Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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Negative Dialectics before Object-Oriented Philosophy: Negation and Event

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Abstract: An important question in Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and its associated literature is how OOO relates to its competitor theories. This article is a meta-philosophical investigation into OOO and its grounding, which hopes to fully theorise this relation, deriving ultimately a “negative dialectic” that emphasises the irreducible differences between OOO and non-OOO. Beginning by analysing the use of OOO as a “starting point”, I consider Althusser’s various contributions to meta-philosophical debates. This leads me to focus on Harman’s notion of “hyperbolic reading”, and on how attempts to hyperbolically ground OOO force it to immanently include its competitors. Finally, I apply these insights to systematise both the negative dialectical relation between OOO and non-OOO and the becoming-OOO of thinking, by applying Laruelle’s Non-Philosophy.

Keywords: Adorno, Althusser, dialectics, grounding, hyperbolic reading, Laruelle, materialism, meta-philosophy, Non-Philosophy, Object-Oriented Ontology

1 Introduction

Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) begins with an impressive and promising postulation: there are only objects. This commitment is found in various permutations and to varying degrees of sincerity among those within the OOO community. Harman’s anti-anthropocentrism is declared when he expresses that (his) OOO is intended to deny the uniqueness of the relationship between humans (subjects) and the world (objects).¹ Although Garcia presents in my opinion a more sophisticated OOO, which accommodates the possibility of hierarchisation among objects, his principal commitment to grasping things *in their capacity of being things* deprived of specificity (and hierarchisation) imitates Harman’s anti-anthropocentrism.² Insofar as we are capable of regarding all things under the unifying sortals of “thing” and “object” and the corresponding advancing of a general ontology, the dismissal of anything demanding a special ontology is naturally entailed.

Because of the volatility of the subject in OOO, this article proposes to address the subject as an event in the thinking of OOO which opens up a pathway to thought beyond the dichotomy of OOO and its competitors.

¹ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 1. I have considered using the denotations “special” and “generic” instead of “subject” and “object”; doing so would clarify the relevance of my approach, since Harman makes explicit that his use of the term object is not the same as its sense in the “subject–object dichotomy”. However, altering my terminology as described would reduce the clarity of my later discussion of Althusser, for whom the relations of subject and special, and object and generic are implicit. As such, I have retained the latter denotations for this article.

² Garcia, *Form and Object*, 5.

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I will offer an appraisal of this event to theorise more adequately the relation of OOO to its philosophical exterior as well as what movements thinking performs in the gesture of selecting either OOO or more standard metaphysics. In mediating this ultimate reconciliation, I will consider the project of Althusser to indicate where in a rigorous affirmation of ontological flatness entities with “height” may still arise. Recognising this ultimate result, I turn towards Laruelle’s proposal of a Non-Philosophy which will in this case finally overcome the “dyadic” opposition of OOO and its competitors by rendering thinkings as objects to thought “in-One”.

2 The problematic

Here I will expand on what I have so far called the “dismissal of the subject” from an OOO standpoint. The nature of OOO’s commitment to its thesis, that “there are only objects”, finds expression in two important characteristics of OOO: (i) that there is something which everything (a tiger in the Amazon as much as a round square) is equally and (ii) that this “something” is object-hood or “thing-ness”. Pursuant to this, OOO-proponents call OOO a “flat ontology”. This phrasing can be understood by the claim that everything is comprehensible through their being things or objects; object-hood and thing-ness produce this “flattening” effect since everything under them is some-thing in an equal capacity. In my view, this thesis risks ontological reductionism, specifically if it can be shown that it remains plausible that something is *not* done justice by being identified as an object; when it is an entity with height above the flatness of objects; when it actually retains some irreducible qualitative distinctness.

The discovery of an entity with this height as described would mark the occurrence of an event from an OOO standpoint. In Badiou’s philosophy of the event, the structure of an event is characteristically such that its occurrence is unthinkable within the system exposed to it. According to the set of entities which the system posits, the event is the being of Nothing, or that which is deprived of being as the negation of anything which is admitted to exist.³ This makes good of Heidegger’s rigorous demonstration of the unthinkability of the Nothing, since the Nothing in philosophies of the event is the unknowable exterior ejected by the understanding once it adopts some set of concepts.⁴ From an OOO standpoint, only one discovery could mark the arrival of an event: the emergence of an entity whose height is irreducible to OOO’s flatness (what I will call the subject). Naturally, this requires of us demonstration that the subject and object are (for now) incommensurable. If, despite the usual dichotomy of subject and object, a subject may be reduced to object-hood, then the discovery of a subject poses no threat to OOO. If, on the other hand, the subject cannot at the same time be an object, then OOO commits a reductionistic error. I think we have plausible reasons to think that “subjects” understood in this way exist. First, therefore, is the unenviable task of defining subject-hood in such a way that we neither gerrymander the concept of the subject to trivially prove our case nor enable its simple reducibility to the class of objects.

Here it is worth noting that both the subject in its conventional sense (in the subject–object dichotomy) and the “subject” in the sense of any entity with height are closely connected. OOO has no trouble accommodating the subject insofar as it is understood simply as subjectivity: the ingenuity of its analysis is to universalise the correlation between subject–object such that the subject, despite its phenomenological structures, is in no way special (or at least, not special enough to dominate philosophical speculation as it has historically). This view seems intuitively disappointing though, principally because it is unclear what it could mean that the relationship between us as minds and the world of objects is mappable onto all relationships between things in the world. Because of conceptual issues in universalising the structures of human–world relations, the subject in both senses identified appears superficially to pose a problem for OOO. Naturally, this is not an issue in response to which

³ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

OOO-proponents are unarmed, and the theories of withdrawal and vicarious causation deal sufficiently with concerns to do with this universalisation. Unthinkable within OOO, however, is the plurality of expressions of this relation.

It may be initially difficult to conceive of what this “plurality of expressions of the subject–object relation” could mean. For one, by affording its equal ontological dignity to all things qua things, OOO appears to adopt the most radical form of this plurality of expressions: where every instance of object–object relationality is unique, insofar as no-thing is reducible to any other. To illustrate my point here, we can note that all things in OOO, despite their uniqueness, are denied structural distinctness in their interrelations. If we attempt to deny the uniqueness of the human–world relation by universalising this relation, we are then committed to defending that this relation is sufficient to structurally describe all interactions between objects in the world. Garcia makes an intriguing concession here by recognising that, rather than this flatness being the result of an argument, it should be treated by OOO-proponents as actually a starting point – as though it defined all of OOO’s prospective outcomes.⁵ Harman adopts a similar perspective when he writes that “flat ontology is a good starting point for philosophy but a disappointing finish.”⁶ This flatness or universality has the character of a heuristic device, since it defines for OOO both what counts as data and how all data will be interpreted. This is OOO’s starting point: where it begins with a philosophical decision favouring flatness (which is really the universality of height). It is at this juncture that meta-philosophical interests may intervene upon OOO’s reasoning, especially once we try to compare OOO’s starting point with other plausible beginnings.

Adorno’s system of negative dialectics amply describes what happens when we attempt to think the contingency of OOO’s starting point from within OOO.⁷ Traditional dialectical reasoning has attempted to discover the “identity of identity and non-identity”, or the ultimate state of consistency within the whole in which all “moments” of the dialectic exist. However, if starting points as different ways of doing philosophy are irreconcilable, no such dialectical sublation should be forthcoming. These starting points should be treated as irreconcilable because it is here that the treatment of all arguments is defined; between them, there is disagreement even about what fundamentally populates the universe, and how these entities, laws and relations should be treated by reason. An exception to OOO’s flatness realistically *should* be unthinkable through OOO, because flatness defines its basic theoretical posture as well as how it reasons about things. This unthinkability between differently originating philosophies cannot result in an ultimate identity of identity and non-identity but can produce only an antinomy, since the parties involved in the dispute lack a system by which to resolve their dispute – any tools for resolution must seemingly be defined only after a starting point has already been chosen!

Adorno describes this state of theoretical aporia as a “non-identity of identity and non-identity” since through antinomy the difference (non-identity) of the basic, originary theoretical postures is absolutised.⁸ Curiously, it is by absolutising the *difference* between starting points that all such starting points become de-absolutised. Negative dialectics expose the contradictoriness of philosophies without expecting that there is an ultimate level at which these contradictions are resolved. Adorno regards this latter view as an idealist pretension, involving reification of the mental category of contradiction. As he phrases it, “for contradictoriness is a category of reflection, the cogitative confrontation of concept and thing. [...] A contradiction in reality, it is a contradiction against reality.”⁹ Once we treat our initial methodological decisions as non-absolute, our further conclusions are seemingly left un-grounded. This un-groundedness can of course be abated by advocating our starting point. However, all such advocacy is stunted by the

⁵ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 2–3.

⁶ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 54–5.

⁷ For the purposes of this essay, I will (not unproblematically) regard negative dialectics as a difference-oriented dialectics, rather than the usually identity-oriented Hegelian sort. This approach overlooks the social and political dimensions of negative dialectics as an “anti-system” (Rose 1978, 12), and as a concrete intervention into capitalist reification (ibid., 46) but shall nonetheless retain what is salient of negative dialectics for the purposes of my discussion of OOO.

⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146–7.

⁹ Ibid., 144–5.

philosophical decisions which must be assented to beforehand: because any exception to the starting point of a philosophy is simply unthinkable within that philosophy, denunciations of alternatives can appear to imitate debates between fideists and sceptics. Recognising the mutuality of this relationship between different starting points also gives us insight into why OOO can appear religious to its critics.¹⁰ Lastly, thinking this unthinkability or recognising the universality of the appearance of fideism between all differently originating philosophies should show to us again the un-groundedness of OOO, but this time *from within* OOO.

3 Ungrounding the object

Here I will consult Althusser's¹¹ philosophy, which should help in understanding the relationship between OOO and its philosophical "outside". In this, I hope to confront how from within a philosophical system such as OOO, alternative philosophies which take radically different starting points inevitably appear ideological (the result of systemic manipulation of knowledge, rather than direct confrontation with reality). The Althusserian strategy works to the effect of reducing the appearance of an event to an identity which is commensurable with the evental-site. Continuing with the language of "flatness" and height which I have deployed thus far, I will attempt to show that even despite the strength of Althusser's theory of ideology, lacunae exist in which really qualitatively distinct entities may still arise. In Section 3.1, I will respond to preliminary complaints which I anticipate from OOO-proponents, following which I will commence the examination of Althusser's more robust complaints against my arguments posed up to this point.

3.1 Preliminary remarks

A complaint I would like to pre-empt is: will not this discussion, which engages in the thought of a philosopher who was not only a non-object-oriented philosopher, but *one of the foremost names* in the philosophy of access, be either totally irrelevant to OOO, or worse, an active misportrayal of arguments for OOO? And further, given my only passing reference up to this point to committed object-oriented philosophers (Harman and Garcia), with whose OOO am I engaging? It is worthwhile to note that we can concede most elements of OOO and find meta-philosophical worries still pertinent. Arguments for, for example, withdrawal so far as I am concerned are all well and good. It is also through features like withdrawal that OOO can lay claim to its own promising non-reductionism. What I choose to take issue with here is the manner in which "non-reductionism" is generally deployed when discussing OOO. And it is my contention against the so-called non-reductionism of OOO-proponents that merits generalisation of my claims made against OOO, since it targets not the works of some object-oriented philosopher in particular, but the very conceptual basis on which OOO is founded, and to which object-oriented philosophers are more-or-less universally committed. To the extent that non-reductionism means grasping an entity in its fullness without deferring our questions elsewhere to learn about it, its non-reductionism is laudable.

On the other hand, OOO is still reductionistic in another, Hegelian sense, in which it cannot recognise the influence of its originary theoretical posture, and through the unthinkability of alternative manoeuvres reduces all such alternatives to ideology by methodological fiat. In other words, the

¹⁰ E.g. Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 640.

¹¹ Throughout this essay, references to Althusser are strictly to what Balibar (quoted and translated in Morfino, *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser*, 7) calls "Althusserianism of the Conjuncture", and not to any "Althusserianism of the Structure", meaning: the Althusser considered here is less interested in dogmatic structuralist Marxism than in an aleatory Marxism in which place is given to chance and pragmatics in ways precluded to the former.

object-oriented thesis which “attribute[s] an equal ontological dignity to each individuated thing”¹² fails to capture the contingency of its treatment of these entities (provided that such a contingency can be successfully demonstrated), and in this respect deprives philosophies which are methodologically incommensurable with it of their “dignity” by expecting its single, flat ontology to equally adequately describe all entities in all theoretical scenarios. Therefore, we need not become mired with the particular variations upon the object-oriented thesis offered by OOO-proponents, nor need we evaluate the efficacy of arguments for particular features of OOOs. Our target is the most fundamental metaphysical supposition offered in OOO: that something like Harman’s totalising “New Theory of Everything” is at all possible.

The use of Althusser in the following discussion is one with which object-oriented philosophers could take issue. Harman would condemn Althusser as a practitioner of “duomining” – something which OOO prides itself on evasion of.¹³ It might therefore be argued that to defend OOO through arguments which depend upon anti-OOO premises is to simply pass OOO onto a new captor. Despite the apparent incommensurability of Althusserian philosophy with OOO, its deposition of the “subject” is not one which necessarily undoes any aversion to duomining. What my reading of Althusser’s philosophy achieves is precisely the desired starting point of OOO: where there is nothing which demands ontological priority above anything else. Therefore, we should discard at the very beginning any delusions about a theoretical embargo between Althusser’s philosophy of access and OOO, which would deny the possibility of an exchange of resources between them.

Lastly, it may be questioned whether the “subject”, even if its disparateness from the general milieu of objects can be established, is actually incommensurable with OOO. Bryant’s proposed taxonomisation of objects, from bright to dark, accommodates this sense of some entities “rising above” the general realm of things.¹⁴ On the one hand, we might wonder whether the investigative priority afforded to bright objects is not actually a characteristic of something ontologically different than non-bright (dim, dark and rogue) objects. It seems like the need which Bryant experiences to express the differences between kinds of objects could under a different theoretical posture simply be identified as a need to recognise the various entities of qualitatively different sorts. Of course, we often speak of univocal terms which admit of variations in their instantiations. That we can speak of entities in terms of hierarchisations which are natural to them doesn’t entail that such entities cannot be classed within the same ontological type (here, that of objects). This solution leaves unquestioned the initial perspective which OOO must adopt, and from simple variations upon which different results may still be acquired. It remains plausible that a philosophy which commences not with considering all things in terms of their equal comprehension by the set of objects or of things, but in terms of the radical differences between certain sorts of entities, would conclude differently than does Bryant.

3.2 Althusser’s anti-subject philosophy

Althusser’s flat ontology emerges foremost from his own crusade against philosophical idealism. He sees the notion of the “subject” (specifically as something demanding a special ontology) as resulting from remnant idealist pretensions about the supremacy of ideality above the entirely processual material world.¹⁵ Although his development of the “process without a subject” occurs in a discussion of Hegel (and Lenin), it is worth noting at this point that the Hegelian subject varies in its ontological scope to the same degree as readings of Hegel do. While Kojève chooses to read Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as an

¹² Garcia, *Form and Object*, 4.

¹³ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 50.

¹⁴ Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 198.

¹⁵ Althusser, *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy*, 18.

exposition on the development of the individual subjectivity as it proceeds towards absolute self-knowing,¹⁶ other conventional readings of Hegel see the subject realised on the scale of history as absolute Being (or God). For Hegel, the individual and historical subjects are certainly inextricable from one another. What the scope of the meaning of the Hegelian subject reveals to us is also the plethora of realisations of the “subject” with which OOO must contend: not only the subjectivity which self-reflexively identifies itself as something special under a certain theoretical posture, but also the superstructure of history which is different in kind than the material world which it organises. Although Althusser develops the “process without a subject” in consultation with Hegel’s philosophy of history, his findings are equally applicable to the individual subjectivity as well.

The question we are really asking of Althusser here is: what does it mean to say that reality is made exclusively of “processes without subjects”? It is questionable whether Althusser ever believed in the ontological flatness which equates to rejecting the “subject” as understood here;¹⁷ however, for OOO-proponents to make use of the arguments which Althusser’s philosophy exemplifies, they must adopt this radicalised form. The question at hand arises for Althusser as one of the central concepts of his anti-humanist philosophy. That Althusser is an anti-humanist means that he denies the importance which humanistic philosophies attribute to human subjects – in a remarkably similar gesture to OOO’s denunciation of “correlationism”. This manifests evidently in the Spinozistic elements of his philosophy: whereas humanist Marxist philosophies intend to view the human worker as the “subject” driving the dialectical–historical process, anti-humanist Marxists wish to see history as *that which determines itself*.¹⁸ I call this Spinozistic because of the radical monism it connotes, since according to the Althusserian concept of history there is no outside-element or “subject” whose being triumphs above history and awards it with philosophical sufficiency from its outside. Therefore, we have first discovered that to describe reality as being exclusively made of “processes without subjects” is to see reality as self-sufficient without the need to refer to a transcendent outside or a qualitative plurality of inter-objective relations for validation.

Although we have described reality now as processual and monistic, we have not yet succeeded in eradicating our dependence upon the notion of the “subject”. Seemingly, to consider a process is still to consider a “subject” to that process; we have inadvertently preserved the ontological difference between what undergoes a process and the process-itself. Against this, it is necessary to refer to Althusser’s related concepts of the “process without a beginning or end” and the “self-alienating absolute” which he derives from Hegel and Marx. In standard Hegelian analysis, reality or Being-itself is understood teleologically. This means that of any event to occur within Being, we say that it happened because it is in the nature of Being that it unfolds in such-and-such a way.¹⁹ This analysis results in the attribution of necessity to history, where every historical moment is a result of the self-movement of Being towards its end: the absolute Idea. However, it is not immediately obvious what it means to speak of Being-itself as historically insufficient, since everywhere that we encounter Being as such it is apparently in the fullness of something totally realised in the moment. Here (many) Hegelians want to insist that history originates in the self-alienation of Being from the absolute Idea, resultant of which a world-historical dialectic occurs to recover the sufficiency of Being in-and-for-itself.²⁰ The self-alienation of Being from itself can only mean that Being is in the last analysis a “subject” which is both above and within all of history, uniquely related to everything that occurs. Therefore, to speak of reality as a “process without a subject” is also to refuse to speak of it as autotelic: since there is no “subject” to e.g. history, there is no originary moment of self-alienation which necessitates its teleological unfolding and which divides Being into “subjects” and objects.

16 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 3.

17 Such a reading of Althusser is alluded to in Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries* (xix) where the view of Spinoza as defining substance only in terms of its effects is attributed to Althusser. If substance/“subject”/structure is only its effects, then in understanding it we need not appeal to something “beyond” the flattened milieu of objects.

18 Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism*, 99.

19 Althusser, *Politics and History*, 181.

20 Ibid., 182.

This insight may be applied to subjects at various levels of analysis. Obviously, Althusser's intention is to speak of the "process without a subject" in reference to Being as such; however, for the scope which OOO requires of this idea we must also theorise its applicability to anything we take to connote a qualitative plurality of relations. These problematic relations can be located in structural causation,^{21,22} whereby absolute Being produces the dialectic of history as well as in more common relations. For example, we may want to claim that in relating to the world as *knowers*, we necessarily enter into a unique relation with the world – in a sense we "step outside" of it, knowing the world in its objectivity and losing the situatedness in the world which defines the relationality of everything to everything else. OOO does not clearly struggle with accommodating this "uniqueness": as noted earlier, OOO's proposition is instead to universalise relational uniqueness. However, this universalisation of uniqueness only preserves uniqueness in a specific sense. Uniqueness is upheld insofar as the individuality of every-thing is retained; it is undermined when we ask if the subject-object relation can be used to adequately model all object-object relations as well.

By Harman's own admission, OOO as a philosophy is intended "to show how relations happen, despite their apparent impossibility", principally by appeal to vicarious causation, the fourfold, and withdrawal.²³ Unfortunately, this does not lead us to certainty that his attempt to describe the fourfold object is equally applicable to every-thing. DeLanda offers a possible exception to Harman's generalised structure of intra- and inter-object relations by citing events as something for which Harman's real-sensual distinction need not apply.²⁴ Harman has already offered extensive rebuttal of this claim to exception. For one, an event such as a cricket match remains the same event regardless of the perspective of its spectators.²⁵ Through this he manages to pry apart again the real and sensual objects. But the mere ability to justify the difference between the summation of perspectives on an event and the event "in-itself" doesn't secure certainty for us that a model like OOO which capitalises upon this justification is assuredly *true*. Different but equally (if not more) popular glosses of the term "event" offer as the event's very essence its total immanence, and therefore the impossibility of there being a real object apart from the sensual.

An analogous difficulty within Althusser's philosophy helps to elucidate this point. Let us proceed from the recognition that a process does not need to be deferred to and organised by some "higher" entity (history or the subjectivity) by which it is causally ensnared. This for Althusser is because the process when deferred to a higher unity makes sense only if its occurrence explains a lack in the "subject" of which it is an unfolding. The attribution of necessity to history following from Hegelianism relies upon the view of the self-alienated "subject" of history; this view Althusser readily dismisses as idealist ideology. A problem with Althusser's philosophy at this point is that its conclusions are not *absolutely* true. Using the "absolutely" qualifier when describing truthfulness mimics the effect of describing the absoluteness of a starting point or methodology in philosophy. Although from a close reading of Marx's *Capital* (the early Althusser's preferred reference material) we can derive a potent methodology, the necessity of our

²¹ Althusser does believe that there is a relational difference between object-object causation and structure-object causation (see "Marx's Immense Theoretical Revolution" in *Reading Capital*). However, he is capable of overcoming the idealist hypostasis of the "subject" (here the superstructure and the infrastructure) with reference to the determination in-the-last-instance of the superstructure by the base (from "Overdetermination and Contradiction", in *For Marx*). This effectively means: the special causation according to which the structure expresses itself in history is grounded in the regular object-object causation of the "relations of production".

²² To some it may seem ill-advised to discuss Althusser's theory of structural causation in a paper seeking to favourably synthesise his work with Adorno's, not least of all given Adorno's distrust of systems and totalities as mere results of capitalist reification. Nonetheless, there is no need to attribute this theory too seriously to Althusser. Through Althusser's work on the aleatory, there is really no need to speak of structures as totalities, but instead as systems of chance encounters (preconditioned and limited by concrete material circumstances). Nonetheless, this point must be set aside and would be better discussed elsewhere.

²³ Harman, *Response to Shaviro*, 298.

²⁴ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 41.

²⁵ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 26.

conclusions thereafter depends upon the necessity of our starting point. In his later works, Althusser would go on to criticise the view that there is a necessary starting point to philosophising as another idealist delusion, seemingly conceding that the selection of a starting point is endowed with necessity only as a strategic decision, for example, in the liberation of the universal proletariat.²⁶

In a similar respect, we might ask: what is it that secures the necessity of OOO's own starting point? Remarkably, Harman appears almost to concede the methodological contingency of OOO when describing the antipathic relation between OOO-proponents and Derrideans.²⁷ Either, so he explains, offers a continuation of Heidegger's philosophy as a response to metaphysics of presence – but while Derrida proceeded by denying the existence of any presence whatsoever, OOO proceeds by specifying the conditions of presence in inter-objective relations. Harman attempts to justify the preferability of his route from this juncture above Derrida's by asserting his view of metaphor and reiterating what he sees as the absurdity of Derridean anti-realism. Notable, however, is that nowhere in his rebuttal of the Derridean view is there an underlying necessity to his conclusions. Instead what we observe is a parallax between the two perspectives, since they diverge so radically from each other once their projects have properly occurred. An OOO-proponent and a Derridean will naturally disagree on nearly everything despite their very recent common ancestor – quite possibly because their initial theoretical postures are separated by an insurmountable difference which can be justified only by appeal to strategic decision. Short of this being a wildly conjectural accusation against OOO, it seems to actually coincide with Harman's comments upon his methodology, which he describes as a "hyperbolic reading".

Hyperbolic readings of philosophy occur by imagining a world in which some theory has achieved absolute admiration within philosophy, becoming a new and totalising paradigm – and then by wondering what such a world as this might lack.²⁸ Harman presents his own OOO as the result of one such hyperbolic reading.²⁹ The effect of hyperbolic theorising as a starting point has been little understood by OOO's critics. The sardonically dystopian world which Wolfendale describes, in which OOO becomes the one-and-only philosophy, overlooks the fundamentally self-effacing quality of a philosophy which grounds itself hyperbolically.³⁰ Instead, OOO is founded not only upon its own contingency (as the result of a rhetorical lack within an opposing theory) but *upon the contingency of theory in general*. Alongside the self-confessed hermeneutic character of Harman's OOO, a similar contingency is identifiable in other popular variants of it. Bogost inadvertently offers up OOO's methodological contingency when, at the beginning of *Alien Phenomenology* he presents OOO as "put[ting] things at the centre of being" before mentioning the alternative approach of "continental philosophy via Henri Bergson or Gilles Deleuze" in which processual flux and dynamism are primary.³¹ Likewise Bryant, despite offering at all other points impressively rigorous argumentation, must let on what he calls a "minimal identity" between all "machines" qua machines.³²

These brief omissions force us to think *from OOO* the event of its own commencement and the givens that configure its theoretical subconscious. The way in which these givens are posed as commonsense intuitions lends rhetorical credence to the accusation against OOO critics that they are merely ideological operatives.³³ The most important unspoken given for OOO is that there is a single, totalising class of things. This perfectly mirrors the theoretical posture initiating Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, cited approvingly by Althusser, where "just anything" is chosen as philosophy's starting point.³⁴ That there is such a Hegelian minimal identity is disputed by Adorno, who proposes instead the ultimate *difference* of real things, once they are unbound from the capitalistic logic of "bartering" which demands a universal

²⁶ E.g. Althusser, *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy*, 13.

²⁷ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 198–209.

²⁸ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 121.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁰ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 391–9.

³¹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 6–7.

³² Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*, 32.

³³ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 184.

³⁴ Althusser, *How to be a Marxist in Philosophy*, 17.

that comprehends every-thing equally.³⁵ Such is the effect of negative dialectics in OOO: occasioning us to point out the critical rhetorical junctures where someone with different intuitions would simply proceed towards different conclusions.

The differences revealed through applying negative dialectics to OOO are profound. For one, by following closely Harman's methodology we see a substantial difference between OOO and its competitors, since it admits of its own contingency from the start. Otherwise, this self-effacing thought of methodological contingency immanent to OOO opens onto the world of alternative intuitions and givens which are excluded by OOO and yet which find expression in it through the absence of any auto-absolutisation. From here, the decision between actuating thought with either OOO or one of its competitors is made obvious to our understanding.

4 Laruelle: a world of (non-)subjects

Up to this point, I have been focusing my efforts on fortifying my claim that a simply strategic decision underlies the selection of either OOO or one of its competitors.³⁶ What the past discussion has unveiled is the curious immanence of this decision to OOO, which (at least in Harman's version) opens onto the multitude of alternatives making *OOO an event to itself*. Laruelle³⁷ is one of the philosophers to have most thoroughly contemplated the nature of the decision in philosophy, and here I hope to consult his "non-philosophy" to understand the precise nature of OOO's relation to its competitors, the effect of which will be to habilitate the subject or exception to OOO by promoting foremost a "quantum-oriented philosophy" that acknowledges how the Real is manipulated to produce either OOO or its competitors which prize the qualitative multiplicity of inter-objective relations.

Returning our thought to the moment of the decision between OOO and its competitors recalls what Laruelle refers to as the "philosophical decision" (PD). For Laruelle, all thought begins with the One, which is divided up and proportioned along a "philosophical dyad", whose role in defining the function of a philosophy is manifold. For one, the division etched out by the dyad informs us of the difference between philosophy and non-philosophy.³⁸ The contents of the PD also represent the horizons for the resultant philosophy, such as where thinking is divided along the lines of right/wrong, height/flatness or special/general. The move which Laruelle proposes, naming his a "quantum-oriented" or "victim-oriented" philosophy, is to think the non-dialectical combination of the full contents of the dyad as a whole One, alternately named by him "the Real" and "Man".³⁹ This means beginning thought with the Real which is "given-without-giveness" or Man who is "prior-to-the-first".⁴⁰ In other words, Laruelle encourages us to engage with the performative structures, in which we are embroiled when we do philosophy, and sees in these an interaction with the Real, in which we are constituted before any philosophical questions of givenness or (epistemological or ontological) priority.

Importantly for Laruelle, the One as it is given-without-giveness to thought in its primordially is what is cut by the dyad.⁴¹ The One is the Real where the identity-without-blend of either side of the dyad

³⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 146.

³⁶ There remain theoretical questions to be answered regarding the possibility of thinking together Laruelle, Adorno and Althusser, as this article has done. However, such exegesis is beyond the scope and intentions of this paper and is best performed elsewhere. As a cursory solution to these matters, I defer the reader to Mesting, *Critical Theory as Theoretical Practice: Althusserianism in Laruelle and Adorno*, who has completed novel work comparing and reconciling the projects of Laruelle, Adorno and Althusser.

³⁷ For this reading of Laruelle, I am indebted to Smith, *François Laruelle's Principles of Non-Philosophy: An Introduction and Guide*.

³⁸ Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 2.

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 21; Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, 9.

⁴¹ Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 31.

is achieved; and should we turn our attention to the dyad of flatness/height, a thought of the One is an escape from the eventual aporia emerging from the moment of decision between OOO and other philosophies. The PD is closely connected with Laruelle's appropriation of Althusser's theory of determination in-the-last-instance. When thought becomes of-metaphysics, of-ethics, or more generally, of-philosophy, it receives determinations that result in its adoption of the transcendental identity of metaphysics, ethics or philosophy. This is because a universal thinking is nonsensical for Laruelle; the One which is the infinite grounding of thought is "foreclosed" to thought in-the-last-instance.⁴² This foreclosure is not because the One is transcendent to thought, however, but because of its radical immanence. Rather than a transcendent and unthinkable One, Laruelle's Non-Philosophical One is "infinitely determinable."⁴³ In this sense, its unthinkability is resultant of its receptivity to all transcendental identities, rather than the inadequacy of transcendental identities for appropriating the Real. The move which I propose here is to consider OOO in-the-last-instance, with regard to its transcendental identity. The performance through which thought assents to OOO's intuitiveness occurs in the midst of the One, and the transcendental identity which grounds OOO is regarded in Laruelian Non-Philosophy as, instead of fully incommensurable with its competitors ("x is right, hence y is wrong"), an aspect of a radical zone of commensurability through the thought of which any effort to think together both sides of a dyad may be fulfilled.

Relevant to evaluating how the flatness/height dyad is deployed in OOO is Laruelle's "non-Cartesian theory of the subject". This non-Cartesian theory holds the key to understanding both the difference between and the moment of differentiation of OOO and its competitors. What Laruelle first recognises is that philosophies which make the "subject" an object (graspable in the same sense as the general milieu of things) end up "doubling" the ego, which is both the thinking-of the ego and the thought-of the ego.⁴⁴ However we prioritise the thinking-of or thought-of the ego is what underlies the selection of either an OOO or non-OOO. Identifying the ego with the priority of the performative "thinking" $\left(\frac{\text{Thinking}}{\text{Thought}}\right)$ produces the irreducibility of the "subject" to our thought of it in terms of the general. On the other hand, insisting that any thinking which seemingly "rises above" the general realm of things is subordinate to the thought of itself $\left(\frac{\text{Thinking}}{\text{Thought}}\right)$ results in the flatness of the "subject" with respect to the object by conceding their equal transparency (or opacity) to consciousness. The error of dividing the One of the ego into thought/thinking Laruelle remedies with his theory of the "ego-without-subject".⁴⁵ The ego-without-subject becomes a matter of considering the Real of the ego as prior to its activity of thinking which, as we have seen, cuts the One by an act of doubling. This is made possible by recognising the ego as the site of all thoughts (the 'force-(of)-thought') which it receives as determinations, rather than by placing thought in the essence of the ego as traditional philosophies have tried to do. Considering the ego as the determinable unity of the thought/thinking dyad locates it in a domain prior-to-the-first, or as the origination of any thought of the priority of thought or thinking.⁴⁶ The ego which is, in this way, *superposed* between its potential identities of thought/thinking produces a new transcendental identity which is truer to the unmediated nature of the One: a quantum-oriented philosophy.⁴⁷

A Laruelian quantum-oriented philosophy is one which successfully habilitates OOO and non-OOO by reminding us of the performativity of philosophy, and therefore the opposition-without-competition between apparently discordant branches of thought, fulfilling Adorno's vision of material reality as a self-contradictory whole. It is true that OOO and the special ontology demanded by the "subject" are

⁴² Ibid., 22.

⁴³ Srnicek, *Francois Laruelle and the Non-Philosophical Tradition*, 3.

⁴⁴ Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, 97.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁷ Laruelle, *General Theory of Victims*, 26–8.

irreconcilable; but from a perspective which begins by refusing any determinacy to thought and which becomes the activity of thinking flatness as well as height, the two may be apparently held together without any demand being roused for their comparison and therefore combat. While philosophies of the event are philosophies of warfare, where the exposure of a system to an extra-situational truth is seen as a fatal assault on the event-situation, recognising the situation and the extra-situation (in other words, philosophy and non-philosophy) in-One, by their identity-without-blend in the Real, we dispose of any apparent need to reconcile OOO with insights contravening upon it. Therefore, although it is true that to the extent to which we expect OOO to be capable of producing a singularly credible “New Theory of Everything”, one which replaces the One with the object (which is always-already a determination of the One), a dimension of the Real will be inaccessible to it, realising OOO as a thought appropriate to a region of the One over which it may hold supreme command restores to OOO its place in thought and explains the phenomenon of its self-aware methodological contingency.

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