Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

Niels Wilde*

Everything and Nothing: How do Matters Stand with Nothingness in Object-Oriented Ontology?

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Abstract: This article poses a question for Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) in general and Harman's position in particular. It is Heidegger's question: "How do matters stand with nothingness?" First, I present the basic outline of Harman's OOO which is presented as a theory of everything. In order to pin down the question of nothing, I begin by asking about "something": what is an object? And what does it mean that objects exist? Then I pursue by identifying two notions of nothing in OOO: the withdrawal of objects and the in-between of two objects. The first, I call infrastructural nothing. The second, I call interrelational nothing. The latter is derived from the former. I argue that OOO is very close to Kierkegaard's account of nothing as the space of possibility of possibilities, since an object is defined as its own interior space which must hold something in reserve in order to allow for change and emergence. Nothing is not merely nothing but something – a bounded openness.

Keywords: objects, nothing, possibility, Harman, Morton, Kierkegaard

1 Introduction

Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) is a theory – a new theory – of *everything*. What about *nothing* then? This is my question for OOO in general and for Harman in particular. OOO is now so influential and well-known across different disciplines that a brief introduction of the theory will do. However, there are some important pitfalls we need to avoid from the outset in order not to go astray from the beginning. The first one concerns Harman's very definition of an "object". What qualifies as an object? The short answer would be everything! In this sense, the subject is not abandoned from the equation in favor of objects. The subject is an object as well. A process is an object. A Christmas tree, an airport, Tokyo, unicorns and Jessica Rabbit are all objects. Yet, what about *nothing* then? I begin with a brief introduction of the key elements in Harman's OOO. Then I discuss the notion of objects and what count as objects in order to present the peculiar case of nothing in relation to everything. I argue that nothing is not merely nothing but something, or to use Morton's distinction borrowed from Tillich – a meontic nothing (relational) rather than oukontic nothing (absolute).¹ There are at least two notions of nothing in OOO: the withdrawal of objects and the in-between of two objects. The second is derived from the former because the relation

¹ See Morton, "This is not my beautiful biosphere", 233.

* **Corresponding author: Niels Wilde**, Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark, e-mail: filnwl@cas.au.dk

between two objects is an object in its own right and hence, it withdraws.² In order to qualify this nothing as withdrawal or withholding, I draw on the background on which OOO is developed, i.e., the phenomenological and existential tradition. I argue that OOO is closer to Kierkegaard than Heidegger in respect to nothingness. While Harman explicitly expands the Kantian limit of the thing-in-itself to count for relations between two objects whatsoever (global finitude) and not only the human–world co-relation (in-itself vs for-itself), he implicitly expands the Kierkegaardian nothing (the possibility of possibility) in terms of the withdrawal or withholding of objects.

2 OOO: points and pitfalls

The project of OOO is twofold: The first task is to defend the claim that objects exist in isolation from other objects and second to explain how objects nevertheless interact.³ The first claim is a development of Heidegger's tool analysis. Objects withdraw into a dark subterranean reality without being exhausted by their appearance.⁴ The second claim is a kind of secular version of occasionalism, what Harman calls *vicarious causation*. Objects are withdrawn or withheld from one another and cannot interact directly, so causation must happen by means of a substitute that is open for partial contact.

In order to define what an object is, let us begin with a clarification of what it is *not*. Harman uses the word “object”, “thing”, “tool-being” and “substance” synonymously. Second, an object is not conceived in terms of any relational property, e.g., standing-over-and-against something, i.e., it is not a *Gegenstand*. An object is not an object of experience. Third, an object is not a dead lump of matter. This is not to say that there are no material or physical objects but that the objecthood of the object is not found in the material it is made of. If an object was nothing but a *Gegenstand*, i.e., a *relata* of a relation, emergence and change would be difficult to explain since the full reality of the object would be actualized all the time. In order for something new to emerge, the object must hold something in reserve which is not found in the relation. An object cannot be reduced to what it is made of either, because the object as a whole has properties that cannot be found in its components held in isolation.⁵ The idea that objects are nothing but their effects or overarching relational structure like language, power, ideology, etc., Harman calls *overmining*. The idea that objects are nothing but the smallest things they consist of, like quarks or strings, he calls *undermining*. An object is irreducible in both directions, it is autonomous – something in its own right. In short, an object is whatever exists as something that cannot be reduced to its effects or components alone.

Harman develops a model of the infrastructure of objects, which consists of four unified poles – (1) the real object (RO), (2) the sensual object (SO), (3) real qualities (RQ) and (4) sensual qualities (SQ).⁶ Take an apple. The apple is an object, a concrete entity that exists in the world. Harman is inspired by Husserl when he holds that we encounter the apple as an object before we isolate different aspects. An apple is not a bundle of different sensations held together by a common name “apple” but a real thing. The reality of the apple is exhausted neither by perception nor by praxis. I could place the apple on top of someone's head in order to shoot it down or mix it with macaroons and whipped cream in a bowl. Every time, it is merely a translation of different aspects of the apple that come into view, i.e., an SO⁷ or more specifically,

² I am aware that Harman replaces the term “withdrawal” with “withholding” in his recent works. The reason is that withdrawal suggests a movement in terms of retraction, but it is more accurate to say that the object is inaccessible from the very beginning. When I use the term withdrawal, I simply mean to investigate this inaccessible realm in terms of nothing and not whether there is a retraction or not (see Harman, “Editorial Introduction”, 592).

³ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 1.

⁴ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 5.

⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 30.

⁶ See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*.

⁷ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 9.

in the terminology of *Guerrilla Metaphysics* – elements.⁸ An element is an SO in a highly specific form⁹ – this particular apple with a faint red color, a rough skin and a wormhole near the stem, etc. For the worm, the apple is not a potential dessert on a coffee table. The apple is a place for digging tunnels and not a commodity with a market value. When the apple lies in the bowl as a part of a dessert, still different elements come into view. Now it is the apple's juiciness which is affected by the macaroons and the form is affected by the knife. The pieces will eventually oxidize due to the cut and so on. In each case, it is the apple elements that interact, but it is still the same apple (SO) throughout the examples which is open for contact. In all cases, the apple (RO) is never exhausted but withheld as something else and something more than whatever relation it enters and whatever components it consists of – the stem, the core or the peel – which are themselves considered objects in their own rights. The apple is no less identical to its components than it is to its external relations.¹⁰

What counts as an object then? The term “object” is used “in an unusually wide sense: an object is anything that cannot be entirely reduced either to the components of which it is made or to the effects that it has on other things”.¹¹ This definition is true not only for rocks and cups but also for transient fluxes and flows as well as sunrises and short-lived insects.¹² Is the subject an object in this sense? Yes! Why? In her outline of similarities and differences between phenomenology and OOO, Floriana Ferro points to the fact that both OOO and phenomenology are concerned with objects and states that the subject is an object in a certain sense: “Even when I think of myself, I am directed to myself as an object”.¹³ While this is certainly true, I think it is important to emphasize that this is not why the subject is an object in the terms of OOO. The subject as an object of experience or thinking is a *Gegenstand* or an intentional object but that is not the basic definition of an object in OOO. The subject who thinks of itself as something is just as much an object as the subject who is the object of its own thought. The subject is an object because it cannot be reduced to whatever it consists of – atoms, organs, genome, emotional states, bacteria, consciousness, the unconscious or whatever,¹⁴ nor is it identical to the sum total of the relations it has to

⁸ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 166.

⁹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 43.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ferro, “Object-Oriented Ontology's view of relations”, 568.

¹⁴ Of course, the term “subject” is problematic. Is it really accurate to claim that the subject consists of atoms, organs, bacteria, etc.? It sounds more like we are describing the body. It depends on how we understand the subject and the phrase “to consist of...” If we want to avoid a mind-body dualism, we could argue that the subject must be corporeal in some sense, not as a ghost in the machine but more like in Merleau-Ponty (I don't *have* a body, I *am* my body). Further, to “consist of...” does not imply tinier material components but rather “anything rather than nothing whatsoever”. In this sense, even the Cartesian cogito can be said to consist of something rather than nothing – thoughts, for instance. Or take Kant's transcendental ego. The apperception or ego has different roles to perform in the apparatus of reason – to unify and to accompany all of my representations without being identical to these representations although this might be a poor reconstruction of Kant. Kierkegaard's subject or “self” is a good example, since it both consists of something rather than nothing, i.e., finitude, infinitude, necessity and possibility to which it relates and still, there is a lurking abyss inscribed in this self-relation which is neither the relation nor the relata. Žižek concludes his article “Marx reads Object-Oriented Ontology” by saying: “There is no place for the subject in OOO”. His point is not that there is something fundamentally about being human that OOO cannot include or account for such as love or friendship, wonder and beauty but rather that the subject is not an object because it is somewhat less than an object: “we pass from the secret core of an object inaccessible to other objects to inaccessibility as such – \$ is nothing but its own inaccessibility, its own failure to be substance” (Žižek, “Marx reads Object-Oriented Ontology”, 60). At first, it sounds like the subject is less than an object since it is not *something* which is inaccessible but pure inaccessibility. On the other hand, Žižek's description of the subject is similar to Harman's two-face theory of objects in some aspects. Žižek: “\$ is an actor that exists only in acting, not in substance. Of course, it has to have some material (neuronal, bodily) base, but ‘that's not it’” (Ibid.). The material entity could be interpreted as an SO – it is right there, the brain, the blood and the bones but all these components do not equal the object as such. Even the element of the SO considered as a psychic substance with desires, fantasies, traumas (Ibid.), etc. must be distinguished as something rather than something else (a fantasy is not necessary a trauma). The object (the subject as a unified whole) is an SO (the material basis/the brain) but for a surgeon, the flesh element of the brain comes into view while for the psychoanalyst, it might be a childhood memory. None of

something else – being a mother, a Knicks fan, a coworker, etc. This is not to say that the subject cannot be all of these things. Quite the contrary. The subject, the self or, more broadly, the human individual, can be all of these things, but it will also always be something *more* or something *else*.

3 Object-Oriented Ontological difference?

The OOO advocates a flat ontology where no entities, large or small, physical or fictional, are ruled out from the start. The subject does not possess more reality than a grasshopper, a cartoon character or a space station, i.e., all objects exist on equal ontological footing. Yet flat ontology is merely a point of departure: “flat ontology is a good starting point for philosophy but a disappointing finish [...] flat ontology is a useful way of ensuring that we do not cave in to our personal prejudices about what is or is not real [...]”.¹⁵ However, OOO aims at a theory of everything which must include both a notion of ontological equality or flat ontology and the differences between various kinds of things.¹⁶ In his 2007 article “On Vicarious Causation”, Harman distinguishes between “ontology” on the one hand and “metaphysics” on the other. He writes:

Henceforth, let “ontology” refer to a description of the basic structural features shared by all objects, and let “metaphysics” signify the discussion of the fundamental traits of specific types of entities.¹⁷

The point about ontological equality and irreducibility belongs to the level of ontology since *all* objects are on an equal footing and all objects are unified autonomous entities. The quadruple infrastructure of the object belongs to this level as well. When Harman defines the twofold task of OOO in *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005), the program is solely ontological without a clear distinction between the ontological and the metaphysical:

The central thesis of the earlier work (sc. *Tool-Being*) is that objects exist in utter isolation from all others [...] Obviously, this can be no better than a half-truth about the world [...] *Guerrilla Metaphysics* is an attempt to tell the other side of the story. It needs to be shown how relations and events are possible *despite* the existence of vacuum-sealed objects or tool-beings.¹⁸

Objects are isolated entities but interact, nevertheless. However, if we zoom in on specific objects, there is still a whole range of things to be explored. If we go back to the essay from 2007, Harman writes: “As for metaphysics [...] the most obvious possible topics include human being, language, artworks, and even God”.¹⁹ In *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* from 2017, Harman no longer makes this clear-cut distinction: “I like to use the words ‘ontology’ and ‘metaphysics’ as synonyms, seeing little benefit in distinguishing them”.²⁰ However, this might only be a change in terms, since Harman still wants to include not only the basic features of everything but also the differences between various kinds of things as stated above. In this sense, there is plenty of room for developing new theories of the subject without reestablishing ontological hierarchies.²¹ The first basic feature of everything is the notion of limit

these elements exhaust the reality of the object (something rather than nothing). The \$ could be interpreted as an RO – the withholding or withdrawal of the object. One might object and say that there is only “withdrawal” or “inaccessibility” and not an *object that withdraws* but recall Harman’s definition: “an object is defined as that which *unifies* notes into one thing” and the \$ and its material basis must, nevertheless, be a *unified something* even though the \$ is different from its material basis.

¹⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 54–5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 55.

¹⁷ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation”, 204.

¹⁸ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 1–2.

¹⁹ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation”, 204.

²⁰ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 42.

²¹ Different attempts have been made in order to rethink the subject or the human in line with OOO. See, e.g., Behar (ed.), *Object-oriented feminism* and Morton, *Humankind*.

or finitude. Harman expands Kant's concept of the thing-in-itself. For Kant, the thing-in-itself refers to the ultimate fence post within the cartography of reason but OOO holds that this limit is not restricted to the human-world relation: "OOO [...] fully endorses the thing-in-itself, and claims that Kant's real error was to hold that the thing-in-itself is something that merely haunts human cognitive and sensory powers. OOO claims instead that the thing-in-itself is an inevitable aspect of *any* relation".²² This aspect is what Harman refers to as *global finitude*. When I touch the apple object, it is merely an element of the apple and not its full reality that comes into view. The same goes for the knife when the blade slides the apple or when the worm penetrates the skin. The distinction between "ontology" and "metaphysics" or the basic structure of all objects on the one hand and the individual "life" of a particular object on the other looks like an expansion of what Heidegger dubbed "the ontological difference" but not between being and beings but between the *object as such* (all objects) and *objects* (particular objects). If this is true, there is place for the subject in OOO since the feature of irreducibility and the quadruple structure is only half the story. If this is not true, it is hard to see how the subject or any other object for that matter could be payed justice. All objects share the same basic features but that is all we can say then. The problem with this kind of object-oriented ontological difference, however, is to explain how these two levels intermix? Ferro raises a similar point when she argues that a hailstone that falls on a rooftop comes into contact with not only the phenomenal roof but also the real rooftop. If the hailstone struck off a shingle, the rooftop changes. The problem is if an object relates to the phenomenal aspect of another object in such a degree that the object can no longer be said to be the same as before, it is in fact the RO that has changed. Ferro writes: "In this way, the phenomenal impact of the hailstones on the phenomenal roof would also cause an impact on the real roof".²³ Since objects are destructible according to OOO, we do not face some eternal archive of immortal substances. In *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, Harman uses the example of a burning warehouse. He says that we can approach it from different angles, but it remains the *same* warehouse. The point here is that "the same is true of the fire, which does not spread through the building with infinite speed, but faces different levels of resistance from its interior walls and sprinkler systems and fails to grasp any aspect of the building that are more subtle than its flammability".²⁴ The fire does not touch "the earth-colored ceiling", "the *Jugendstil* entryway" or "the dreary and stagnant smell".²⁵ The human observer, the water from the fire hose and the fire interacts with different elements of the same SO – the phenomenal warehouse – without exhausting all aspects of the RO. The RO is the irreducible autonomous warehouse which is more than these encounters and more than the sum total of its components – the roof and walls, sprinkler systems, *Jugendstil*, smell, geographical location, storage facility, wooden material, etc. Yet, what if the fire burned the warehouse to the ground? What if the warehouse–fire relation turned the warehouse to a pile of ashes? Is it still the *same* warehouse? Still the fire did not touch the fact that the warehouse was built by someone at a certain period in time and that it was the occasion for a topping-out ceremony many years ago, but are these elements really enough to keep the identity of the warehouse intact? And do these elements even belong to the warehouse or do they belong to the relation between the warehouse and whoever joined the ceremony? Is the warehouse destroyed indirectly through the fire–warehouse relation which is a new object in its own right being neither the fire nor the warehouse, but the fire–warehouse relation giving birth to yet another object – the ash pile?

This question relates to a basic concept in OOO which is often used but rarely explained. Take Ian Bogost's paradigmatic formula from *Alien Phenomenology* (2012): "*all things equally exist, yet they do not exist equally*".²⁶ This is flat ontology in a nutshell. It means that all things are regarded the same ontological status, i.e., nothing exists more or less than anything else even though all things are different.

²² Harman, "Global finitude", 255.

²³ Ferro, "Object-Oriented Ontology's view of relations", 576.

²⁴ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 78.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 11.

However, the concept that needs clarification here is the term *existence*. What does it mean that something exists? Here is what Harman says:

on the other, there is the “singularity” of the wood, its individual reality as anything at all [...] the question of the thing’s existence is not to be answered with a “yes” or “no” but must be described as the thing’s real enactment of itself amidst the system of the world.²⁷

Existence on the interior of an object is defined by sincerity and involvement, not transcendence and critique. This is true for all objects at all times.²⁸

Some objects may be real in the usual sense of external physical existence, but others may not. Donald Duck is no less an object than a pillar of granite.²⁹

Objects come in just two kinds: *real objects* whether or not they currently affect anything else while *sensual objects* exist only in relation to some real object.³⁰

But a higher standard than literalism is needed for an object to remain in existence.³¹

The first quote suggests that an object can be *anything at all*. Yet an object is a unified individual reality which means that a random aggregate is not necessary an object although all of its different parts might be: “why a specific laser or freight train should count as one thing, while the grand assembly made up of Kenya, the moon, Prince William, and a herd of zebras should not”.³² It is not hard to follow why this assembly might not count as one thing, but why should it not count as *anything at all*? After all, it is “a grand assembly” or if you wish, “an example of a random assembly that does not count as one thing” but that is still to be something, anything. One possible answer lies in the qualification of existence. The existence of an object does not consist in a *factum brutum* but in the object’s enactment of itself as a unified singular entity. The second quote links existence to the notion of endo-ontology (the idea that objects are identical to their own interiors) but does not say much about the criteria of existence. The third quote emphasizes that existence is not restricted to external physical presence but fictional characters exist as well (Could the assembly of Kenya, the moon, Prince William and a herd of zebras not count as one thing if considered fictional?). The fourth quote says that both ROs and SOs exist, but while the former is independent of external relations, the latter is not. In this sense, we cannot say that to exist is to appear in a context (enter into a relation) or a field of sense, to use Markus Gabriel’s term,³³ since this is only true for an SO and not for an RO. We cannot claim the opposite either since it is only the RO that contains this conatus-like core of ontological self-preservation in terms of essential notes but not the SO. However, what we have learned so far is merely that an object *exists as* a unified singular entity with a rich irreducible interior and comes in two different kinds – independent ROs and dependent SOs, but this is just to say that an object exists as *x, y, z insofar as it exists at all*. The final quote touches upon the birth of an object. Literalism, Harman says: “does well enough in marking the birth of an object such as a war: fifty cannon firing from Charleston at Fort Sumter”.³⁴ An object is born: “as soon as its conditions of birth have literally been met”.³⁵ When an object comes into being, e.g., as a collision between two objects, the relation immediately forms a new substance which fulfills all of the criteria for being an object. When it exists, the very existence of an RO is independent from other objects but the coming-into-existence of an RO is not. Relations can only take place as a collision between two objects inside a third object, i.e., the

²⁷ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 245.

²⁸ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 255.

²⁹ Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 147.

³⁰ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

³² Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 231.

³³ Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*.

³⁴ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 117.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

endo-sphere is a condition for the birth of any object. So the question is not only how do two existing objects relate to one another but how do they unify and become independent in the first place?

4 Everything and nothing

If OOO is a theory of everything, what about nothing(ness), then? How do matters stand with nothingness? We might approach this question in different ways. The first option is to say that OOO is not obliged to deal with nothingness since nothingness is exactly the opposite of *everything*. Nothing is exactly *no thing* and hence it cannot be subsumed under the domain of every-thing. OOO is a theory of what there is – *every thing/everything* (all objects) insofar as they exist but nothing does not exist per definition. However, we should not rule out nothingness so quickly. Recall the slogan of flat ontology: “we do not cave in to our personal prejudices about what is or is not real”. After all, objects are not restricted to the physical realm and it would be a disappointing surprise if nothingness was ruled out altogether from the equation of reality by OOO when we consider its phenomenological legacy. Harman does touch upon such notions as death³⁶ and the nonpresence of entities³⁷ which might be said to harbor on the theme of nothingness. The second option is that a theory of everything should allow the occurrence of nothingness, but how do matters then stand with this nothingness?

It is hard to address Nothingness in the Parmenidean sense with a capital N or what Tillich dubbed *oukontic* nothing (absolute nothingness), but we can examine *meontic* nothingness (relative nothingness). In the phenomenological and existential tradition, nothingness is not merely nothing but something, e.g., a space of possibility of possibilities (Kierkegaard), a power that thrust us into being (Heidegger), that which comes into being due to man’s lack of essence (Sartre) or in terms of nihilism (Nietzsche). These “no-things” expose what we could call various kinds of *indeterminate openness*. We might be suspicious about the human all too human correlation here. However, since nothingness is hard to disclose head on, we are able to talk about different phenomenal aspects or manifestations of nothingness, for example, in the case of anxiety. Anxiety concerns an abysmal experience of one’s own existence as a whole which is a kind of nothing in the sense that it has no determinate object. According to Simon D. Podmore: “The abyss which one inevitably gazes upon in Kierkegaard’s writings cannot simply be subsumed under nothingness; it is not fundamentally a void, though at times it may resemble one and may at all times threaten to become one”.³⁸ Kierkegaard’s nothing is not merely nothing but something – not some thing, but something nevertheless. Recall Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s famous distinction between fear and anxiety. Fear is always directed against something – a mad dog or a car crash but anxiety has no object. We are anxious about *nothing*. For Kierkegaard, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, “nothing” turns out to be a space of the possibility of freedom in the constitution of the human being.³⁹ For Heidegger, nothing is not empty but is revealed in anxiety as being-in-the-world as such, i.e., an opening of possibilities. The crucial difference here is that even before the constitution of spirit as self-relation (before humans as humans arose), there was nothing, according to Kierkegaard. Nothing precedes the human. This is exactly why Kierkegaard is closer to OOO on this point than Heidegger. Alison Assiter interprets the Garden of Eden in *The Concept of Anxiety* as *nature* which, as she says, must preexist Adam and Eve and constitute “a great outdoors” – a term borrowed from Meillassoux. Assiter adds cautiously, however, that this notion does not provide the kind of proof that a skeptical epistemologist might want of the existence of such a nature, but it works like a speculative hypothesis to explain the origin of human freedom.⁴⁰

³⁶ See, e.g., Harman, *Immaterialism*, 107ff.

³⁷ Harman, “Editorial introduction”, 592.

³⁸ Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self before God*, 2.

³⁹ The exact phrasing identifies actuality with a kind of possibility, i.e., “anxiety is freedom’s actuality [*Virkelighed*] as the possibility of possibility” (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 42/Begrebet Angest, SKS 4, 348).

⁴⁰ See Assiter, *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth*, 82–83.

Let me just say a few more words about why I believe Kierkegaard's position is closer to OOO than Heidegger's in respect, not only to nothingness but overall. In Heidegger's model, we are anxious about nothing. In Kierkegaard's model, nothing is the origin of anxiety. In case of the former, nothing refers to being-in-the-world as such, i.e., the basic constitution of human Dasein. One might say that anxiety, on Heidegger's account, originates from nothing as well since it raises from being-in-the-world but the point of departure is the always-already-ness of Dasein's situatedness. In Kierkegaard's model, anxiety originates as an anarchic event *ex nihilo* prior to any "always" and "already" that first makes possible the coming-into-existence of spirit, i.e., the capacity of self-relation, or to stay in Heidegger's terminology, of being-in-the-world as such. In short, Kierkegaard describes a situation prior to situatedness. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, this prior situation is presented as the Garden of Eden. Adam, in his not-yet human form, i.e., before him and Eve ate their way into self-consciousness, becomes anxious exactly because there is *nothing* to be anxious about. This nothing is the possibility of freedom. Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Haufniensis, describes freedom as a yawning abyss. Standing in front of the pit of possibility, Adam becomes dizzy and succumbs. When he awakens, he finds himself guilty. The depth of the abyss pulls and attracts the one who gazes into it, but this feeling of being sucked into the void presupposes that someone looks down. Note it is the abyss as well as the eye that cause the dizziness of freedom because Adam could just as well not have looked down.⁴¹ While this paragraph is meant to signify the aporia of sin – Adam is both guilty and not guilty – it reveals an implicit realist standpoint because consider if Adam in fact have not looked down, the human race would never have occurred. The decisive point here is that this very possibility of *not occurring* does not constitute any retroactive disqualification of the ontological status of Eden or "the great outdoors". Imagine Adam as Bartleby, Eden might have been what Eugene Thacker with a term borrowed from Alan Weisman has called "the world-without-us".⁴² Even though Kierkegaard is most interested in the problems linked to human existence in particular, the human being does not exist more or less than anything else: "In relation to factual being, any discussion of more or less being is meaningless. A fly, when it exists, has just as much being as God [...] in relation to factual being Hamlet's dialectic: 'to be or not to be', applies".⁴³ If this is not flat ontology, I do not know what is. Further, Adam, when he becomes human, finds himself *in* the world but still alienated *from* the world, i.e., the world is not exhausted of being a world-for-us: "The Garden of Eden was closed; everything was changed, the man became afraid of himself, afraid of the world around him".⁴⁴ But I think it is possible to make an even stronger claim. I want to argue that Kierkegaard, in fact, is not a correlationist. By correlation, Meillassoux means "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other".⁴⁵ This hardwired couple is the codicil of modernity, according to Meillassoux. Said differently, since Kant Western philosophy has left reality behind in order to talk about our *access* to reality.⁴⁶ In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Climacus, talks about Kant's "deviation": "which brought actuality [*virkeligheden*] into relation with thought".⁴⁷ In principle, there is nothing wrong about the reality of thought or the correlation between thought and being, but this is not all there is to the real. In the post-Kantian tradition, Climacus holds, "thought-reality" was confused with actuality or reality as such [*virkeligheden*] and "This triumph of pure thought (that, in it, thought and being are one) is something to both laugh at and weep over"⁴⁸ I take this to be a clue of what we could call Kierkegaard's anti-correlationist account. In this sense, Harman is closer to Kierkegaard than to Heidegger. While Heidegger remained a correlationist to the very end even though the role of Dasein as mortals was downscaled in his later writings, Kierkegaard never advocated a

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 61/Begrebet Angest, SKS 4, 365.

⁴² Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*, 5–7.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Repitition and Philosophical Crumbs*, 115 FN/Philosophiske Smuler, SKS 4, 246.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 127/Fire Opbyggelige Taler, SKS 5, 131.

⁴⁵ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

⁴⁶ Morton, "This is not my beautiful biosphere", 229.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, 275/Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift, SKS 7, 299.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

correlationist standpoint. On the contrary, Kierkegaard describes a version of nothingness prior to the emergence of humans as humans who as soon as they exist do not exist more or less than anything else and do not exhaust reality by thinking it. The keywords are reality [*virkeligheden*] and existence, not humans thinking about reality. I call Kierkegaard's position *topological realism* and not *transgressive realism* as Lee Braver does. Although I agree with Braver's analysis, I think his term is too narrow. Braver points to Kierkegaard's notion of an external transcendence that nevertheless makes contact to us like when God demands Abraham to kill Isaac – an experience that does not fit our mental structures but violates them.⁴⁹ However, this is still to move within the framework of the human–world correlation. Of course, Kierkegaard does not develop a theory about the interaction between two nonhuman objects nor does he elaborate on the ontological status of nothingness apart from the role it plays in relation to the human, but there is a common ground between Kierkegaard's position and OOO that needs further investigation.⁵⁰ In fact, philosophy of existence more broadly should be paired with speculative realism in general and OOO in particular.⁵¹

If we return to Kierkegaard's analysis, anxiety arises as an effect of nothingness in the Garden of Eden. He says:

In this state there is peace and repose, but there is simultaneously something else that is not contention and strife, for there is indeed nothing against which to strive. What, then, is it? Nothing. But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety.⁵²

This is just like the intro scene in *Blue Velvet* by David Lynch, where the camera zoom in on the busy bugs and creeps in the ground beneath the surface of a peaceful, idyllic suburban scenery after a man was hit by a stroke (or stung?) while watering his garden with no one around to call for help. In the first part, nothing is wrong. Everything is exactly how it is supposed to be although there is something eerie about the fact that everything seems too perfect and idyllic. Something *is* wrong exactly because *nothing* is wrong. The point is that even before the stroke and the bugs are introduced, we as an audience get the feeling that there is something creepy about this place – the theme song is too jolly, the fireman is waving in slow motion while driving by and the frames contain too many warm colors. It is the same effect Kierkegaard describes in the Garden of Eden. Everything is in the right order and exactly *because* everything is in place, it is out of place – there is exactly *nothing* of which to strive and that is what begets anxiety. Now recall Harman's definition of an object: "an object is anything that cannot be entirely reduced either to the components of which it is made or to the effects that it has on other things".⁵³ Nothing has an effect but is not identical to its effect. In this sense, nothing meets Harman's second criterion of what counts as an object. More important, nothing cannot possibly be said to *consist of* tinier components. Even if "components" here are objects themselves and hence could count as *anything at all*, it is still hard to see what they would be in the peculiar case of nothingness? In other words, does nothingness meet the first criterion of OOO? If nothing exists but objects and if nothingness does not qualify as an object, can OOO give an account of what it is/is not?

5 OOO: A new theory of nothing?

In an associated line of thinking, Tristan Garcia offers an account of nothing in his theory of things. Garcia presents three angles of nothingness while ruling out the option of an absolute nothingness.

⁴⁹ See Braver, "A Brief History of Continental Realism", 271.

⁵⁰ Due to limited space, I cannot cover all the aspects of the Kierkegaard–Harman relation here, but I have presented what I take to be the common ground between the two elsewhere and I am currently working on a project that places Kierkegaard in the context of speculative realism more generally. See Wilde, "Weird Allies?"

⁵¹ Markus Gabriel makes an attempt to think in line with the existentialist tradition although the kinship is only very briefly sketched. See Gabriel, *Neo-Existentialism*, 40.

⁵² Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 41/Begrebet Angst, SKS 4, 347.

⁵³ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 43.

The first angle goes: “a nothing which is in fact something”.⁵⁴

When we ask, what was *before* “something”, it can only ever be another thing which is already something, i.e., something other than what comes afterward.⁵⁵

The second angle is: “a nothing which is exactly the opposite of something”.⁵⁶

In Garcia’s theory, all things have a form which is defined as its condition, its negative – everything-except-the-thing. Hence, the opposite of something is everything-except-something, which is nothing.

The third angle is: “a nothing which is in fact an absence of something”.⁵⁷

The absence of something is still something since it is the absence of what has been. This emptiness of something is a potential after-thing, but it is still a thing since it is something other than what once was.⁵⁸

Following Garcia, we might be able to say that nothingness does not consist of anything, but it must at least have a form – that which is not nothing, i.e., everything-except-nothing which is *something*. Or the reverse model: something must have a form – everything-except-something which is *nothing*. Nothing is inevitably linked to something and hence, a theory of everything must account for nothing as well. The hardwired relation of being and nothingness is well-known. Hegel asserted an identity between pure nothing and pure being but an unstable identity that flips into becoming. Further, nothing is the very engine of becoming for Hegel. As Žižek and Woodard expresses it “This is (also, among other things) what ‘to conceive substance as subject’ means: subject as the Void, the Nothingness of self-relating negativity, is the very *nihil* out of which every new figure emerges”.⁵⁹ For Nietzsche becoming is also linked to nothing but in a different manner: “becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*”.⁶⁰

Still this does not answer the question about nothing in OOO since both in Garcia’s, Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s account, nothing orbits around a notion of *relationality*. Even though we exclude *absolute nothingness* as a possibility, the kind of nothing we have in mind must still be withdrawn or withheld in order to be an RO if it is an object at all? If nothing was in fact *oukontic* or absolute, it could neither consist of anything nor enter into any relation (SO) from which it could be withheld (RO). If nothing is *meontic*, i.e., relative, it cannot refer to ROs, since they are not relational. What kind of nothing is then at stake, if at all? In a different vein, quantum physics rules out the notion of absolute nothingness as well. Here absolute nothingness refers to a region in space devoid of matter, energy, dark matter, dark energy or physical entities of any kind which cannot exist.⁶¹ Even a vacuum is not merely nothing: “every quantum is simply a wave, or disturbance within physically real vacuum fields that contain energy and are not ‘nothing’”.⁶² While Harman’s approach toward objects is *metaphysical* and not physical, ROs exist in their own private *vacuums* as well. This vacuum is not a region in space in the physical sense but an inaccessible “space of reality” in a metaphysical sense. Like in quantum physics, this space is not merely nothing. Rather, it is a *meontic* nothing not in terms of external – but *internal relationality*. According to Harman, “No object is only substantial or only relational [...] Any object can be considered simultaneously under both aspects”.⁶³ The object as a whole is that which unifies its own internal relational system of countless parts.⁶⁴

There are at least three different notions of nothing we can examine in relation to OOO. The first two are kinds of *meontic* nothing. The first is *infrastructural*, and the second is *interrelational*. The latter is derived from the former. The third one is still an open question – *nothing as object*?

⁵⁴ Garcia, *Form and Object*, 49.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 48–9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Žižek and Woodard, “Interview”, 415.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 12.

⁶¹ Hobson, *Tales of the Quantum*, 78.

⁶² Ibid., 30.

⁶³ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 227.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Let us begin by examining *infrastructural nothing*. Take the example of the apple from before. Me, the worm and the chopping board all enter into different relations with the same apple (SO) in terms of apple elements – the SO as *the sweet ingredient of a dessert* (element 1), the SO as *the penetrable texture suitable for tunnels* (element 2), the SO as *the shape that makes it tilt on a hard surface* (element 3), etc. However, the apple as such, i.e., the RO is not exhausted by these three different encounters. We can interpret Harman's notion of an RO in at least two ways and maybe we will need both. First, the RO could be this very *surplus* that resists any total fusion with another object in a relation. In this sense, the RO is *irreducibility* as such. On the other hand, "irreducibility" or "inexhaustibility" must be the irreducibility of something. In this sense, irreducibility does not equal the RO. Rather, irreducibility is an RQ of the RO. The RO is only irreducible because *it is something*. Yet if the vacuum-sealed RO should count as nothing, it must be a nothing which is not merely nothing but something. It is impossible to positively state what this *nothing* is, but we know that Harman identifies the infrastructure of the RO with the unification or interrelation between its essential notes.⁶⁵ We cannot determine what these notes are since that would violate the principle of irreducibility. If we invoke Kierkegaard's model, we can qualify this "nothing which is not merely nothing but something" not as a space of possibilities but the *space of possibility of possibilities* (SPP). The SPP is a rephrase of Kierkegaard's term for nothing as "the possibility of possibility". According to David Kangas, the possibility of possibility can be interpreted as "possibility beyond a horizon of realization, a beginning in excess to any telos".⁶⁶ Following Kangas, Michael O'Neill Burns reads Kierkegaard's notion of the instant along a similar vein in what he calls "Kierkegaard's ontology of contingency". The abyss (the nonground of existence) is interpreted as the instant which opens up "the space in which anything is possible".⁶⁷ There is a tension between "the realization of a possibility and the nothingness or pure possibility-of-possibility".⁶⁸ The SPP does not name the possibility-for-something but the pure possibility of possibilities-for-x,y,z, i.e., the very *form* of the possible. In the context of OOO, an object cannot be reduced to mere possibilities-for-x, since then it would be trapped in a teleology, where it is exhausted by its external relations. "To be" would then come to mean "to have a purpose for some other entity".⁶⁹ This cannot be the case due to the object's withdrawal and irreducibility. The SPP prevents such a terminus. It is not the case that we reduce objects to pure potentiality – an option Harman explicitly rejects.⁷⁰ If we stay in the terminology of possibility and actuality, the object can neither be fully actualized (since then it would hold nothing in reserve) nor remain a pure potentiality (then the object would be reduced to this hidden power). Rather, the possible is harbored within the actual or to use Kierkegaard's expression, actuality is not annihilated possibility but active possibility (AP).⁷¹ This is important, not only to secure the autonomy of the object itself but also in order to leave the room for change and emergence.⁷²

⁶⁵ Ibid., 211, 226.

⁶⁶ Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant*, 167.

⁶⁷ Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy*, 63.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁹ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 211.

⁷⁰ Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 129.

⁷¹ See Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 15/Sygdommen til Døden, SKS 11, 131. "Active possibility" does not refer to an underlying reality of transient fluxes of becoming but is harbored within actual concrete entities. For a broader outline of this argument, see Wilde, "Weird Allies?"

⁷² I think it is important to distinguish between the SPP and AP. While the former refers to an anarchic event very akin to what Meillassoux has called "an advent *ex nihilo*" where something new, a whole new order without precedence, takes place, the latter refers to the irreducibility of reality, of that which has come to be in this new order (things that exist equally). When Kierkegaard talks about the instant as an event, it is an advent *ex nihilo*, since quality cannot originate from quantity. He is very specific about this. The AP names the non-all of reality, that the real is not exhausted by presence. However, it is not the case that whatever comes into being emerges from something which is already there in latent form. Rather, if AP is a kind of nothing which is something, every emergence of something new is in a certain sense an advent *ex nihilo*. See Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* and Meillassoux, "Appendix".

Harman's argument against overmining is based on the notion of *emergence*. If an object is nothing but whatever relation it enters, how can anything new ever happen, since the object would be actualized instantly. Here is an example: "If the volcano holds nothing in reserve beyond its current relations to all entities in the universe, if it has no currently unexpressed properties, there is no reason to see how anything new could ever emerge".⁷³ Due to the surplus of every RO, there is always an excess of possibility withheld from the impact of other objects. If the RO was nothing but its possibilities, it would never become an actual thing and we would have trouble explaining what *unifies* these possibilities. Even a possibility is *this* possibility rather than *that* possibility which makes them parts or components of which the object as such consist. Rather, the RO is its interior and this interior is characterized by Harman as a specific space or rather a chunk of space–time.⁷⁴ Nothing could be an *SPP* which is nothing that is not merely nothing since *it is* (anything at all) without being reduced to tinier determinate components – possibility 1, 2, 3 etc. If emergence is possible because the RO withholds and hence leaves room for new properties to arise, there must be a *form* of the possible – an *SPP* at the heart of the RO. Without naming Kierkegaard, Harman does use the term "form" for this structure. The surplus of any reality, he says, "is always a form that can never be fully translated into any set of relations".⁷⁵

In this sense, we might say that Harman implicitly re-locates Kierkegaard's *SPP* from the context of origin and freedom to the realm of objects. Like the thing-in-itself was distributed to count for all relations whatsoever, the *SPP* reappears as nothing which is something, the irreducibility of objects and the nihil hypocenter of vicarious causation. In *Realist Magic*, Morton links nothingness to this irreducible character of the object: "For the object-oriented ontologist, nothingness is not a blank void or simply the gap between (human) knowing and what is real".⁷⁶ Rather:

Because a thing withdraws, it disturbs us with an excess over what we can know or say about it, or what anything can know or say about it – this excess is a nothingness, not absolutely nothing, but not something to which one can point.⁷⁷

Nothing is here defined as the "non-localizable withdrawal" of an object. This nothingness is not something to which one can point: "the withdrawal of a thing cannot be located anywhere on its surface or in its depth".⁷⁸ What Morton describes here corresponds to our previous formula of nothing, i.e. "nothing which is not merely nothing but something" or as he explains elsewhere with a reference to Tillich: "Nothing-ness: not absolutely nothing at all [...] but a -ness, a something, a quality that cannot be objectified by definition".⁷⁹ Morton's notion of Nothingness is inspired by the Buddhist notion of "emptiness" as *form*. Nothingness is the very *difference* between me and not-me, the gap between the thing and the phenomenon which makes up the very fuel of the world. Nothingness is a part of the given, a "spectral, shifting presence of absence: shimmering substantiality".⁸⁰

The second notion is *interrelational nothing*. Nothing is not only the very withdrawal or withholding of the object but also the very crack in reality between objects. In this sense, *nothing is everywhere* both inside objects and in-between objects (which is nothing but a third interior). If we follow Harman, what I call *interrelational nothing* is two-faced, since two objects can never interact directly. Nothing would here refer to the *lack* of direct access between two objects. However, even indirect access or *vicarious causation* is a form of infrastructural nothing, since a relation between two objects is a new object in its own right. Hence, the relation is itself withheld, withdrawn. In this sense, it makes perfectly good sense when Morton claims that OOO "is the first western view to embrace nothingness with no hesitation

⁷³ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 82.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁷⁵ Harman, "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy", 143.

⁷⁶ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 47.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Morton, "This is not my beautiful biosphere", 232.

⁸⁰ See Morton, "Buddhaphobia: Nothingness and the Fear of Things", 203, 231, 242.

whatsoever”.⁸¹ Yet, if reality consists of objects wrapped in objects, wrapped in objects⁸² is nothing itself an object or is it less than an object but more than absolutely nothing? If Tillich is right and nothingness is impossible to objectify, what we get is merely approximations – different phenomenal translations of nothing which is not merely nothing but something – something which does not consist of anything but something that has certain effects without being identical to these effects. The abyss, the cracks, the infrastructure and interrelations might be of the same kin – only chunks of nothing which is not nothing.⁸³ Maybe nothing is the most powerful and extreme object there is, because it is wholly other than what it is, since it is not – it does not consist of anything, it does not exist, and yet it is everywhere. *Nothing is the everywhere of everything and every-thing which is every-where.*

So far, we have traced two kinds of nothing in the framework of OOO: *infrastructural nothing* which is primary and *interrelational nothing*, which is secondary, since the latter is derived from the former. Nothing is a *where* that lacks any determinate location. It is a *where* which is *everywhere*. It is a nothing which is not merely nothing but something and it concerns the withdrawal or inaccessibility of the RO. If we return to Morton, we can say that objects are non-objects in the sense that they are contradictory entities – they are themselves and not-themselves, they are $p \wedge \neg p$, they appear and they withdraw.⁸⁴ *Nothing* is the “non-”, the “not-”, the “–” and the “withdrawal”. Like in Haufniensis’ description of Adam, where anxiety is both considered a *friendly force* that constitutes the relation as self-relation (Adam) but also a *foreign power* that interrupts the relation (not-Adam), Morton defines Nothingness as an entity in me that is not me.⁸⁵ The demarcation between inside and outside, me and not-me is operative but impossible to determine. The friend-foe uncertainty of anxiety is akin to the gap between appearance and withdrawal and is best captured by the idea of the Möbius strip: “A thing is not its appearance. Yet it appears just this way [...] It is like following a Möbius strip, a non-orientable surface on which it is impossible to specify a front or back, inside or outside”.⁸⁶ When Morton talks about *interobjective space*, i.e., the realm of appearance where objects can interact, he refers to this space with a metaphor borrowed from Schelling, i.e., the *abyss*.⁸⁷ This space is defined as “the possibility space of causality as such”.⁸⁸ In this sense, every object is not only substantial and relational simultaneously but also “something at all” and “nothing whatsoever”.

Granted, we can only speculate about what the internal kingdom of the RO is like. If the RO holds something in reserve in order to leave room for emergence, the unknowable inner realm must be a kind of *SPP*, i.e., the condition for the possibility of notes escaping the event horizon of the object uniting in assemblages or giving birth to new objects, etc.⁸⁹ In short, change or emergence requires possibility at the heart of the RO. If this is true, OOO does not only globalize Kant’s notion of finitude (thing-in-itself vs. thing-for-us) to count for all relations whatsoever but also Kierkegaard’s abyss as an *SPP* not in terms of human freedom but as the qualification of the surplus/withdrawal of the RO. Without referring to Kierkegaard explicitly, Morton touches upon the very same definition when he qualifies withdrawal as the unknowable essence of a thing in terms of futurity or pure possibility.⁹⁰ Withdrawal is *openness*.⁹¹ In this sense, the *SPP* must be a “bounded openness”. It must be bounded due to the unified structure of the

⁸¹ Ibid., 233.

⁸² Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 85.

⁸³ Last semester, I taught a course in Metaphysics at the BA level. After a lecture on Meillassoux, one of my students approached me after class and asked whether we could understand the notion of *hyperchaos* in terms of “Nothing’s more potent older brother?” I thought the comparison was funny and quite accurate.

⁸⁴ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 27, 31, 32.

⁸⁵ Morton, “Buddhaphobia: Nothingness and the Fear of Things”, 189.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 249.

⁸⁷ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 178.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 185.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 215.

⁹¹ Ibid.

object (*one thing* in contrast to *another thing*). It must be open in order to allow emergence without becoming determinable or fixed.

6 Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have tried to pose three questions or challenges for OOO. The first concerned the division of “ontology” and “metaphysics” in the general project of OOO. If we are allowed to distinguish between objects as such (everything) and their shared structure on the one hand and the individual object (each thing) and their differences on the other, how do these levels intermix? The second question concerned the very definition of existence as such. What does it mean for something, anything to exist? The final question was related to the second and was concerned with the theory of everything. Is nothing included in the notion of everything? Does nothing count as an object or does it not? Does it make up the essence of both the object and the relation between objects? Are infrastructural as well as interrelational nothing just mere versions or caricatures of nothing as such or does this lack of determination, of definition, of positive statements bare witness of nothing without being absolutely nothing? Is OOO a new theory of nothing or does it exclude the notion of nothing? In short, how do matters stand with nothingness – *wie steht es um dieses Nichts*?

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