute needs to be conducted at a more basic level than merely accusing one’s opponents of an inability to account for one’s own pet entities. The need for such entities to exist must first be established, and this certainly holds for the “subject” of modern philosophy, whose theoretical downside is at least as obvious as its benefits. Otherwise, we might just as well invite Reichians to dismiss Lacan on the basis that he cannot account for the existence of “orgone.”

Sounding the alarm about the disappearance of the subject is just one of several ways that *Subject Lessons* preaches to the converted. Another can be found in Sbriglia and Žižek’s mockery of the quest for a “re-enchantment” of the world by way of a “posthumanist reversion to a pre-modern ontology” (9). The word “pre-modern” seems to have been deliberately chosen to evoke not just a specific period of philosophy, but a purported allegiance by “New Materialists” to an irrational, unenlightened, unscientific, and mythical past. I do not exaggerate. Just one page later, the editors compare flat ontology – the fairly basic notion that all entities must be treated by philosophy on an equal footing – to “a Tolkienesque world of magical forces in which the subject is merely one among countless vital objects,” (10) before repeating the slap in a footnote: “little wonder, then, that the pluriverse envisioned by neovitalists resembles the Middle-Earth of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, the defining work of fantasy literature” (27n57). Since no argument in particular is made for the purported resemblance between the “New Materialists” and the workings of Middle Earth, this would appear to be an instance of reverse projection: rather than the “New Materialists” being obsessed with enchantment, Ljubljana seems obsessed with the *disenchantment* of the world, as if this were the very key to enlightenment. Žižek’s first critique of OOO, published in 2016, already sounded this note: “the main target of OOO is thus not transcendental philosophy with its subject/object dualism, but modern science with its vision of ‘gray’ reality reduced to mathematical formalization: OOO tries to supplement modern science with a premodern ontology which describes the ‘inner life’ of things”¹³ (177). Not at all. The OOO critique of modern science is not for its “grayness,” but for its *literalism* in reducing objects to bundles of qualities: a pivotal argument mentioned nowhere in *Subject Lessons*. In any case, the “Tolkien” jabs will no doubt earn much laughter from Žižek’s loyal readership, but they fail to advance the discussion a single step. They are little more than morale-boosting jests among friends in a beer hall.

It is fortunate that Sbriglia and Žižek do eventually show their hand as honestly as one could wish. Their highest-ranking card is the same one thrown down by so many others in post-Kantian philosophy: the sheer impossibility of old-fashioned realism in the face of the closed circle of transcendental thought. As they put it, any “naïve notion of fully constituted material reality as the sole true reality outside our minds, of materiality as ‘all,’ relies on the overlooked exception of material reality’s transcendental constitution [...]” (9). After all, how can anyone claim to speak of a reality apart from the subject when that same person is already a subject? Here they find fault with an unusual trio of thinkers: “Lenin, but also [...] Bennett and Bryant, all [...] fail to account for the very position of the enunciation of the subject whose mind ‘reflects’ matter” (9). And later: “From where does the subject [...] who deploys these object-oriented ontologies, these thing-power materialisms, speak? From what standpoint? Such theories obviously cannot be uttered from the position of merely one object among others” (15). The editors inform us that, as German Idealism knew all along, “the more we try to isolate reality as it is ‘in itself,’ independently of the way we relate to it, the more this In-itself falls back into the domain of the transcendentially constituted, always already caught in the transcendental circle” (9). This leads Sbriglia and Žižek to make a heroic call “to fearlessly think through the consequences of *rejecting* ‘objective reality’ [...]” (10). The reader will be

13 Žižek, “Afterword: Objects, Objects Everywhere,” 17.

forgiven for saying that this sounds like a Berkeleyan solipsism, though we will soon be reminded of why the editors think it is not.

Before moving on, we should say something about the Ljubljana School's unusual relation to Meillassoux, whom they tend to see as an opponent who gets things basically wrong, despite the fact that there is a tremendous degree of agreement between them. An early taste of this aversion can be had from Žižek's remark in *Less Than Nothing* that "the problem is not to think the Real outside of transcendental correlation, independently of the subject [as Meillassoux attempts]; the problem is to think the Real inside the subject, the hard core of the Real in the very heart of the subject, its ex-timate center."¹⁴ Zupančič says much the same a few years later in her well-received book *What IS Sex?*: "[Meillassoux's Great Outdoors] is a fantasy that conceals the Real that is already *right here*."¹⁵ Johnston's article "Hume's Revenge" is even harder on Meillassoux, although mostly in connection with the latter's speculations on a virtual God.¹⁶ But while it is true that Meillassoux ultimately seeks a reality both prior and posterior to human consciousness – and to this extent is closer to traditional realism than anyone in the Ljubljana orbit – it is generally ignored that he accepts the same closed circle of thought on which Sbriglia and Žižek depend. That is to say, Meillassoux accepts the limit that correlationism places on speculation about reality itself, as seen in his widely overlooked remarks at the 2007 Goldsmiths SR workshop:

I insist on this point – the exceptional *strength* of this [correlationist] argumentation, apparently and desperately implacable. Correlationism rests on an argument as simple as it is powerful, and which can be formulated in the following way: No X without givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X. If you speak about something, you speak about something that is given to you, and posited by you.¹⁷

So impressed is Meillassoux by the correlational circle ("you can't think something outside thought without turning it into a thought") that far from "refuting" it by way of the arche-fossil, he has to invent a rather complicated argument for how to get out of the circle, albeit one I have argued is faulty.¹⁸

Obviously, the insistence that we are unable to escape the closed circle of thought immediately raises the specter of an extreme form of idealism, which is why I alluded to Berkeley above.¹⁹ Ljubljana foresees such objections and already has prepared responses, such as Žižek's appeal to "the hard core of the Real in the very heart of the subject" and Zupančič's "Real that is already *right here*." Against "the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual," what is defended is "the idea, as Freud earlier articulated it, that 'the ego is not master in its own house,' which means that subjectivity/subjectivation concerns not the ego but the unconscious" (8). This explains the group's attraction to Schelling, with his gap between Existence and Ground of Existence rumbling within – if not beneath – the given, like a Lacanian cut or fracture in the subject itself (9). My response is that neither Schelling nor Maurice Merleau-Ponty – another figure who claims to be on the scent of a purely immanent Real – escapes the onto-taxonomical assumption that the two basic poles of reality are (a) the human, and (b) everything else.²⁰ Moreover, we find no discussion of relations between two non-human objects, which make up the vast majority of interactions in the cosmos. There is a related problem with Sbriglia and Žižek's claim that "prior to fully existent reality, there is [...] a chaotic 'non-all' proto-reality, a pre-ontological virtual fluctuation of a not yet fully constituted Real. In short, from the dialectical materialist standpoint, the true formula of materialism is that material reality is non-all" (9). While such language of the "non-all" is comfortably reminiscent of Badiou's recourse to the transfinite mathematics of Georg Cantor, its link with materialism is by no means clear.²¹ As Bryant notes about a similar passage:

¹⁴ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 644.

¹⁵ Zupančič, *What IS Sex?* 76.

¹⁶ Johnston, "Hume's Revenge."

¹⁷ Meillassoux, in Brassier et al., "Speculative Realism."

¹⁸ Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, and Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

¹⁹ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

²⁰ Harman, "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy," 142.

²¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*.

Materialism [has become] so empty that Žižek could write, “[m]aterialism means that the reality I see is never ‘whole’ – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.” This is a peculiar proposition indeed. What need does matter have to be witnessed by anyone? What does a blind spot have to do with matter?²²

These questions are well worth addressing. Since a number of the authors in *Subject Lessons* see fit to psychoanalyze various “New Materialist” positions, I will note that the Ljubljana School’s obsession with materialism seems very much like a symptom of the well-grounded worry that it will appear to neutral observers like a full-blown worldless idealism. Rather than answering this charge with a red-blooded realism, which they are in no position to do, they change the subject and talk about materialism. It is enough to bring back the following memory. As an undergraduate student I once had a summer job in a video arcade at a blue-collar resort on Lake Erie. Every day, a five-year-old boy named Lyle would come in with a handful of pennies to exchange for a quarter to play his favorite game. After several weeks of this, young Lyle showed up one morning with large unblinking eyes and announced: “I don’t have any pennies today, but I have this, and it’s not my Dad’s it’s mine,” whereupon he presented me with a twenty-dollar bill. Žižek and his colleagues sometimes sound like they are coming into the arcade and saying: “there is no in-itself, it’s just an immanent traumatic kernel in the subject, but it’s not idealism it’s materialism.”²³ Stated differently, “materialism” is effectively used as an alibi to advance a thoroughly idealist position while claiming to be immune to the usual defects of idealism. “For us it is not like Berkeley where everything is just an image, you see: there is a bone in the throat, a trauma in the subject, an *Anstoß* that is sort of outside the mind even while not being really outside the mind.” Cake can be eaten and kept simultaneously.

That brings us to the topic of Lacan’s *objet petit a*, or simply *objet a*, referring to the attainable object of desire. The polar opposite of any autonomous thing-in-itself, *objet a* is “an entity that has no substantial consistency, which is in itself [...] ‘nothing but confusion,’ ‘naught but shadows/Of what is not,’” (12) as Bushy puts it in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. Stated differently, “the [*objet a*] is a weird, alien object which is nothing but the inscription of the subject itself into the field of objects in the guise of a stain that acquires form only when part of this field is anamorphically distorted by the subject’s desire” (12). This weird, alien object is not just another species to be added to the objects already found in the OOO bestiary, but is meant to replace real objects altogether: “we pass from the secret core of an object inaccessible to other objects (the ‘withdrawal’ thesis of Harman and Bryant’s object-oriented ontology) to inaccessibility as such” (12). *Objet a* “is not simply the excess of the In-itself, what Harman characterizes as the ‘withdrawn,’ volcanic core of objects [...]” (10). Instead, it represents the hard core of a Real that is not hidden, but already right here in front of us. Moreover, *objet a* itself turns out to be the “objective correlative” of the subject:

As defined by Lacan, the *objet petit a* is a strange object which is not only lacking, never fully here, always eluding the subject, but which is in itself nothing but the embodiment, the materialization of a lack. That is to say, since the subject is the self-appearing of nothing, its “objective correlative” can only be a strange object whose nature is to be the embodiment of nothing, an “impossible” object, an object the entire being of which is an embodiment of its own impossibility, an object whose status is that of an anamorphosis, a distorted projection. (11)

As we have seen, no withdrawn real objects are permitted by the Ljubljana School. This is due initially to its allegiance to the closed circle of thought as deployed by German Idealism against the Kantian *Ding an sich*. But it is further cemented by its ontologization of psychoanalysis as a theory not just about the psyche, but – since only a psyche can pursue philosophy – about reality as a whole. For this reason we only have the subject, which is “nothing but its own inaccessibility, its own failure to be substance”

²² Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 2. The citation from Žižek comes from *The Parallax View*, 17.

²³ For another argument that materialism is actually a secret form of idealism see Latour, “Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?”

(12; *emph. removed*) along with its “objective correlative” the *objet a*. It is not entirely clear, however, why the failure of the subject would lead it to generate an objective correlative in the first place. *Objet a* is a perfectly fascinating psychoanalytic concept, and no doubt goes a long way toward explaining the vicissitudes of human desire and the clinical phenomenon of transference. But psychoanalysis alone cannot establish that we must dispose of any object that is not merely the “objective correlative” of a subject. That only makes sense if we agree with Ljubljana – and their unrecognized ally Meillassoux – that the correlational circle is a strong argument, a topic to which I will return at the end of this article.

Before moving on, we should raise the issue of relationism in philosophy, mentioned briefly above in connection with Whitehead. A relational ontology is one in which there are no autonomous or independent elements, but only a network in which each term gains its reality differentially from the others. Along with Whitehead’s “philosophy of organism,” Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory is another such case, and most people read the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure in this way.²⁴ OOO is adamantly opposed to such extreme relational theories, on the grounds that if entities are fully deployed in their current relations, there is nothing in them that could disengage from those relations and enter into others. Change is impossible if objects are “overmined” into their current effects on other things.²⁵ Here, Sbriglia and Žižek take the opposite tack once again. Whereas Bryant insists – as do I – on the nonrelational core of every object, the editors cite Lacan in making the opposite assertion. In their words: “for Lacan, the subject is precisely a non-substantial entity, an object that is entirely – indeed, is perform – reducible to its relations to other entities” (14). They conclude as follows: “a truly radical materialism can only be a dialectical materialism [...] according to which the subject is a purely relational entity – indeed, is nothing but this very relationality” (14). As might be expected, this entails that *objet a* – as the mere “objective correlative” of the subject – also has a purely relational structure. On this point Žižek cites Lacan from Seminar XX as saying that “[t]he reciprocity between the subject and object *a* is total”²⁶ (14). But this leaves at least two questions hanging in midair. First, if the reciprocity between subject and *objet a* is “total,” we have to wonder where the rest of sense experience comes from: namely, the massive banal portion that is not cathected in the form of unfulfillable objects of desire. If this giant commonplace sensory mass exists in total reciprocity with the subject as well, then we have a form of Berkeleyan idealism without God; if it does not, then we have no idea where it might come from. Second, the notion of the subject as pure relational reciprocity makes an uneasy fit with Žižek’s further description of the subject as “an excremental little piece of the Real, a recalcitrant, unsymbolizable remainder of every signifying process” (14). For it is unclear why any system of pure relational reciprocity would even be able to have such a “recalcitrant, unsymbolizable remainder.” Any such remainder should apparently stem from outside the relational system. And given that Lacan’s Real is not an autonomous thing-in-itself, but simply a wound to the subject, this Real cannot provide anything more than an *immanent* remainder: in other words, it is no remainder at all.

2 Todd McGowan, “Objects After Subjects”

McGowan’s chapter has an amusing point of departure that he turns to real philosophical effect. “According to Fichte,” he reminds us, “philosophy is inevitably caught up in a perpetual struggle between idealism and what he calls dogmatism (but which we would call materialism.) Though Fichte hopes to sway the reader in the direction of his version of Kantian idealism, he freely admits that neither side can persuade the other” (68). This points to a possible element of choice at the basis of any philosophy: a theme so prominent in Heidegger and the existentialists, and more recently in Badiou’s notion of fidelity to

²⁴ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*.

²⁵ Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects”; Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duomining.”

²⁶ The citation from Lacan is from *Encore*, 114.

the event. The status of this topic is far from settled. But McGowan prefers to emphasize the humorous polemical consequences of the situation: “Since both idealists and materialists operate with an unquestioned fundamental principle [...] in order to convince his reader about the superiority of idealism relative to materialism, Fichte has no alternative but to resort to name-calling” (68). As even the casual reader of Fichte knows, his name-calling skills are extraordinary. McGowan offers the following sample: “What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is [...] A person indolent by nature or dulled and distorted by mental servitude, learned luxury, and vanity will never raise himself to the level of idealism.”²⁷ Quickly showing his own sense of fair play, McGowan notes that there is another side to the story, as represented most famously by Marx: “Subsequent thinkers haven’t found Fichte’s attempt at moral blackmail all that convincing. In fact, after Marx inaugurates his materialist revolution that upends German Idealism, the moral valence of the decision undergoes a thoroughgoing transformation” (68). Even so, Marx turns out to be just a mirror image of Fichte: “At no point does Marx attempt to refute the idealist position through an argument. Instead, he meets idealism with assertion and ridicule” (69). As we read in one of Marx’s gentler statements on the matter: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”²⁸ When it comes to more contemporary thinkers, McGowan goes so far as to claim that Badiou remains on the Fichtean side of the fence, and – perhaps less controversially – that Heidegger too remains stranded in idealism (79n5).

For McGowan himself there is no deadlock at all, since the opposition between idealism and materialism is already successfully overcome by Hegel: “at the moment when Hegel becomes Hegel, he comes to see the inseparability of idealism and materialism” (70). The familiar term McGowan uses for the Hegelian solution is “objective idealism,” though we can leave this term for our discussion of Johnston below. More pressing here is the particular set of themes in Hegel that McGowan wishes to emphasize. Although none of them is especially shocking for the reader of Hegel, they do lay the groundwork for McGowan’s critique of OOO:

1. The Kantian thing-in-itself is nonsense.
2. Contradiction is not found in our inability to think about reality (as Kant holds) but in reality itself.
3. This central status of contradiction entails a relational model of philosophy.

It should already be clear that McGowan is as anti-object-oriented as he could possibly be. After all, OOO stresses precisely the opposite of the three principles just listed: (1) Kant’s thing-in-itself is real, (2) there is no contradiction in reality itself, and (3) relational models of philosophy automatically collapse through their own inherent weakness.

Like a number of authors in *Subject Lessons*, McGowan indulges in psychoanalysis of the philosophical positions with which he happens to disagree. For instance, Kant’s views on the impossibility of moral perfection are diagnosed as a form of “hysteria,” although one might have expected a verdict of obsessional neurosis instead (71). In McGowan’s view, “Kant needs someone – the world – to play the bad guy, which is how hysteria operates” (71). The same critique extends to the very notion of the thing-in-itself, which cannot be accessed any more directly than pure duty can in the ethical field. But McGowan’s diagnosis of Kant is of less interest than the positive, Hegelian alternative he offers: “Our knowledge cannot remain at a remove from what it knows. It cannot treat what it encounters as phenomena distinct from things-in-themselves” (71). Rather than making use of the “circle of thought” objection to the *Ding an sich* discussed in the previous section, McGowan makes dubious use of one of Hegel’s funniest but least convincing passages. The version McGowan selects is the one from the *Philosophy of Nature*: “Of a metaphysics prevalent today which maintains that we cannot know things because they are absolutely shut to us, it might be said that not even the animals are so stupid as these metaphysicians; for they go after things, seize and consume them.”²⁹ (A similar passage, of course, can be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.³⁰) The problem with this

²⁷ Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 16.

²⁸ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 21.

²⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, 9.

³⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 65.

rebutal to the thing-in-itself is that it confuses inaccessibility with indestructibility. I am not aware of Kant ever arguing that the in-itself must be *eternal* in the manner of Platonic forms, and even if he did, we would not be bound to accept such a conception of the *an sich*. Admittedly, McGowan's main argument is slightly different, and hinges on the inherent anti-idealist properties of action: "Acting lifts us out of our hermetically sealed idealism" (70). But while action is an intriguing path to follow against the thing-in-itself, McGowan overplays his hand: "When we act, we cut into the world of objects and reveal that it is not epistemologically off-limits in the way that Kant and Fichte would have it" (71–72). There are several problems with this, the first being the failure to consider that Fichte himself spent a good deal of time thinking about action, and simply reached different conclusions on the matter from Hegel. The second problem is that the ability to act says nothing about whether the things are accessible "epistemologically," which concerns knowledge rather than action. But the main problem here is the same as with Hegel's claim about animals and eating. Namely, our ability to act on things – which no one denies – does not mean we are able to act on them *directly*. We will consider this topic more closely below, when considering Rothenberg's chapter.

But the real heart of McGowan's chapter is the notion of contradiction as existing in the world itself rather than merely in the impasses of human thinking. Whereas Kant treats his famous antinomies as red flags warning of the limits of human cognition, Hegel treats them positively: "According to Hegel, [the antinomies do not] mark reason's failure but its success. The moment at which reason runs into contradiction indicates a contradiction in being itself that reason grasps through its own contradictions" (72). He notes that this sharply distinguishes Hegel from Karl Popper, whose falsificationist model of science treats any contradiction as spelling the catastrophic end of a theory.³¹ Spirit, in its "fundamental masochism" (74), can endure contradiction in a way that lifeless materials cannot. McGowan's crowning defense of contradiction had appeared earlier on the same page:

Contradiction manifests itself in the becoming of every entity that exists. There is no entity that simply is what it is. Instead, every entity is both itself and what it is not. This is the fundamental contradiction that defines the entity as such. If any entity were only itself and had no reference to what it was not, it could not exist in contrast with other entities. (74)

This insistence on the truth of contradiction is reminiscent of the analytic philosopher Graham Priest, whose "dialetheism" asserts the existence of true contradictions, and the consequent downfall of any strict principle of identity.³² While this runs counter to my own and Meillassoux's differing defenses of identity, no less a OOO figure than Timothy Morton relies extensively on Priest's position, which is perhaps made easier by Morton's pre-OOO roots in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida – another prominent skeptic of identity.³³ At any rate, McGowan's focus on contradiction leads him straight to a relational ontology, on the basis that "[c]ontradiction is revealed through interaction" (74). And with this conclusion, his third anti-OOO principle is established.

To solidify his case, McGowan notes OOO's roots in Heidegger and its relative lack of reliance on Hegelian principles. Unfortunately, he misinterprets several key points in the OOO interpretation of Heidegger, in ways that sometimes make his argument difficult to follow. While McGowan is certainly right that Heidegger – like Edmund Husserl – treats the question of the existence of the external world as a false problem from the outset, he is wrong to imply that OOO greets this as a liberation from stale epistemological problems. Instead, OOO is openly horrified by this aspect of Husserl and Heidegger, which it regards as setting the table for a long tradition of mediocrity in continental meditations on reality-in-itself. For example, I complained in discussion with Manuel DeLanda that "the usual procedure, following in the footsteps of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, is to treat realism as a pseudo-problem."³⁴ As a rule, OOO would much rather pose the question of the objective existence of the world than deny the question's pertinence, as happens in nearly all strands of phenomenology. McGowan

³¹ Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*.

³² Priest et al., "Dialetheism."

³³ Morton, *Realist Magic*; Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

³⁴ Harman, in DeLanda & Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, 1.

sinks further into the marsh when he claims that “[f]or Graham Harman [...] Heidegger’s turn from subjectivity to Dasein marks an important move in the direction of the object” (75). Quite the contrary, since the first page of my debut book contains the following words: “Of the few interpreters who have been willing to give center stage to the drama of [the tool-analysis], all have followed Heidegger too closely in regarding human Dasein as the biggest star in the theater.”³⁵ Nor is this an isolated complaint taken out of context; a good deal of that book consists of laments about the unfortunate centrality of Dasein for Heidegger. In fact, in my view the shift from “subject” to “Dasein” does nothing to alter Heidegger’s underlying onto-taxonomy, with the human being filling up fifty percent of ontology despite being an ultimately minor phenomenon in the universe. Finally, there is McGowan’s claim that “Heidegger rejects out of hand [Kant’s] division of things into phenomena and things-in-themselves” (77). While McGowan does cite a supporting passage for this reading – there are plenty – from *Being and Time*, there is also an elephant in the room that Heideggerians habitually ignore.³⁶ I speak of Heidegger’s widely overlooked face punch to Hegel from late in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*: “What is the significance of the struggle initiated in German Idealism against the ‘thing-in-itself’ except a growing forgetfulness of what Kant had won, namely [...] the original development and searching study of the problem of human finitude?”³⁷ Quite apart from any scholarly dispute on these matters, McGowan is criticizing OOO, and he therefore ought to account for the fact that object-oriented ontologists do not agree that Heidegger is an anti-noumenal thinker. Indeed, I am already on record as critiquing Derrida for asserting that being is nothing outside the various ways it has been given to Dasein historically; Heidegger is clear that *Sein* is a surplus deeper than any givenness.³⁸

That said, the weight of McGowan’s argument about Heidegger comes to rest in his treatment of the distinction between “worldless” stones, “world-poor” animals, and “world-forming” humans in the widely read 1929/30 lecture course, which McGowan contrasts with Hegel’s approach.³⁹ On the whole, McGowan’s critique of Heidegger’s threefold schema is persuasive. As he rightly notes, the world-poverty of animals is never sufficiently illuminated by Heidegger, and the resulting distinction between stones and humans gives us little more than commonsensical banality: (75) the stone is worldless because it is aware of nothing, while humans are “world-forming” since they partake in language and are open to the world (76). Here, McGowan announces, is where Heidegger will “[pay] a steep price” for his abandonment of subjectivity in favor of Dasein – though to repeat, OOO denies that the move from the subject to Dasein changes much at all.

As McGowan has it, what is the steep price that Heidegger pays but Hegel avoids? His first step toward an answer is puzzling, but not obviously wrong. Here are McGowan’s words on the matter:

For Kant, Heidegger’s claim that the stone is worldless would already be going too far. Though we might discuss the stone as a phenomenon, we cannot say anything about its status in-itself. By identifying it with worldlessness, Heidegger steps beyond the limits that govern knowledge [...]. In Kant’s thought, our worldliness depends on not making claims about the worldlessness of stones. (76)

Is it really the case that Kant’s conception of the thing-in-itself leaves him skeptical about our ability to make any statement at all about stones lacking inner life, while Heidegger’s assertion that being-in-the-world eliminates the distance between Dasein and things makes him feel empowered to utter bald-faced statements about the status of non-human entities? I had not thought of it this way before, though I suspect McGowan is overstating both Kant’s caution in making such statements and Heidegger’s dogmatism in doing so. In any case, the real problem is that McGowan goes on to ascribe this way of looking at things to OOO itself: “This is precisely why object-oriented ontologists find Heidegger’s ontology more hospitable than Kant’s. Even though Heidegger sustains a radical difference between the

³⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 1.

³⁶ “‘Behind’ the phenomena of phenomenology there is essentially nothing else; on the other hand, what is to become a phenomenon may be hidden.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 60.

³⁷ Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, 251–2.

³⁸ Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 196. I am referring to a passage from Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 22–23.

³⁹ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.

human and the nonhuman, he does not remain trapped in the problem of epistemology in the way that Kant seems to" (76). As we have seen, OOO by no means accepts Husserl's and Heidegger's claims to be "beyond epistemology," and in the case of Heidegger OOO argues – against Derrida – that the very posing of the question of Being entails a degree of noumenal realism. In fact, from a OOO standpoint the similarities between Kant and Heidegger are extensive enough that OOO might even have been launched instead through an interpretation of Kant. Perhaps the biggest advantage of Heidegger over Kant for OOO is that the tool-analysis poses a question that would never have occurred to the earlier thinker: how do items of equipment relate *to each other*? Since the most obvious point where OOO departs from Kant is its claim that object–object relations are haunted by a noumenal surplus even when no humans are on the scene, this is the main point of Heidegger's superiority for us.

There is a final twist to McGowan's argument, and while it is pleasingly counterintuitive, it also repeats a problem we encountered in Sbriglia and Žižek. Here is McGowan: "the moment that he avoids the distinction between subject and object, Heidegger loses the ability to recognize the nature of the difference between the subject and other entities [namely, a special relationship with contradiction]" (77). Quite apart from OOO's refusal of the idea that Heidegger is a flat ontologist who smooths out the difference between Dasein and everything else, McGowan is simply repeating the Sbriglia/Žižek charge (already made by Žižek *solo* against Bryant in 2016) that what OOO thinks as subject does not meet the criteria for subjecthood.⁴⁰ Stated differently, McGowan is left with the tautology that since Heidegger no longer recognizes a fundamental difference between subject and object, he is unable to see what makes the subject so special. I do not doubt that humans can do many things that other entities cannot, that in psychoanalytic terms we are distinguished even from other animals by repression and castration, that history plays an eminent role in human existence but not in the vegetable kingdom, and so forth. What has not been demonstrated is that the human subject is *ontologically* special, a claim that makes sense only for those who accept the Cartesian assumption that we have direct access to thought but indirect access to everything else.

Let's end this section with a final word about McGowan's reversal of Heidegger's worldless/world-forming schema, a reversal that I for one find interesting and imaginative. Whereas Heidegger adopts the commonsensical stance that stones have no world but humans are very much immersed in one, McGowan sees Hegel as holding the contrary view: "Although Hegel doesn't theorize the stone as world-forming, he does see it as fully in the world in a way that the subject cannot be" (77). That is to say, the stone is so fully delivered to the world as to be possibly shattered by causal forces with no hope of active self-preservation. McGowan continues: "Hegel defines the organic as that which has the ability not to be simply a victim of its world. Unlike the inorganic, the organic reacts to the destruction that the world heaps on it with self-restoration" (77). This power of self-restoration is one that McGowan interprets not in the biological sense of immune response and regeneration, but in the ontological sense of contradiction. And this is where his article finally comes to rest, at the same unconvincing point toward which it has always been signaling:

We know that the stone is not self-identical, that it is not an independent substance, because it is capable of breaking. But the stone is not a subject, a being that makes its ability to break apart its founding principle. Though it can suffer violence from the external world, the stone lacks the ability to perform any violence toward itself. It is divided against itself, but not in a way that grants it any purchase upon contradiction. (78)

The second part of this passage is insufficiently clear about the difference between a thing being merely divided against itself, or divided against itself in a way that "grants it purchase upon contradiction," and thus it will be convincing only to those already in the Ljubljana camp. The bigger problem comes at the beginning of the passage. The claim that a thing cannot be self-identical if it is capable of breaking is not only introduced without argument, but is made in the face of the glaring counterexample of Aristotle: who was both the philosopher of self-identical substance *par excellence* *and* one of the great thinkers of motion and growth.

⁴⁰ Žižek, "Afterword: Objects, Objects Everywhere," 178.

3 Adrian Johnston, “Fear of Science”

Johnston’s chapter is framed explicitly as a response to his critics, myself included. Since Johnston is a personal friend, and I fully expect to engage him in further debate in the future, this section will limit itself to one key point. Namely, he is especially perturbed by what I do with a particular passage from Žižek’s conversations with Glyn Daly. The relevant words from Žižek are as follows:

The true formula of materialism is not that there is some noumenal reality beyond our distorting perception of it. The only consistent materialist position is that the world does not exist – in the Kantian sense of the term, as a self-enclosed whole. The notion of the world as a positive universe presupposes an external observer, an observer not caught in it. The very position from which you can perceive the world as a self-enclosed whole is the position of an external observer. It is thus paradoxically this radical perspectivism which allows us to formulate a truly materialist position, not that the world exists outside the mind, but that our mind does not exist outside the world.⁴¹

It would be an exaggeration to say that there is “a lot going on” in this passage, since the exact number of things going on is three. (1) Žižek denies “noumenal reality,” (2) Žižek denies that the world is a self-enclosed whole, and (3) Žižek asserts that the world could only be a self-enclosed whole if there were an external observer to look at it, but no such observer can possibly exist. The dispute between me and Johnston turns on points (1) and (2), while (3) is one of the key arguments that recurs throughout the chapters of *Subject Lessons*. Let’s consider the situation briefly.

In essence, Johnston charges me with deliberately distorting the Žižek passage above by ending after “the world does not exist” instead of giving the full context for this phrase. In Johnston’s words, “Harman latches onto the line ‘the world does not exist’ without acknowledging the crucial caveat immediately following it: ‘in the Kantian sense of the term, as a self-enclosed whole.’ What this caveat unambiguously indicates is that Žižek does anything but, as Harman falsely charges, deny the real world’s existence *tout court*” (127). Yet the reason I elided the part about the world as a “self-enclosed whole” is its distracting irrelevance to my argument. When Žižek denies “some noumenal reality beyond our distorting perception of it,” this is not an accusation aimed at the Kantian noumena specifically, but at the idea of a reality “beyond our distorting perception of it.” In other words, for Žižek, reality is simply not something that exists apart from our encounter with it. This view is entirely unsurprising given his admiration for Hegel and Lacan, who argue respectively that the thing-in-itself is just a negativity immanent to thought, and that the Real exists only through being encountered as an unsymbolizable trauma. Nowhere in Hegel do two things-in-themselves interact beyond surveillance by the subject; nowhere in Lacan do two pieces of the Real enter into relation apart from the human subject, however “barred” that subject may be. As a reliably Hegelo-Lacanian thinker despite his numerous innovations, Žižek is not just opposed to a reality *beyond* our distorting perception of it, but even to a reality that is *not* beyond our distorting perception of it. What exists for him is simply the subject, the *objet a* correlated with it, and a Real that does not come from outside in any rigorous sense of the term.

The portion of the passage that Johnston accuses me of eliding is nothing more than a Houdini-like effort by Žižek to escape from idealist handcuffs he has dangerously placed on his own hands. This effort includes two separate elements: (1) his denial that the world is a self-enclosed whole, and (2) his assertion that such a self-enclosed world would require an observer external to it. The problem with (1) is that there are many different ways to deny that the world is a whole other than Žižek’s method, which is to proclaim a subject whose anamorphic squints of desire prevent the world from having any inherent status apart from such squints. For instance, his part-time ally Badiou also frequently asserts that “the whole is not,” but this is based on his interpretation of set theory rather than any Lacanian considerations. OOO equally denies that reality forms a whole, but for the very different reason that relations are raggedy enough that at any moment some things – called “dormant objects” – exist in disconnection from the rest.⁴²

⁴¹ Žižek and Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, 97.

⁴² Harman, “Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos.”

There is also Markus Gabriel, who wrote a best seller in Germany literally entitled *Why the World Does Not Exist*, but on the basis of reasons entirely different from Žižek's, Badiou's, and my own.⁴³ In short, the issue of whether the world is a whole is not the same as that of whether something exists independently of the subject.

But point (2) is where we encounter the real soft spot in the argument. The relevant portion of text is as follows (again, this is Žižek responding to Daly):

The notion of the world as a positive universe presupposes an external observer, an observer not caught in it. The very position from which you can perceive the world as a self-enclosed whole is the position of an external observer. It is thus paradoxically this radical perspectivism which allows us to formulate a truly materialist position, not that the world exists outside the mind, but that our mind does not exist outside the world.⁴⁴

Let's admire for a moment the sheer audacity of this passage. Žižek is widely known as a gifted promoter and developer of the doctrines that the thing-in-itself is merely an immanent obstacle of thought itself (Hegel), that the object of desire is only the correlate of a posited lack (Lacan), and that the Real exists only in its traumatization of the subject (Lacan). On this basis, any neutral reader would say there is at least a strong *prima facie* case for concluding that Žižek is a full-blown idealist, so that one of the most urgent challenges for his position is to account for a reality independent of the mind in sufficiently robust terms. Given these circumstances, what does he do? Incredibly, he tries to displace the "observer-dependent" burden of idealism onto its polar opposite: realism. After all, the argument runs, those who think the world exists apart from the mind must accept an external observer looking at that world from outside it, in a sort of God's-eye view. No matter that no realist actually thinks this, since the whole point of realism is that the world exists (and not necessarily as a "whole") whether anyone is looking or not; the mere fact that one *says* this does not make one an "observer" in the same sense that Berkeley's (human or divine) subject is such an observer. In other words, Žižek is trying to argue that if I think of a world outside thought, then *precisely through doing so* I become an "external observer" thinking and talking about the world. This is the same argument that Meillassoux calls the "correlationist circle." Žižek's special audacity in this case comes from the fact that he claims not to accept an external observer, but only an *internal* one. And with the external observer's statement about an independent world now disqualified by her apparent self-contradiction, only the internal observer is left to testify about the world, which makes the latter the only qualified party to tell us that there is anything at all. Somehow this flagrant idealism is permitted to go by the nickname "materialism," and Žižek conceals this gesture behind an especially clever play on words: as he puts it, materialism means "not that the world exists outside the mind, but that our mind does not exist outside the world." We might just as well say that phenomenology (the most unapologetic idealism of its century) means "not that no world exists outside the mind, but that no mind exists without a world," which is essentially Husserl's argument, after all.

4 Molly Anne Rothenberg, "Twisting 'Flat Ontology'"

Rothenberg's chapter contains the most detailed engagement with OOO anywhere in *Subject Lessons*, and for this I am grateful. Her main concern is the concept of "allure," which she treats as a self-defeating concept whose aims are better addressed by Lacan's notion of "extimate cause."⁴⁵ "According to Harman," Rothenberg reports, "our failure to know the object-in-itself has nothing to do with the epistemological limitations of the subject but is due to the fact that the object withdraws from itself. For Harman, the object-in-itself has neither qualities nor relations [...]" (190). She cites Žižek's criticism that this amounts to "a quasi-magical reversal of epistemological obstacle into ontological premise," such that my position

⁴³ Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*.

⁴⁴ Žižek and Daly, *Conversations with Žižek*, 97.

⁴⁵ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 141–4.

entails transcendental subjectivity even while claiming to deny it.⁴⁶ Crossing from Hegelian into Lacanian territory, Rothenberg posits that the “self-withdrawn object” of OOO should really be understood as *objet a*, so that its supposed withdrawal is only an imaginary loss, “the fantasy of a substantialized object that is imagined to rectify the so-called loss accompanying subjectivization” (191). However, she adds, OOO’s attempted *prohibition* on accessing the in-itself is really just an *impossibility*, since no in-itself exists.

There are several things to be said in response. First, it is inaccurate to say that for OOO our failure to know the in-itself is due to its *self*-withdrawal, since “withdrawal” alone (without adding the “self-” part) does the trick. The notion of self-withdrawal occurs in OOO only with reference to the special case in which a specific kind of object (namely, a human being) looks at itself and fails to grasp it directly, just as it fails in the case of any other object. This will not come as welcome news to the Ljubljana School, which accepts the Hegelo-Lacanian consensus that we do have direct access to the thought–world relation in a way that we do not for object–object relations, despite their great haste to disown the transparent Cartesian subject in favor of a turbulent subject that – in its traumatic madness – never quite coincides with itself. Whatever the busy efforts of Ljubljana to create a “wobbly subject,” as Meillassoux aptly puts it, the object–object interaction is entirely excluded from consideration.⁴⁷ Second, it is not the case that “for Harman, the object-in-itself has neither qualities nor relations.” Here there is one serious mistake and one moderate one. The moderate mistake is that the OOO real object (or “object-in-itself”) does in fact often engage in relations, but only indirectly, through sensual mediators; real objects that are not currently in any relations at all are called “dormant objects,” but they may be rather rare. The serious mistake is the claim that real objects have no qualities. *Au contraire!* Real objects can have both sensual qualities and real qualities, though the former are found only in cases of allure.⁴⁸ As for Žižek’s claim that referring to the withdrawal of objects is a “quasi-magical” imputation of a merely epistemological barrier into the object itself, this charge has frequently been made by critics, though none of them have bothered to demonstrate that the barrier is really just “epistemological.” This claim is convincing only for those who assume that the circle of thought is valid, so that we must confine our initial remarks to a thought–world correlate, thereby ascribing everything to the “subject” pole and nothing to the “object.”

We now turn to Rothenberg’s discussion of the OOO idea of “allure,” an intermediate experience in which we have a suggestive indirect access to objects. The idea is crucial for the OOO account of aesthetics, where it is described as the heir of Socratic *philosophia*. Rothenberg’s first concern is to claim that OOO allure arises not only from the philosophy of Husserl, but from a flat-out *misreading* of his work. For instance: “‘allure’ is Harman’s (mis)appropriation of the Husserlian horizon of indeterminacy” (196), and “Harman’s reading [of Husserl] constitutes a serious misprision” (198). All right, then: what does a *proper* appropriation of Husserl look like for Rothenberg? At the very least, it apparently requires that we emphasize an object’s horizon of indeterminacy. In her own words: “No act of consciousness can completely grasp the object, if only because an [intentional] act occurs in the present and the object endures through time [...] That is, the object, in Husserl’s terms, necessarily *transcends* the intentional act that fixes its meaning (*Sinn*) for consciousness. This indeterminate horizon draws consciousness to it” (196–197). So far there is no problem; this is in fact what Husserl says. What is subtly wrong here, however, is the implication that allure is somehow related to Husserl’s indeterminate horizons. OOO’s allure is a matter of *real* objects, and no such objects are permitted by Husserl to exist – given his outright rejection of objects that could not, in principle, be the terminus of some intentional act. Rothenberg is free to argue the contrary, but then she would simply be siding with the mainstream Husserlians who claim that his “horizon” already contains everything that we find in Heidegger’s *Sein*. There is no time to argue the point here; I did so in my first book in connection with a similar argument made by Rudolf Bernet.⁴⁹ From a OOO standpoint, the idea of an object as having indeterminate horizons leading beyond its current

⁴⁶ Žižek, *Disparities*, 57.

⁴⁷ Meillassoux, in Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 215.

⁴⁸ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*; Harman, *Art and Objects*.

⁴⁹ See Harman, *Tool-Being*, 135–41. The reference is to Bernet, “Phenomenological Reduction and the Double Life.”

presence in consciousness is simply not realist enough. Stated differently, Husserl's "things themselves" have nothing to do with Kant's thing-in-itself, and the latter is closer to what interests OOO. To find something like allure in a basically phenomenological framework, we need to look to Heidegger rather than Husserl.

The least fortunate part of Rothenberg's pages on Husserl comes when she accuses OOO of misreading the concept of reduction. She begins by noting that Husserl's "method requires that we put aside considerations of the object-in-itself, suspending 'even the idea of the natural world,' so that intentional acts [...] can be apprehended and consciousness itself interrogated" (197). She adds that in my own work, the Husserlian horizon of indeterminacy becomes something alluring in the object itself, which she rejects on the following grounds: "[Harman] describes the *epoche* as if it has nothing to do with bracketing the existence of the object and everything to do with bracketing consciousness [...]" (197). Yet she follows this point with a citation from my book *Guerrilla Metaphysics* that has nothing to do with the *epoche* and everything to do with eidetic reduction, which is something altogether different. She elaborates as follows: "Harman's claim notwithstanding, Husserl's 'eidetic reduction' does not concern the object's essence [...] [it] puts out of play the veridical existence of the external world, including the object-in-itself" (197). This point is supported with a citation not from Husserl, but from the scholar Christian Beyer in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article.⁵⁰ More importantly, Rothenberg seems to have misunderstood what I am doing with Husserl. Namely, when I speak of "objects" in Husserl I am not referring to withdrawn *real* objects, which do not even exist for him; instead, I am referring to the essences of *intentional* objects (OOO's "sensual" objects) just as Husserl himself is doing. For this reason it is strange for Rothenberg to accuse me of missing Husserl's bracketing of reality, since I not only recognize it, but openly find fault with it. Furthermore, Rothenberg is simply wrong to exclude all talk of the "essence" of objects, since it is Husserl himself who insists on the *Wesensschau* that allows us to have intellectual intuition into the essence of – intentional – objects. This sort of talk is even one of Husserl's trademarks, to such an extent that he is abundantly mocked by detractors for his claim to have insight into essence. To sum up this point, although the *epoche* does suspend all discussion of *real* objects outside consciousness, it is so far from suspending all discussion of *objects* that it guarantees our ability to recognize the existence of intentional objects in the first place. This is one of Husserl's great innovations in philosophy: the recognition of an object-quality split *within* appearance; the empiricist tradition had claimed instead that in experience we only encounter "bundles of qualities." Finally, when Rothenberg glosses OOO's allure as the claim that "there is a property X or 'allure' inherent to the object-in-itself" (198), she seems to imply that the subject is left out of consideration altogether. But this completely misses the *theatrical* nature of allure, in which – for OOO – the human beholder has to stand in for the missing real object and perform its real qualities. She is effectively mistaking my position for that of the early Michael Fried, which receives an appreciation – though a rather critical one – in *Art and Objects*.⁵¹

Yet the heart of Rothenberg's critique lies elsewhere. She begins with a solid understanding of my theoretical aims: "The twin premises of Harman's theory are that we need the object-in-itself in order to prevent 'exhaustion'/stasis and we need to think of the object-in-itself as 'alluring' in order to provide the motive force [...] of causation" (198). And further: "because the object-in-itself is a 'non-relational reality' and the [sensual qualities] that interact with other objects are both relational and somehow the product of the non-relational core, Harman needs something to bridge the gap between the withdrawn objects and the [sensual qualities] [...]" (199). Needless to say, she thinks that I have brought this deadlock on myself: "[t]hanks to his dislike of immanent causation, Harman has mired himself in the problem of external causation [...]" (199). As she sees it, using the term "vicarious" to describe the relation between the object-in-itself and its sensual qualities only "wishes the problem away" (199).⁵² Allure is dismissed as

⁵⁰ Beyer, "Edmund Husserl."

⁵¹ See Harman, *Art and Objects*, 43–82.

⁵² See Harman, "On Vicarious Causation."

“a notional and mysterious force, like the ether, that has to be presupposed in order to link the non-relational part of the object to the relational part without (somehow) bringing them into relation” (199).

By linking allure and vicarious causation with the long-discredited notion of an ether that fills cosmic space and allows for the transmission of electromagnetic waves, Rothenberg is trying to make these concepts look both superfluous and old-fashioned. For this reason, it may be worth recalling why I introduce them at all, especially since my reasons are rooted in some of the most venerable currents in the history of philosophy. The assumption that something can either be stated directly in clear propositional terms, or else it is nothing but negative-theological hand-waving, is a contemporary version of the sophist’s trick known as Meno’s Paradox: either we know something or we don’t, have access to it or not, period. Among other difficulties, this renders Socratic *philosophia* impossible, and turns all forms of human cognition into full-blown knowledge, despite ample evidence – from aesthetics and elsewhere – that direct access to reality is not the only kind. Nor did we need to wait for Kant’s thing-in-itself or Heideggerian withdrawal to encounter this point in the history of philosophy. Although Aristotle was no theorist of indirect causation – this would only come later, with the early occasionalists of Islam – he already noticed that we cannot define a substance in words, since words employ universals but substances are always concrete.⁵³ Stated differently, there is an automatic gap between reality and anything we might say about it.

Now, any attempt to dismiss indirect causation as a pseudo-problem that OOO brings upon itself through a mere “dislike” of “immanent causation” (199) leads to an overmining situation, in which causation is “internal” and there is no surplus beneath the current set of relations in which a thing is involved. Of course, Rothenberg has already rejected this claim, but then again, I have also refused her rejection of it. The question of how things interact is a real one, and the term “vicarious causation” was coined in order to pin down this question for further study, rather than wish it away. Nor is it merely posited as a “notional” or “mysterious” force, since a preliminary answer is given as to how it works. While it is true that for OOO no two real objects can touch, and true as well that inserting another real object between them would simply multiply the problem, it is nonetheless evident that real objects can touch *sensual* ones: this is precisely what happens in human experience. I am a real object, inexhaustible by any amount of introspection, and it is I myself who make contact with the sensual objects of experience: not just a sensual image of this “I.” Thus, the first secret of vicarious causation is that I as a real object touch a sensual object directly through encountering it (say, a tree). For its own part, the real tree touches the sensual tree by generating it; in this way, it is the medium through which I make second-hand contact with the other real object despite the impossibility of *direct* contact between us. To assert that all contact is either direct or nonexistent is merely a way of evading the *bona fide* problem that OOO has noted with direct interaction.

5 Concluding remarks

Of the many wise remarks about philosophy made by Whitehead, the following is of especial importance: “It has been remarked that a system of philosophy is never refuted; it is only abandoned.”⁵⁴ He adds further that attempts at refutation have an in-built flaw: “logical contradictions [...] are the most gratuitous of errors; and usually they are trivial. Thus, after criticism, [philosophical] systems do not exhibit mere illogicalities. They suffer from inadequacy and incoherence.”⁵⁵ Not logical flaws, but inadequacy and incoherence, are the real shortcomings of abandoned philosophies. The need for

⁵³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z 7. See also Harman, “A New Occasionalism?”, and Harman, *Aristotle With a Twist*.

⁵⁴ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

coherence in a philosophy is real, though it should also not be rushed. It is often fruitful to pursue contradictory intuitions for a time, and much can be lost through a forced or premature consistency: this is the grain of truth in Ralph Waldo Emerson's maxim that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."⁵⁶ It is best to think of consistency as a goal rather than a starting point of the philosopher. The more pressing matter is always *adequacy*, meaning that nothing that exists should be excluded from a philosophy's scope; it is a bad sign if too much is *explained away* by a theory for the sake of easy self-consistency. If philosophies are generally refuted rather than abandoned, what this means is that they are left behind not because of some purported mistake, but because they account for less of experience than their successors do. Nonetheless, philosophers generally behave as if they were more afraid of being refuted than being abandoned. They spend more time constructing ironclad proofs and "knockdown arguments" than asking themselves what portions of reality they are missing. This is especially true in the modern period of philosophy, so eager to mimic the natural sciences and geometrical deduction whenever possible.

The importance of these remarks for the battle of objects and subjects should be clear. Today's neo-rationalist philosophies think themselves rigorous because of their adherence to a very specific *proof*, one that they hold marks a permanent cut between obsolete and living philosophy. I speak of the circle of thought, or Meillassoux's correlational circle: the notion that to speak of what lies beyond thought is itself already a thought. Virtually every philosophical claim made in the pages of *Subject Lessons* stems directly from the acceptance of this circle: the replacement of the real object with the *objet a*, the transformation of reality into the traumatic Real, the replacement of a rift between phenomena and noumena with a "cut" internal to the subject, the surrender of independent material atoms in favor of a counterintuitive "materialism" defined as a "blind spot" of the subject, and the notion that to speak of a world-in-itself is to fantasize the existence of an observer looking at it from outside. What is interesting about this particular "proof" is that it demands assent despite very weak adequacy. After all, one wakes up in the morning thinking that there are trillions of entities in the cosmos, and that they are busily influencing one another even when no human subject is watching them. Against this everyday assumption, the "irrefutable proof" of the Ljubljana version of the circle of thought tells us that no such interactions really occur, that the subject must always be on the scene to monitor them, and that objects of desire have no capacity to satisfy in their own right. Of course, this is exactly what proofs are capable of doing: making us sacrifice our previous sense of adequacy in favor of a surprising limitation that can be demonstrated beyond all doubt. For example, it is counterintuitive to think that at any given moment there must be two antipodal points on the equator with exactly the same temperature, yet this is decisively proven as a consequence of the so-called Borsuk–Ulam theorem.⁵⁷ Philosophy too has aspired to enter the ranks of the disciplines that work via *proof*, especially in the modern period. Perhaps the best example is that, from Kant onward (with the remarkable exception of Whitehead) we have taught ourselves that the thought–world relation is the root of all others. Not a page of *Subject Lessons* makes sense without this particular "wager." But is the wager a good one? Is it really the case that I cannot speak of the relation between fire and cotton, but only of the conditions of possibility for how this relation appears to me? This is not the place to argue the point once more. I merely wished to show how dependent Ljubljana's arguments – both the Hegelian and the Lacanian sort – are on the circle of thought.

Another remark about *Subject Lessons* is in order. At the beginning of this article, I mentioned that the collection is stronger in its combined defense of German Idealism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis than in its critical remarks on "New Materialism" broadly conceived. The reason may be as follows. I cannot recall a single passage in the book, by any of its authors, that shows evidence of having learned anything new from the "New Materialist" figures. They are treated as belonging to a purely retrograde tendency; the

⁵⁶ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 265.

⁵⁷ Aharoni, *Mathematics, Poetry, and Beauty*, 125.

Ljubljana School that stands at the end of this anthology is identical to the one we knew coming in. That makes the encounter proposed by the book a disappointing one. Some of this is only to be expected. Žižek in particular is better known and more influential than any New Materialist figure, including Karen Barad (whose relative absence from the book is surprising) and Bennett.⁵⁸ Thus a certain degree of “King of the Hill” attitude was to be expected, with the editors’ Introduction going out of its way to remind us that Žižek was already fighting cultural materialism for a quarter of a century before the New Materialists came along (5). Yet there is something unsatisfying about hearing the same arguments, the same claims that Hegel is being misrepresented by his critics, the same complaints that the subject of psychoanalysis is not being taken into account. In that respect, the collection is a missed opportunity. That is why I am far more likely to recommend the positive chapters on Ljubljana School doctrine – such as Dolar’s, one of the gems of the anthology – than any of the critical treatments of the new philosophies.

Conflict of interest: The author is the editor in chief of the journal and editor of this topical issue. The evaluation process was handled by another editor and the peer reviews were double blind. The manuscript was anonymized (references to the author were written in the third person) for the purposes of review.

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⁵⁸ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

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