

Key cross-references: **New Materialism, Post-Humanities, Animism, Ontological Turn, Speculative Realism**

Object-Oriented Ontology

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What do ‘diamonds, rope, neutrons... armies, monsters, square circles, and leagues of real and fictitious armies’ (Harman 2010: 5) and ‘plumbers, cotton, bonobos, DVD players and sandstone’ (Bogost 2012: 6) have in common? The shallow answer to this question is that they all belong to the curious menagerie of *real* and *imaginary* things marshalled by object-oriented ontology (OOO), but the deeper answer is precisely what OOO aims to discover: what can be said of each of these *objects* of thought and talk, and indeed, of every such object, merely in virtue of the fact that it is an object? What are objects *qua* objects?

OOO is neither the only, nor the first philosophical approach to concern itself with this question. On the one hand, beginning with Aristotle, the metaphysical tradition has pursued the study of objects *qua individual substances* – the basic building blocks of reality in which accidents inhere (e.g., a man who may at different times be either wise or foolish, running or sleeping); on the other, beginning with Husserl, the phenomenological tradition has pursued the study of objects *qua intentional objects* – the fundamental units of consciousness through which qualities appear (e.g., an apple that may at once appear red, shiny, and even sweet and juicy). However, although OOO is influenced by both classical metaphysics (Leibniz as much as Aristotle) and phenomenology (Heidegger as much as Husserl), it differs from each in a crucial respect. On the one hand, it rejects the classical notion that only those objects that *persist* in space and time are true substances (e.g., including transient events, mathematical objects, and fictional characters); on the other, it refuses the phenomenological gesture of reducing the *ontological structure* of objects to the *intentional structure* of our consciousness of them (e.g., allowing that there is more to fictional objects *qua* fictional objects than *how* we think and talk about them).

Prima facie, OOO’s peculiarity lies in this attempt to combine the *descriptive scope* of phenomenology with the *speculative depth* of metaphysics. However, there are also a number of positive claims about the nature of objects that unite the different variants of OOO and distinguish them from other forms of contemporary metaphysics with similar concerns. We will focus on three core ideas: withdrawal, flat ontology, and vicarious causation, explaining them by returning to the origins of OOO in the work of Graham Harman, and addressing the work of the main OOO theorists influenced by him – Levi

Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton – as it becomes relevant.

Harman's object-oriented philosophy (OOP) is the original form of OOO from which other variants descend. OOP has numerous influences beyond those already mentioned (e.g., Whitehead, Latour, Lingis), but it originated in Harman's interpretation of Heidegger's tool-analysis (Harman 2002). Harman finds in this phenomenological description of our encounters with broken tools a general model of relations between objects: one object can *rely* on another (e.g., a person *using* a hammer, an animal *depending* on atmospheric oxygen, a bridge *incorporating* girders), but it does not thereby *exhaust* the underlying capacities on which it depends (i.e., there is more to hammers, oxygen, and girders than their roles in construction, respiration, and architecture), at least insofar as they can *disrupt* these relations (e.g., the hammer breaking, the oxygen igniting, the girders warping). He holds that, if we analyse the moment of breakdown, we can see that what appears to us as broken (the tool as *present-at-hand*) is something other than the executant reality we were relying upon (the tool as *ready-to-hand*). This forms the basis of Harman's distinction between the *sensual objects* we encounter in experience and the *real objects* that hide behind them (Harman, 2010: 20-50). The major innovation underlying Harman's subsequent work is the addition of a further axis of distinction between objects and qualities (e.g., between the man and his wisdom, the apple and its redness), producing a fourfold schema that also includes *sensual qualities* and *real qualities*. The relations between these four poles then constitute a system of ten categories (e.g., space, time, essence, eidos) that supply the technical infrastructure of Harman's metaphysics (*Ibid.*: 95-135).

The emergence of OOO out of OOP was largely spurred by Harman's association with 'speculative realism' (SR), alongside Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Ray Brassier (Bryant et. al. (2011): 1-18). There are questions regarding the extent of the commonalities between these thinkers, and thus the supposed unity of SR (Brassier, 2014), but the most obvious point of contact is their opposition to the pervasive philosophical trend that Meillassoux identifies as 'correlationism' (Meillassoux 2008). Correlationism takes many forms – from its origins in Kant's transcendental idealism, to phenomenology, deconstruction, and social constructivism – but it is characterised by the idea that the world (and its objects) cannot be thought outside of its relation to thought (and its subjects). This results in a prohibition on speculation concerning the world as it is *in itself*, and a reorientation towards critique of the conditions under which the world appears *for us* (e.g., consciousness, language, culture, etc.). However, the realist

opposition to correlationism can be framed in either epistemological or metaphysical terms: *epistemological realism* objects to its skepticism, aiming to demonstrate that things can be known in themselves, whereas *ontological realism* objects to its anthropocentrism, aiming to demonstrate that things can exist in themselves (Bryant, 2012: 13-20).

The thesis that objects *withdraw* from one another has its origin in Harman's initial separation of the sensual and the real. It is articulated slightly differently across the variants of OOO, but we can identify two essential components: first, that every object *exceeds* the ways in which it is presented to other objects, and second, that every object is *independent* of every other object. Excess constitutes OOO's rejection of epistemological realism, insofar as it ensures that there every object has hidden depths that can never be grasped by knowing subjects. Bryant's *onticology* interprets these depths as unactualised potential – or *virtual proper being* (Bryant 2012: 87-134). Bogost's *alien phenomenology* interprets them as subjective interiority – or *what it is like to be them* (Bogost 2012: 61-84). Though these theories are distinct, they can be seen as engaging different aspects of Harman's theory of real qualities (Wolfendale 2014: 135-162). By contrast, Morton's main contribution is his account of *hyperobjects*: highly complex, massively distributed, and extensively entangled phenomena (e.g., supermassive blackholes, global warming, and evolution) that manifestly transcend our everyday understanding of things (Morton 2013b). Independence underwrites OOO's defence of ontological realism, insofar as it ensures that no object is constituted by its relation to a knowing subject. It also forms the basis of OOO's revival of substance: prioritising individuality and discreteness over relationality and continuity, in opposition to many strands of contemporary metaphysics (e.g., actor network theory, process philosophy, and related new materialisms) (Shaviro 2011).

The commitment to *flat ontology* is also interpreted in different ways, but can equally be broken down into two components: first, the *liberal* principle that everything that can be taken to exist should be taken to exist (e.g., Popeye, the East India Company, the empty set), and second, the *egalitarian* principle that everything exists in the same sense, or that no objects should be granted special ontological status (e.g., no ultimate cause, no fundamental atoms, no absolute totality). Ontological liberalism is most emphasised by Bogost (Bogost 2012: 11), and is essentially just the concern with descriptive scope discussed earlier. Ontological egalitarianism is most emphasised by Bryant (Bryant 2011: 279-290), and is responsible for the anti-anthropocentrism behind OOO's ontological realism, insofar as the possession of a unique capacity to know other objects is seen as an illegitimate ontological privilege. These concerns with treating every object equally and

every object *equally* are shared by other contemporary metaphysicians (e.g., Markus Gabriel and Tristan Garcia), but it is the conclusion that relations between objects should be modelled on those between subjects and objects that sets OOO apart from them. Conversely, the same universalisation of subjectivity creates an affinity with panpsychists, vitalists, and new materialists not committed to ontological liberalism (e.g., Deleuze) or substance metaphysics (e.g., Jane Bennett). However, what makes OOO unique is its peculiar synthesis of epistemological and ontological humility: we can't know anything in itself, but we aren't special in this regard, and so things in themselves can't know each other (Wolfendale 2014: 341-374).

Finally, the theory of *vicarious causation* attempts to reconcile the thesis that objects withdraw from one another with their obvious ability to interact with and thereby change one another, by explaining how their sensual facades *mediate* between them (Harman 2007). Harman does this by modelling causation on the deliberately indirect allusion to an object provided by metaphor (e.g., 'the cypress is a flame') as opposed to the supposedly direct knowledge provided by literal description (e.g., 'the cypress is coniferous'). He holds that in such encounters the *allure* of the sensual object grants us indirect access to the real object, insofar as it enables the latter to affect us. He thereby proposes a theory of indirect causation understood in terms of the emotional intensity produced by aesthetic experience (Wolfendale 2014: 97-105). Bryant develops an alternative theory based on systems theory and the idea that objects *translate* external perturbations into internal information (Bryant 2012: 153-162), but Bogost and Morton each subscribe to Harman's approach. Furthermore, though Harman uses his theory to motivate the claim that aesthetics is first philosophy (Harman 2007), it is Morton who pursues this idea furthest, proposing an expanded aesthetic theory of causation as 'magic' founded on a rejection of the principle of non-contradiction (Morton 2013a).

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