



Research Article

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An Ontologically Nihilist Critique of Graham Harman's Ontological Liberalism

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Abstract: In Graham Harman's realist philosophy, which I call "ontological liberalism," all objects are considered equal, there being no unbridgeable gap between various modes of being. Every object is a unique individual, endowed with a positive being. Any privileging of a certain class of objects over other classes of objects is invalidated. An object is composed of its relations, summarized under the heading of what Harman calls "sensual qualities," while objects also contain mutually inaccessible essences. Supposedly, every object may be characterized by the duality of relationality and substantiality. According to ontological liberalism, *all objects exist*. In this essay, I propose an ontological nihilist critique of Harman's liberal ontology. We cannot exclude the possibility of every object being equally nonexistent. Appearances could pertain all the way down, with no final substance at the end of the infinite chain of appearances. Building on insights gleaned from Jan Westerhoff's defence of ontological nihilism, I propose a nihilist reconfiguration of Harman's ontological liberalism. If objects and relations are empty and reality is made of appearances all the way down, no underlying objective essence can or should be posited. Because relations are without basis, lacking in substance, nothing exists, nothing happens, and *no objects exist*.

Keywords: nihilism, ontological liberalism, ontology, relationalism, substance

1 Introduction

The realist metaphysical system proposed by Graham Harman stands out in terms of both its all-encompassing scope and ambition. To reference the subtitle of Harman's 2018 volume, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, Harman's ontology genuinely seeks to function as a "new theory of everything."¹ While the philosopher has created some neologisms to describe his system, such as Speculative Realism, and Object-Oriented-Ontology (OOO, or Triple-O), I will refer to it under the, in my view, accurate heading of "ontological liberalism." During the course of this article, I shall elaborate an *ontologically* nihilist critique of Harman's ontological liberal philosophy, referencing for the most part Harman's two systematic works, namely, *Tool-Being* and *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, while also drawing on Harman's later works. As distinct from ethical or political uses of the term "nihilism," *ontological nihilism* refers here specifically to the far from uncontroversial idea that nothing whatsoever exists.² Whilst it certainly can be viewed as a form of skepticism with

¹ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*.

² This form of nihilism, while sharing affinities with epistemological nihilism and ethical nihilism, refrains from making specifically epistemological or ethical claims. It is not a hypothesis regarding the possibility of knowledge, or the status of good or evil. Be that as it may, ontological nihilism does indeed undermine knowledge claims, as the absence of anything

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reference to even the possibility of all-encompassing ontological or metaphysical systems, and indeed such skepticism seems to result from acceptance of this position, ontological nihilism is unafraid to declare and maintain the *actual* truth of the following programmatic statement: *nothing whatsoever exists*. Differently put, *inexistence is the sole valid and existent mode of being*. Instead of being merely an epistemological statement referring to the inability of our finite, puny, insignificant human minds to construct accurate or adequate cosmologies, ontological nihilism affirms the counterintuitive truth of the absence of any real or unreal mode of existence. This implies that our world and everything in it are not even broken tools, inaccessible depths, nor failures to be, but something infinitely less than what the word “abortive” is supposed to denote.

2 Ontological Liberalism, or the Promise of Everything

First, however, a digression is in order. Why use the phrase “ontological liberalism” to denote Harman’s ontology in the first place? During the early 2000s, Harman used the term Speculative Realism (SR) to describe his work along with that of fellow participants of the Speculative Realism Conference, Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux, and Iain Hamilton Grant. Since then, Harman has shifted to using the terms “Object-Oriented Philosophy” and “Object-Oriented-Ontology” (OOO). “Ontological liberalism” was first coined as a general description of flat ontologies³ by Peter Wolfendale in a book severely critical of Harman and the contemporary movement of flat ontology as a whole.⁴ Following Wolfendale, I define ontological liberalism as “the demand to account for all things and the demand to account for them equally.”⁵ This description accords well with Levi R. Bryant’s summarization of flat ontology: “entities at all levels of scale, whether natural or cultural, physical or artificial, material or semiotic are on equal ontological footing.”⁶ Wolfendale’s volume, while overly simplistic in its representation of Harman and SR/OOO/OOP/Flat Ontology, is an important point of departure, for it does manage to capture the essence of the aforementioned position. Being a shameless defence of scientism, the hopelessly outdated idea that the natural sciences (the more quantified, the better) ought to have the final say when it comes to descriptions of reality, Wolfendale’s train of thought remains mired in what may be described as “ontological conservatism.” The latter I define as the polar opposite of ontological liberalism, namely, *the demand to not account for all things and the demand to account for them unequally*. For ontological conservatism, there *are* objects that ought not to be spoken of, because they are non-existent, irrelevant, or otherwise undeserving of the attention of serious philosophers.⁷ Why liberalism and conservatism though? Before proceeding, it is worthwhile to elaborate upon this peculiar choice of terminology.

known and the absence of a knower do trivialize knowledge to a great extent. However, the absence of anything whatsoever also draws with it the absence of non-knowledge.

³ The term “flat ontology” was first coined by Deleuzian philosopher Manuel DeLanda: “while an ontology based on relations between general types and particular instances is hierarchical, each level representing a different ontological category (organism, species, genera), an approach in terms of interacting parts and emergent wholes leads to a flat ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.” DeLanda, *Intensive Science*, 47. Wolfendale mentions the following philosophers as representatives of this school: Jane Bennett, Ian Bogost, Levi R. Bryant, Manuel DeLanda, Markus Gabriel, Tristan Garcia, Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, and, of course, Harman. Interestingly, a participant of the Speculative Realism Conference, Quentin Meillassoux, is let off the hook by Wolfendale because of Meillassoux’s perceived greater respect for scientific knowledge. cf. Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 402.

⁴ Even the subtitle of Wolfendale’s tome – which implies that Harman is guilty of resurrecting the Kantian noumenon or “thing-in-itself” – is symptomatic of the severe misunderstandings, which plague Wolfendale’s reading of SR/OOO. Indeed, the volume reads more like a work of satire than a genuinely philosophically informed engagement with its opponents.

⁵ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 255.

⁶ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 279.

⁷ Indeed, assuming the mannerisms of the serious thinker can make one almost automatically well qualified to exercise the heavy task of disqualification. Almost, but not quite.

These two phrases originate from a specific Western post-French Revolution political context, denoting ideologies formerly dominant mostly in Europe and dual-party political systems throughout the Americas in the nineteenth century. It may strike the reader as somewhat odd that Wolfendale chooses “liberalism” as a term to critique a twenty-first century school of thought, considering that none of the authors (Harman, Morton, Bryant, and so on) who form the object of Wolfendale’s critique ever make use of such a self-description. In my view, it is helpful to distinguish the ontological uses of concepts from political ones, while recognizing the complex interrelationships between these registers. Thomas Nail, not dissimilarly to Wolfendale’s use of “ontological liberalism,” distinguishes between “ontological” and “political” anarchisms. The former denotes the position, attributed by Nail to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that “there is no absolute law, ruler or origin of being.”⁸ We cannot posit any necessary relationship between ontological and political anarchism. The former in itself does not automatically imply normative affinity with the latter: “ontological anarchism may provide a new, non-representational space of liberty, or it may provide a ruptured ‘open’ domain for a new discourse of rights and military occupation by the state, or it may merely reproduce a complicity with the processes of capitalism.”⁹ Without wishing to pass judgement upon ontological anarchism, the aforementioned example underlines that an ontology is not moored to a specific political position. Hence, when speaking of liberalism or conservatism, I am not referring to explicitly political, but rather specifically ontological usages of these terms.¹⁰

Without seeking to waste an excessive amount of time on reconstructing the *minutiae* of Wolfendale’s ideologically motivated critique of Harman, I borrow the concept of ontological liberalism as a descriptively accurate, even useful heuristic tool, Wolfendale’s original pejorative intentions notwithstanding. It describes a permissive attitude when it comes to ontological categorizations, an attempt to leave nothing out of consideration. While sharing Wolfendale’s deflationary intentions, I absolutely do not share his ontological conservatism. As will become evident, ontological liberalism cannot withstand the challenge of ontological nihilism, but this does not imply that ontological conservatism fares any better. Certainly, the denial of the reality of some objects takes us a bit closer to full-blown nihilism than the unlimited affirmation of the being of all objects, but ontological nihilism cannot take the validity of any *specific* appearance seriously. No object resists the gnawing suspicion of inexistence and insubstantiality, without instantaneously dissolving into a set of appearances, not even those “hypothesized,” “proven,” or “measured” by modern scientific practices. The best scientists can do is quantify shadows, while metaphysicians, inhabiting the obscurely rodential grottoes of philosophy, dispute the implications among themselves. I propose the following quote from *The Quadruple Object* as an apt summary or programmatic statement of ontological liberalism:

Along with diamonds, rope, and neutrons, objects may include armies, monsters, square circles, and leagues of real and fictitious nations. All such objects must be accounted for by ontology, not merely denounced or reduced to despicable nullities. Yet despite repeated claims by both friends and critics of my work, I have never held that all objects are ‘equally real.’ For it is false that dragons have autonomous reality in the same manner as a telephone pole. My point is not that all objects are equally real, but that they are equally objects. It is only in a wider theory that accounts for the real and the unreal alike that pixies, nymphs, and utopias must be treated in the same terms as sailboats and atoms.¹¹

A few notes are in order. Ontological liberalism does not claim that everything exists *equally*. In this regard, Harman’s denial is not untruthful. There are undeniably significant differences of degree between a league composed of fictitious nations in my geopolitically themed dream, an alliance of nations in George R. R.

⁸ Nail, “No Gods! No Masters!,” 32.

⁹ Ibid., 33. This observation echoes Alain Badiou’s (in)famous denunciation of Deleuze and Guattari, according to which their philosophy, with its emphasis on deterritorialization, is nothing but a puerile affirmation of “becoming for becoming’s sake,” open to progressive and reactionary appropriations and therefore inherently ideologically dangerous. Badiou, “The Flux and the Party.”

¹⁰ This does not mean that ontological positions necessarily do not contain implicit political facets. An analogous binary would be that of “inflationary” and “deflationary” ontologies. cf. Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology*.

¹¹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 5.

Martin's *Game of Thrones* novels, the (formerly) real League of Nations active between 1920 and 1946, and the United Nations of today. We intuitively feel that something of importance would be surely lost if we were to accord completely equal status to all four leagues. The first is nothing but a dream, the second a fiction, the third a formerly existent but now defunct entity, while the fourth is a genuinely real, powerful political force active in the world of international relations, accepted as legitimate by practically all important political players on Earth. To be clear, ontological liberalism does *not* declare that every object is *equally* real. It accepts that differences of degree certainly can matter. What ontological liberalism does mean though is that *all objects are equally objects*. In other words, something can be both unreal while also *existing in the mode of an unreal object*. My dream league of nations is an unreal object, being but a mere parody or caricature of real leagues, yet it too has an ethereal existence as a subjective illusion. Alliances between royal Houses in *Game of Thrones* have a fictitious existence but, being known by a greater number of persons, have a greater claim upon reality than my private dream. The League of Nations is endowed with a historically documented defunct existence, having been demonstrably real for a couple of decades. And the real United Nations of our day and age is equipped with a variety of punitive mechanisms to bring rogue political entities into line. One can act as if my geopolitical dream never happened, *Game of Thrones* were never published or remade as a TV series, or the League of Nations had never been founded, but it is all but impossible to ignore the existence of something as real as the UN without facing repercussions.

What ontological liberalism does *not* accept is the idea that non-existent objects can be eliminated or excluded from ontological thinking. It is animated by a commitment to never pass over anything in silence, a "demand for comprehensiveness" which "seems to collapse barriers between divergent explanatory registers simply by including diverse terms alongside one another."¹² It is clear from this wording that Wolfendale claims that this collapse is only apparent, a rhetorical device rather than a genuine philosophical achievement. Later on, Wolfendale writes that "everything has a place ... except those things that don't," furthermore, "these placeless things are placeless not because they are strictly unthinkable, but because they are explanatorily irrelevant."¹³ On this view, Harman's ontological liberalism is inadequate, as it is incapable of properly excluding inexistent objects. Because of its egalitarianism, ontological liberalism seeks to take into account all objects, extending objecthood beyond the limits of reality. For Harman, everything is equally an object.¹⁴ As he makes clear in a crucial passage in *Tool-Being*, the first book dedicated to the elaboration of his metaphysical system, "to say that every entity is both tool and broken tool is to say that every entity is half physically real and half merely relational. No entity can be assigned unequivocally to one side of the equation or the other. ... It is not only the case that every entity has a deeper essence – rather, every essence has a deeper essence as well."¹⁵ This brief but important passage contains three distinct assertions: (a) the world is built from objects which are simultaneously relational and substantial; (b) all objects conform to this model; (c) all objects contain a hidden surplus or essence outside of the relations in which they are deployed. I shall not deal with the question of whether every conceivable object indeed conforms to the dichotomy of deployed relationality versus hidden essence. Neither shall I investigate the question of what role, if any, the category of "world" plays in Harman's system, or whether it denies the reality of an all-encompassing holistic ontological structure. My suspicion is that infinite regress excludes the existence of the whole encompassing all parts, but the jury is out.¹⁶ Rather, for the sake of

¹² Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 214.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁴ In this regard, Harman and most ontologically liberal authors follow in the footsteps of Alexius Meinong, an Austrian philosopher of the Brentanian School who held that both real and unreal objects are equally objects (whom Harman calls "a formidable precursor of my own object-oriented philosophy"). Harman, *Circus Philosophicus*, 29.

¹⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 258.

¹⁶ In this regard, among contemporary Continental New Realists, Markus Gabriel stands out as one of the most radical contemporary exemplars of anti-universalism. For Gabriel, the world considered as a whole does not exist. Yet Gabriel distances himself from Nelson Goodman, who draws irrealist conclusions from the plurality of worlds (and the inexistence of a singular world), Gabriel maintains that the inexistence of the singular implies the reality and individuality of objects. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 146; Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*.

argument, I provisionally accept the “packaged” nature of both existent and inexistent objects, as posited by Harman. All things being equal, it does seem intuitively plausible that objects always exist or, to use a more neutral term, *pertain* within other objects, while we can leave open the question of whether an object-of-objects exists. What reason does Harman have to claim that all objects contain a hidden essence, a reserve, a surplus of surprises?

Ontological liberalism is an adversarial philosophy which has many enemies. On the one hand, it is diametrically opposed to the idea that we ought to be parsimonious in our descriptions of reality. Following Elliott Sober, two interrelated possibilities can be distinguished: “the razor of silence” and the “razor of denial.”¹⁷ The former means that one ought to be silent about objects excluded by the principle of parsimony, while the second, “sharper” razor implies that we must *also* actively deny the reality of objects found to be inexistent, and thereby superfluous or useless to our explanations of the world. Harman's ontological liberalism would throw Ockham's Razor out the window entirely. Now the word “parsimony,” deriving from the Latin *parsimonia* (“sparingness, frugality, thrift”) is the stock device of ontological conservatism. Because ontological liberalism cannot tolerate scarcity, it is unfettered by such shopkeeperly, miserly modes of seeing the world. In this regard, ontological liberalism is a heterogeneous, complex ontology characterized by a Baroque descriptive lavishness. For better or worse, it has resulted in an enrichment of the language of ontological philosophy. Nonetheless, ontological liberalism has another significant enemy, in the form of relationalism (the idea that nothing exists apart from relations or that objects are reducible to the sum of their relations). This second point of distinction is crucial for understanding why Harman sees the need to rehabilitate the concepts of essence and substance in the first place. Critiquing sociologist Bruno Latour and, by extension, all relationalist ontologies, Harman claims that thinking in terms of relations alone would make it impossible for us to conceptualize change:

The potential can only mean a potential for future relations, and *the actual can only mean what is in and of itself actual apart from any relations*. Unless the thing holds something in reserve behind its current relations, *nothing would ever change*. This secret reservoir cannot be the ‘potential’, because the potential needs to be inscribed somewhere actual right now, and if the actual is entirely determined by its relations then this gets us nowhere. And the reserve also cannot be called the ‘virtual’, since this term merely plays the double game of saying that true reality in the universe is both connected and separate, both continuous and heterogeneous. The only thing that will fit the bill is a *nonrelational actuality*: objects that exist quite apart from their relation to other objects, and even apart from their relation to their own pieces. [emphasis mine]¹⁸

What Harman calls “substance” is “a real thing considered apart from any of its relations with other such things.”¹⁹ A possible issue with this concept of substance is that it lands us right in the midst of an apophaticism.²⁰ Again, as distinct from Wolfendale, I do not believe that, in and of itself, this point, even if proven true, is a sufficient reason to reject Harman's system. Mysticism or ineffability should not mean anything pejorative, and ought not to be bandied about as a label for the demeaning of philosophical rivals. There is something revoltingly distasteful in the lack of respect scientistically oriented eliminativists have for certain words, concepts, and meanings they propose to disqualify. The following remarks display a fundamentally disrespectful attitude to the positions of others, utterly out of touch with the plurality of ways of seeing the world, while also highlighting the lengths (or depths) to which Wolfendale goes in abusing the Razor of Denial: “Harman's metaphysics would inspire acts of intellectual onanism more extreme than the worst excesses of the Heideggerian orthodoxy: failed romantic overtures to noumenal

¹⁷ Sober, *Ockham's Razors*, 12.

¹⁸ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 187.

¹⁹ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 21.

²⁰ Apophaticism refers to the mystical idea of approaching God through the use of negative descriptions. While one may describe it in terms of knowledge, “unknowing” seems more accurate. In mysticism, there is no pretence of knowledge, as the very contours of individuated subjectivity are obliterated in the posited *unio mystica* with God. Simply put, after the mystical path has been trodden, nobody is left to know: nothing remains, apart from “the utter impossibility of self, of God, of theology.” Rubenstein, “Unknow Thyself,” 413.

intimacy doomed to wallow in the most pathetic mysticism; a sort of *theoretical suicide* akin to death by auto-erotic asphyxiation – lonely, and mildly embarrassing for everyone who hears about it.” [emphasis mine]²¹ Ontological conservatism, an ascetic practice devoted to subordinating philosophy to whatever happens to be accepted as scientific knowledge, seems a far better candidate for the suicide of philosophy than Harman’s Baroque metaphysics.²² In itself, ontological liberalism, while having “nothing to do with the political connotations of the words ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative,’” still contains – for Wolfendale – problematic political consequences, such as the dissolution of “every essential organ of political thinking” and the abolition of any “foundational distinction” such as “object/concept, nature/culture, cause/reason, might/right, and accident/action.”²³ As distinct from such reckless radicalism, the ontological conservative proposes to save discourse from the apophatic threat of all-dissolving mysticism. Poetically inclined metaphysics is worse than useless, representing the supposed self-endangerment (“suicide”) of theory.

Despite the distasteful and, quite frankly, occasionally underhandedly vulgar nature of Wolfendale’s polemical remarks, it has some entertainment value and there is a grain of truth to be unearthed from this muck: the positing of hiddenness does imply an epistemological mysticism regarding the knowability of substance.²⁴ As Harman makes clear in the quote referenced earlier, his concept of actuality as hidden essence exists, (i) apart from all relations; (ii) as an undeployed reserve; and (iii) apart from its own pieces. Nothing can ever access the non-relationality of the in-itself. Substance for Harman is situated in an eternal sphere outside of time, yet – as a sort of fragmented First Mover, it still persists as the excess which permits change to occur. Temporal problems aside, this also results in a collapse of the integrity of the object. As Harman reiterates, “substances are everywhere,” while “we never reach some final layer of tiny components that explains everything else, but enter instead into an indefinite regress of parts and wholes. Every object is both a substance and a complex of relations.”²⁵ Both “overmining” and “undermining” are erroneous, as objects cannot ever be reduced to being components of a grand whole, and neither can they be broken down into the sum of components in turn. Neither, for that matter, can any object whatsoever exhaust the sum of all other objects.

Something is always bound to remain in the condition of hiddenness. Harman ventures the claim that no entity can even be imagined which can access everything else. As he writes in a book dedicated to the analysis of the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux, not even “almighty God” could access the “something more” of the moon: this latter aspect is “a unifying principle never exhausted by *all* attempts to approach it from the outside.” [emphasis mine]²⁶ The substantial aspect of an object will be its hiddenness, while its relational aspect will be its manifestness, resulting in a bifurcation of all objects (real and unreal) into multiple and singular modes of hiddenness and manifestness (hence, the “quadruple object”). Every object is a quadruple entity, multiplied into four different objects which never entirely coincide with each other: the Real (inaccessible) Object (RO), its Multiple Real Qualities (MRQs), the Sensual (accessible) Object (SO), and its Multiple Sensual Qualities (MSQs).²⁷ Perhaps Louis Morrelle is actually understating things when he describes ontological liberalism as “an antireductionism grounded on an inflationist ontology.”²⁸ An even more apt term would be “hyperinflationism”: not only are unreal objects according to objecthood, but all objects are immediately multiplied into four distinct modes of being! The obvious question presents itself at

²¹ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 396–7.

²² As Harman writes, mocking the scientism of those who would transform philosophy into a servant of the natural sciences: “why exactly is it the mission of philosophy to limp along after the science of its time? It is not clear why philosophers must prematurely unify their own speculations on space, time, and substance with those of a quantum theory and relativity that are not yet even unified with each other. In fact, there is little evidence that the scientists even want philosophers to limp along after them.” Harman, “I Am Also,” 785.

²³ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 380.

²⁴ Alternately, one could also describe the Harmanian system in terms of “epistemological aestheticism.” Knowledge can only relate to relations, that is, sensual qualities (i.e. those characteristics of an object which are in any way deployed in relations).

²⁵ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 85.

²⁶ Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 148.

²⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 78.

²⁸ Morrelle, “The Trouble,” 461.

this point: How ought we to know that this indeed is the case? More specifically, why does Harman believe that substance is anything positive, that beneath appearances – objects only ever access one another's sensual notes or Sensual Qualities. Indeed, Harman himself maintains that access, even when successful, always already reduces the accessed object to the form of a "caricature": "if my perception of a bridge reduces its bridge-being to a mere caricature, the same is equally true for the pigeon that lands on it, the hailstones that strike it, and the military satellites that spy on it prior to a bombing."²⁹ The last example in particular is a telling one. If we accept the implications of what Harman is saying here, the bridge in itself shall always remain inaccessible and irreducible to the sum of its relations. So far so good. But if that really is the case, then the bridge cannot ever be said to be irrevocably destroyed. According to the Harmanite School of philosophy, it would be erroneous for us to speak of a destroyed bridge: reduced to a mere memory, apparently erased from the face of the Earth, some obscure aspect of the bombed bridge would nonetheless remain, inscrutably, even after its having been rendered utterly useless to humans by laser-guided missiles. Ontological liberalism cannot countenance any exclusion of entities as unreal, remaining incapable of distinguishing in an ontological sense between a bridge in my mind and the bridge in its manifest material reality. Apparently, within the context of this model, nothing can ever be bombed into oblivion. Presumably not many military experts adhere to an immaterialist philosophy such as OOO. At best, the denial of definitive, irrevocable nothingness strains our credulity, even if we accept commonsense views about the reality of change or the reality of objects. At worst, it remains incapable of furnishing us with a plausible account of how change happens. In itself, this would not be an issue, but this philosophy prides itself upon its ability to explain how occurrences can be taken seriously.

As Whiteheadian process philosopher Steven Shaviro correctly points out, the extremely minimalist usage of the word "being" in Harman's philosophy means that "actual entities only have one aspect. They are quite definitely, and exclusively, things or substances, no matter how brief or transient their existence," leading to an underestimation of "the importance of change over the course of time."³⁰ In Shaviro's reconstruction, Harman's system is characterized by stasis. Mutual withdrawal remains the sole form of substance, hence literally no room is left for becoming. To be fair, Harman does on occasion mention changes which, upon first appearances, appear to constitute examples of destruction. As Harman observes in a response to Shaviro's article,

Under my model of reality, objects can be melted in furnaces; they can be tightened in a vice and reduced to splinters; they can rust, grow old, or crumble with age; pets and grandparents can die before our eyes; Santorini can be destroyed by a volcano; Aquileia can be sacked and razed by the marauding Huns; Germanicus can be poisoned; rock stars can die of heroin overdoses; protons can be destroyed by cosmic rays; marriages can disintegrate; philosophical movements can break into recriminating factions; comets can be drawn to the sun and vaporized.³¹

A formidable list indeed. Also in a relatively recent work, Harman does mention the possibility of the "death of an object."³² He posits the following underlying reason for the "death" of objects in general: "the death of an object arises from the excessive strength of its ties Strong ties mean dependence, and that means devastation when one of these ties is suddenly weakened."³³ In the case of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* [VOC]) in particular, Harman mentions the decline in popularity of spices and the growing economic, military, and political difficulties associated with maintaining spice monopolies as heralding the death knell of the Company as a viable venture.³⁴ Irrespectively of whether we accept or reject the specific historiographical diagnosis or not, in Harman's work, the possibility of non-being is nonetheless relatively rarely mentioned. There is something symptomatic in

²⁹ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 127.

³⁰ Shaviro, "Actual Volcano," 285.

³¹ Harman, "Response to Shaviro," 300.

³² I am indebted to Benjamin Norris for pointing out the relevance of Harman's relatively recent *Immaterialism* to the topic of nothingness and the destruction of objects.

³³ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 124.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

the few examples we do find: the litany of destructions quoted earlier is a response to a critique, which in itself is of course not in itself damning, but we are left nonetheless perplexed: Why the relative paucity of definitive destruction/s in Harman's system? Most of the examples in Harman's response to Shaviro are indeed far from final, perhaps with the exception of the utterly vaporized comet. A dead rock star is still a rock star, a destroyed city is still a city, and so on. True absence, nothingness or non-being, without any object (not even a formerly persistent entity) is never mentioned. The specificity of objects apparently outlives even the objects themselves.

Morrelle emphasizes that the ambition of ontological liberalism is "to achieve descriptive exhaustiveness," yet Harman does not seem to devote the same attentiveness to the absence of objects that he devotes to their lives and "ripenings."³⁵ Indeed, we are presented from *Tool-Being* onwards with a view of the world that incites our worst claustrophobic fears: never do we encounter anything like absence or vacuity. "What is real in the cosmos," declares Harman, "are forms wrapped inside of forms."³⁶ Similarly, in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, we read that the world is "a spiraling interplay of objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects."³⁷ But if objects are indeed mutually inaccessible "black boxes,"³⁸ who is to say that change is real, or that this infinite regress of objects wrapped up in one another contains anything positive whatsoever? A monstrous possibility presents itself: the possibility that every object, real and unreal, deployed and undeployed, relational and substantial alike, is unreal, and change is indeed a delusion produced by an inexistent dreaming unborn mind. Once we open the black box, revealing its contents to the radioactively corrosive light of reason, it shall be revealed as empty. Behind the appearances of Being, we shall have uncovered *the universal and unbounded failure to be*. In the course of the second half of this article, I seek to show that Harman's ontology is not only not immune to ontological nihilism but also can actually be repurposed and reconfigured into a nihilist ontology.

3 Ontological Nihilism, or a Downward Spiral of Nothingness

In the second part of my article, I shall present an argument for ontological nihilism, for the most part gleaned from a highly insightful article by Jan Westerhoff. At the outset, it must be mentioned that ontological nihilism is not a modal thesis. In this regard, it is not a form of metaphysical nihilism or a nihilism about the possibility of metaphysics. Stated in no uncertain terms, "ontological nihilism claims that there are no objects, no properties, no events, no space-time, no structures, no facts or states of affairs, no appearances, no anything."³⁹ A frequent objection regarding nihilism is its apparently self-denying nature. If the statement of the nihilist ("nothing exists") is a true and existent statement, then at the very least, this declaration itself surely must exist in some form, leading to the self-refutation of the nihilist position. We get here an example of the Liar's Paradox. The nihilist's declaration would automatically falsify itself by way of its veracity. In a move which resembles Harman's introduction of unreal

³⁵ Morrelle, "The Trouble," 454.

³⁶ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 293.

³⁷ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 158.

³⁸ Harman extensively and approvingly cites the "black box" metaphor in his works on Latour and elsewhere.

³⁹ Westerhoff, "Argument for Ontological Nihilism," 2. I shall base my argument upon the main points of Westerhoff's excellent article, which bears commonalities with Jason Turner's definition. As Turner would have it, an ontological nihilist "denies that there is anything at all – and hence denies that there are buildings, people, shirts, or marshmallows – he must think the sentences," which refer to such entities "are somehow misleading. He needs to tell us what this building-, people-, shirt-, and marshmallow-free world is like," and is therefore dependent upon "paraphrase." Turner, "Ontological Nihilism," 8. This is an interesting point of commonality with Harman's view that we can ever only refer to ontological truths about objects metaphorically. Unfortunately, the remainder of Turner's otherwise insightful article devolves into a study of the language we as humans use to describe ontology, rather than examining the *objective* merits or demerits of nihilist ontological propositions in their relationship to reality itself. The same problem does not plague Westerhoff's genuinely *ontological* examination of ontological nihilism.

yet persistent objects, Westerhoff ventures the claim that ontological nihilism implies that “the thought ...‘nothing exists’” can be true even if nothing whatsoever exists, the statement itself included: “if ontological nihilism obtains there is no fact that ontological nihilism obtains.”⁴⁰ As a fact, this truth can be true, without anybody really existing to declare it. A nihilist can recognize her inexistence and continue talking, even spreading her nihilist views, refuting and denying other inexistent philosophical positions. There is no inconsistency in not taking oneself or others seriously. Ontological nihilism refers above all to the thesis of the *actuality* of nihilism, namely, “nothing *actually* exists.”⁴¹ [emphasis mine] This emphasis has important ramifications when it comes to the philosophy of time. As we shall see, ontological nihilism is an inherently actualist ontology.

Westerhoff proposes a combination of eliminativism with non-foundationalism. In itself, eliminativism is usually foundationalist. For the most part, eliminativists – such as philosopher of mind Paul Churchland – deny the existence of certain entities (in their case, mental states), in favour of other entities considered fundamental.⁴² Similarly, Wolfendale is an eliminativist when it comes to the supposed fabrications of ontological liberalism, accusing the latter of a skepticism which threatens to “irreparably distort our grasp of the real ... in the face of reasoned debate,” resulting in the overproduction of “capricious speculation.”⁴³ There would supposedly be well-grounded entities, the existence of which we have little reason to doubt. For example, Peter van Inwagen has famously argued for the non-existence of inanimate material objects, in favour of a vitalist cosmology that only recognizes the being of living beings.⁴⁴ Ray Brassier, perhaps the most extreme of the eliminativists, supposes that nothing exists apart from the scientifically informed rational consciousness of annihilation, all things considered a bizarre form of rationalist idealism and not a genuinely nihilist philosophical position.⁴⁵ We could extend our list of eliminativists indefinitely. What matters is the recognition that the eliminativist is bound to halt their rubbishing of existents at some point. Differently put, eliminativism – because of its weddedness to the principle of parsimony – is inevitably foundational, hence ontologically conservative. It is a form of what Harman calls undermining, or downward reductionism. The problem with such a position is that it fails to take into account that “an object is more than its components, and hence cannot be paraphrased successfully by way of downward reduction.”⁴⁶ I suggest that, from the nihilist's perspective, eliminativism is also problematic because of its inconsistency. The eliminativist is inevitably always already biased towards certain favoured pet entities at the expense of others. Guilty of a discriminatory, dismissive attitude towards certain objects or classes of objects, eliminativists inevitably expose themselves as adherents of a hierarchically oriented worldview, a despicable regression compared to the unlimited egalitarianism of ontological liberalism. Westerhoff's move is compelling, because it successfully combines eliminativism with non-foundationalism, resulting in a form of indiscriminate undermining.

What would non-foundationalism mean in the context of ontological nihilism? Here, the concept of infinite regress can bring the non-nihilist Harman into connection with the nihilist Westerhoff, a compelling coincidence of perspectives from two philosophies which are otherwise diametrically opposed. Infinite regression is summarized by Westerhoff as the idea that dependence pertains all the way down the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

⁴² Churchland, “Eliminative Materialism.”

⁴³ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 403.

⁴⁴ Van Inwagen, *Material Beings*.

⁴⁵ Ray Brassier cannot be considered a genuine nihilist. The primary aim of his misleadingly titled work, *Nihil Unbound*, is a surprisingly conservative defence of the scientific image of the world against the manifest image. Brassier is merely a selective nihilist or eliminativist, seeking to ground a rationalistic and scientific cosmology against all other epistemic alternatives. Brassier's nihilism is, ironically, not boundless enough to qualify as an ontologically or even epistemologically consistent specimen of nihilism. Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*. In the end, there is not much difference between Brassier's “nihilist” form of rationalist idealism and George Berkeley's idealism. Consciousness remains the sole foundational category of ontology. Neither for that matter.

⁴⁶ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 9.

many levels of the world.⁴⁷ This concept has a checkered reputation in philosophy, being, like solipsism, so counterintuitive that it is regularly categorized, especially in the first-year philosophy seminars, as something which ought to be avoided by sensible thinkers. Both Harman and Westerhoff are non-foundationalists, meaning that they deny the existence of any object which is ungrounded. Going against the grain of what is considered sensible, they accept infinite regress. All objects depend on other objects, and this dependence pertains across all levels of the world. *Pace* Westerhoff:

Below every level of entities there is a further level of entities the former entities depend on, and it is these entities the further explanation refers to. The why-regress can continue indefinitely because there is a dependence-regress that also continues indefinitely, and the existence of the explanatory regress is a good indication for the existence of this ontological regress.⁴⁸

Despite appearances, the statement is not about epistemology, for it references the ontological nature of the regress. If all this sounds familiar to readers acquainted with Harman's work, then that is no accident. As a non-foundationalist, Harman recognizes that if we are to defend the irreducibility of an object to another object, we are indeed fated to accept the infinite regress. Accordingly, talk of "an infinite regression of tool-beings into further component tool-beings" is warranted in the context of ontological liberalism too.⁴⁹ Infinite regress is the price to be paid for the exclusion of reductionism. Neither the ontological liberal nor the ontological nihilist can accept any form of foundationalism, as the latter would halt the movement of thought at a certain ground point. Nothing like a basis can be discovered when it comes to thinking ontology. Because he is a mereological nihilist, Harman denies the validity of holism. As a consequence of his substantialism, overmining (the assumption that objects are reducible to the sum of their effects) is also ruled out.⁵⁰ Appearances cannot exhaust the reality of objects. Perplexingly, again we find that the ontological liberal and the ontological nihilist are in agreement on this point also, albeit for the opposite reasons. The former holds that an object is more than the sum of its relations, and therefore, appearances do not tell the whole story about its hidden essence. The latter similarly asserts the invalidity and misleading nature of appearances, because there simply is no such thing as an object underlying the appearance! A crucial juncture in the ontological nihilist train of thought is the recognition that "the appearance of something is not incompatible with the something's non-existence."⁵¹ If the liberal is committed to the truth of the statement "every object only exists as part of another object," then the nihilist affirms the truth of the following sentence: "every fiction only exists as part of another fiction."⁵² Indeed, the liberal would even accept the second assertion, with the proviso that fictitious entities too are persistent, albeit unreal objects. What distinguishes the two positions is the unlimited nature of the nihilist's perversely universalist fictionalism. Bluntly stated, for the nihilist, all objects are fictional because there is nothing underlying appearances.

What we could call Westerhoff's Wager is the following: against all odds, despite its unintuitive nature, nihilism can be shown to be internally consistent and therefore an attractive type of ontological system. As

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁹ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 293.

⁵⁰ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 10.

⁵¹ Westerhoff, "Argument for Ontological Nihilism," 16.

⁵² *Ibid.* Is this a form of dogmatic metaphysics? One could very well make the case that, despite its unlimited, uncompromising negativity, ontological nihilism could one day solidify into an institutionalized orthodoxy, precisely the same danger that Wolfendale sees at work in Harman's metaphysics. Whether such worries are justified is open to question, given the relative marginality (and, to date, apparent political uninstrumentalizability) of nihilism. Neither for that matter, is Harmanian OOO/OOP especially well equipped for ideological-political translatability. This latter point is amply demonstrated by Harman's surprising unwillingness to articulate any definite political philosophical alternative to the Charybdis of (political) liberalism and the Scylla of Marxism (both of which Harman rejects because of their modernism and anthropocentric pretensions). cf. Harman, "Object-Oriented Ontology and Commodity Fetishism." The inability to offer a third alternative is perplexing, especially given that (admittedly unorthodox) non-anthropocentric readings of both political traditions critiqued by Harman are certainly possible. In any case, a nihilist for whom nothing matters and nothing has more meaning than anything else would not care much either way about whether a social or political movement emerges that manages to instrumentalize, and thereby dogmatize, nihilist doctrines, or whether nihilism is in itself dogmatic or not.

has been shown, as distinct from the ontologically conservative eliminativist, the ontologically radical nihilist is uninterested in obtaining an undisputably real object somewhere down the line. Appearances, for the nihilist, are not real objects. Furthermore, “despite their appearance the objects in the world can fail to exist in any sense.”⁵³ Again, this point may be accepted as valid by the liberal without much contention. Where the liberal and the nihilist part ways is the assertion by the latter that *all objects fail to exist*, without exception. In addition, the (being) of objects lies in this inexistence. Crucially, Westerhoff maintains that “there is nothing to rule out an appearance that has an appearance as its source.”⁵⁴ My most fundamental point of contention when it comes to Harman's object-oriented metaphysics is the uncertainty surrounding the hidden cores of objects. At this point, epistemological and ontological nihilisms are in agreement: if we accept the epistemological inaccessibility of real objects, this provides support to the contentions of the ontological nihilist. Of course, nihilism of the ontological variety is also inherently anti-realist when it comes to claims about existence. As James T. Miller rightly points out in reference to Westerhoff's position, “ontological nihilism denies existence, but in so doing, it also leads to a denial of other commitments of realism: if nothing exists, then it follows that there cannot be anything that exists mind in dependently, thereby denying independence, and nor is there anything to access, denying accessibility.”⁵⁵ What this comment inadvertently makes evident, beyond demonstrating the interconnectedness of epistemological and ontological nihilisms, is the sorely self-contradictory nature of Harman's purportedly “realist” project. Harman wants to have his cake and eat it too, inaccessibility alongside realism.

We are repeatedly reassured by Harman that the universal absence of access, the pervasiveness of hiddenness, contains a latent positivity. The lack of unmediated interobjective contact would be the guarantee of their being. Indeed, relational ontologies are taken to task by Harman for not allowing a hidden reserve underlying their relations and actions. Relationalism, we are told, “allows objects no surplus of reality beyond whatever they modify, transform, perturb, or create.”⁵⁶ But who is to say that beneath appearances or sensual qualities, there is anything like a positive essence to be uncovered? Stated more explicitly, what is to be gained by saying there is an inaccessible something rather than appearances ensconced within appearances all the way down, in a limitlessly inexistent fictional whirlwind? The concept of vacuum offers us important clues. Harman refers to the mutual lack of access that pertains in the interobjective realm as “vacuum,” which evokes the metaphor of emptiness. As Harman observes, “to say that the world is filled with objects is to say that it is filled with countless tiny vacuums. ... What guerrilla metaphysics seeks is the vacuous actuality of things.”⁵⁷ Of course, as an adherent of essence, Harman backs away from the full implications of asserting the emptiness and insubstantiality of all objects, claiming that “the thing apart from its relations is actually not an empty bare particular, but remains torn apart in its private vacuum between its irreducible unity and its colorful particularity.”⁵⁸ In some manner (we are not told how or why), the multiple sensual qualities of an object are supposed to pertain even when the object happens to be locked away within its private solipsistic vacuum. From the perspective of ontological nihilism, such a move seems inconsistent. Why not simply accept the fully nightmarish implications of a world composed exclusively of “vacuums sealed within vacuums”? Why ought we to persist in the Parmenidian phobic denial the obvious? Beneath hiddenness, there is nothing whatsoever, no object, no relations, no qualities. Instead of a magical surplus of a reality, we uncover the monstrosity of absolute absence.⁵⁹

⁵³ Westerhoff, “Argument for Ontological Nihilism,” 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁵ Miller, *Metaphysical Realism Anti-Realism*, 26. This most definitely does not imply that the absence of mind-independent objects in any way affirms the reality of mind. Affirming that “appearances all the way down” is the sole form of persistence could lead to a Kantian, Fichtean, or Husserlian position, but for the ontological nihilist, not even consciousness exists.

⁵⁶ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 10.

⁵⁷ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 82.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁹ Referencing the aesthetic experience of nothingness in the work of René Magritte, Michel Foucault provides the following apt description: “Magritte allows the old space of representation to rule, but only at the surface, no more than a polished stone, bearing words and shapes: beneath, nothing. It is a gravestone: The incisions that drew figures and those that marked letters

The ontological liberal would respond that surely one cannot be so inane as to deny the reality of change. Objects are perpetually being born, ripening, and dying before our very eyes. Certain insects live for a day in their adult form, a human survives for decades, a star burns for billions of years, and so on. Westerhoff mentions the illuminating example of a tiger appearing to leap upon a cinema screen.⁶⁰ Media theoretical considerations aside, we may refer to various everyday intuitions regarding the status of this object. Is the tiger on the screen a real entity or not? The appearance certainly has a referent, we could say, if it was a real wild animal filmed in the jungle as part of a documentary film, or a tamed tiger trained to perform a stunt in a movie. But what if the tiger has long since deceased? Or it is a mere digital animation? Or tigers have long since gone extinct, and we are participants living in a distant future, visitors in a museum of extinct animals that visually reproduces what tigers *could* have been like, based on existing scientific information? All things considered, it seems intuitive that appearances *can* refer to entities which do not exist in reality and cannot be accessed (apart from media representations or historical accounts). Is the appearance of the tiger a real object? As Westerhoff remarks, “considering the appearance of the tiger as a distinct entity leaves us with a queer kind of object.”⁶¹ An ontological liberal would no doubt reply affirmatively: yes, the screen-tiger, while not being in the same league as the real thing, is nevertheless a distinct object, albeit with different relations and properties than the tiger in the jungle (or, in a more pessimistic future, the extinct tigers which roamed the Earth centuries ago). Be that as it may, nothing in the world, barring a miracle, will ever make the tiger on the screen a living carnivorous animal, that is, a real object. If dependence persists all the way down, then it will not help to point at an object which is realer than another. Ordinarily, an adherent of a commonsense outlook would point to the “original” tiger filmed in the wild as being the object upon which the screen tiger is dependent. But the nihilist asserts dependence all the way down. At one stroke, “the entire hierarchy of dependence collapse into non-existence at the same time.”⁶² Nihilism, as Westerhoff expounds, is a fundamentally atemporal outlook.⁶³ The argument that nihilism as an ontological view is implausible because it cannot account for time or change is no counter-argument at all, for this position in fact unequivocally asserts the undivided *actuality* of nothingness. To ask of the nihilist to account for the reality of change is a non-starter, for change is also among the characteristics of being which the nihilist denies. We cannot ever account for the origin of appearances. “There is no ultimate basis for any appearance,” for nothing ever changes and no objects have ever been or will ever be born or destroyed.⁶⁴ Objects are not even abortive. *Being is nothing more than failure to be.*

Does the nihilist not end up at a self-denying position? We almost instinctively tend to distance ourselves from self-refuting philosophies, as if there were something weak, demeaning, or degrading about self-refutation. Nobody desires to be a self-refuted nihilist, this being one of the most lowly of ranks, the most abject of roles, in the hierarchy of philosophy. Westerhoff admits that ontological nihilism is “not

communicate only by void, the non-place hidden beneath marble solidity. I will note that this absence reascends to the surface and impinges upon the painting itself. When Magritte offers his version of Madame Recamier or Le Balcon, he replaces the traditional paintings’ characters with coffins. Invisibly contained between waxen oak planks, emptiness undoes the space composed by the volume of living bodies, the arrangement of clothing, the direction of the gaze and all the faces that are about to speak. The “non-place ‘emerges in person’ – in place of persons and where no one is present any longer.” Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 41. Paraphrasing Foucault, it can be said that the *absence* of the object arrives in the place of the object. The relationship of ontological nihilism and metaphysical anti-realism to metaphysics is like that of Magritte to the original painting: a gesture of erasure, this form of nihilism is a way of pointing out the non-existence of all things, literally making a travesty of any and all positive ontological claims.

⁶⁰ Westerhoff, “Argument for Ontological Nihilism,” 29–30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶³ Partly as a consequence of this atemporality, it does not seem that ontological nihilism is equipped to handle the theme of historicity. Because this style of thought is constitutively incapable of taking historical problems seriously (change, after all, is an illusion), the adherent of ontological nihilism is constrained to turn to other approaches if they seek to undertake the study of historicity. One can be a nihilist and also account for historical phenomena, but one cannot do so with exclusively nihilist methodological tools. Unfortunately broader questions relating to the tradition of nihilism, be it the history of nihilism as a theme or movement within philosophy, or nihilism as a problem to be resolved, lie outside the purview of my article.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

compatible with realism about truth.”⁶⁵ Neither, for that matter, is nihilism compatible with any form of realism about anything, its own statements included. Where does this leave the adherent of nihilism then? Westerhoff asserts that a nihilist can indeed talk about something cogently and intelligently, without treating it as anything more than a “useful fiction.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, Westerhoff also claims that nihilism can in fact take appearances seriously without accepting their existence.⁶⁷ Is this a betrayal of the original nihilist position? In my view, Westerhoff seems to backtrack from the radicalism of ontological nihilism, going so far as to retreat into the comfort of a general skepticism regarding grand metaphysical theories: “we should not commit to the existence of ultimately true theories.”⁶⁸ Everybody is free to commit themselves to any philosophical position they wish to, yet this retreat to the neutral fortress of skepticism is nonetheless highly suspect, considering the context. Having refuted a few stock objections routinely levelled against Westerhoff, he confronts the accusation of uselessness. On the conventional view, there is nothing substantial to be gained from actually being a nihilist and allying oneself with such a position. Westerhoff feels obligated to legitimate nihilism as something useful. At the very least, ontological nihilism can prove a helpful instrument for refining our skepticism regarding all-encompassing metaphysical. As distinct from Westerhoff, I believe that ontological nihilism need not constrain itself in such a manner. It would as a matter of fact be far more consistent to admit that we, as nihilists, do not, shall not, and cannot take anything seriously, the pompous claims of philosophy included. There is no fundamental need for nihilism to clothe itself in the hypocritical robes of respectability or, worse, bourgeois usefulness.

Ontological radicalism ought to be consistent in its thoroughgoing rejection of economizing modes of thinking. Ontological liberalism is a beneficial stage on the pathway to fully realized nihilism, because it allows for a breakdown of ontological conservatism. The phobias of conservatives such as Wolfendale are indeed warranted when it comes to the danger represented by liberalism, but where they see danger, the nihilist sees the opportunity for the violent rupture of thought. To do violence to conventional, habitual modes of thought is, after all, the objective of philosophical radicalism. It is my belief that I have uncovered a latent ontological nihilist possibility within Harman's ontologically liberal ontology, namely, the pervasiveness of vacuity. One half of Westerhoff's “recipe” for ontological nihilism (non-foundationalism + eliminativism) is indeed already present in Harman's system, in the form of its anti-foundationalist non-reductionism. The second half is covered over by the ontological liberal affirmation of the appearance of multiplicity, something which ends up at a “purely aesthetic stance,” a celebration of difference.⁶⁹ Instead of joining in the festivities, the ontological nihilist highlights the aporia underlying the joyous occasion of “vacuously vicarious causality.” The ontological nihilist insight involves finally taking seriously Harman's own insight regarding the vacuous, empty nature of objects: “entities are always primarily withdrawn tool-beings, and as such, they are sealed away in a vacuum devoid of all relation.”⁷⁰ By removing or, better yet, eliminating a few superfluous components, the meaning of the sentence is both transformed and simplified, its truth extracted and brought to the light of day for all to see: *entities are always withdrawn, and as such, they are sealed away in a vacuum devoid of all relation*. We may modify Harman's statement further, accentuating its latent irrealism, all but bringing it into accord with ontological nihilist teachings: *entities are always remote, sealed away as vacuums devoid of all relation and being*. The remoteness of the object is the sum of its being, the failure to be the whole of its existence. Not even the philosophy which proclaims this truth exists. This truth about reality is “beyond attachment and activity, ignorance and Enlightenment. You must see clearly that there is really nothing at all – no humans and no Buddhas.”⁷¹ And, we may add, no nihilists either.⁷²

⁶⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁹ Morrelle, “The Trouble,” 459.

⁷⁰ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 295.

⁷¹ Huang, *On the Transmission of Mind*, 64.

⁷² Any violation of the law of non-contradiction can be called a self-refutation. Because the ontological nihilist holds that nothing whatsoever exists, one could make the claim that the nihilist falls into the trap of self-contradiction. As Westerhoff

4 Conclusion

As I have hoped to show, Graham Harman's ontological liberalism represents a significant improvement upon ontological conservatism. However, it is plagued by an internal inconsistency: the emphasis on the withdrawn nature of real objects seems incompatible with realism about their inner essence. We are left having to accept on faith that the inaccessibility of objects guarantees their real status. Instead of positing a hidden surplus within the inaccessible cores of objects, I propose a thoroughgoing ontological nihilism. The only consistent way of admitting the "vacuous" nature of objects is to admit that in fact there is nothing whatsoever underlying appearances, relations, and actions, neither substance nor anything else. In this manner, ontological liberalism may be transformed into ontological nihilism. Both multiplicity and singularity are appearances which cannot ever exhaust the vacuous inexistence of objects. Nihilism does not have to take the reality of either objects or appearances seriously, for this position denies the validity of all ontological claims, its own included. Such a self-refutation does not make nihilism less plausible than other ontological positions because all systems of philosophy similarly fail to refer to real objects. *An object is nothing more than nothing.*

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observes, "if ontological nihilism holds, there are no metaphysical foundations." Westerhoff, "Argument for Ontological Nihilism," 43. If this is indeed the case, then the truth claims of ontological nihilism too are far from immune to the dissolution of being enacted by this position. Westerhoff concedes this point, but claims that we nonetheless gain something positive regardless, namely, the destruction of all forms of metaphysical foundationalism, a theoretical step forward that even the non-nihilist can appreciate.

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