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Graham Harman, Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything

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Graham Harman,   *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything.* St. Ives: Pelican Books, 2018; 295 pages. ISBN: 978-0241269152.

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Graham Harman is best known for being the founder of "Object-Oriented Ontology" (OOO), a contemporary form of philosophical realism committed to the exploration of the intrinsic being of "objects," broadly understood. In his recent work, entitled *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, the prolific author offers an introductory synthesis and development of OOO's central ideas. The work itself is divided into a short introductory section followed by seven chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect of the movement's concerns.

After a brief overview of the main ideas and rationale behind OOO, Harman begins by differentiating OOO's "theory of everything" from the one offered by contemporary science. Harman boldly claims that the latter is unable to provide such a theory, since it falsely assumes that anything that exists must be physical ("physicalism"), simple ("smallism"), real ("anti-fictionalism"), and stateable in direct propositional language ("literalism"). Therefore, it ultimately discounts a vast swath of entities—or as Harman would prefer it, "objects"—which do not fit its stringent categories. Contrastingly, OOO's "theory of everything" is committed to a pluralist view, where atoms, Sherlock Holmes, a pot, Pi, pie, a pen, and the Dutch East India Company command equal dignity *qua* "object" even if not all of them are necessarily real. Given this unusually broad melange of different objects, we might wonder what it means for something to be an "object" in this specific sense. As Harman clarifies, OOO gives the term "object" an especially broad scope, taking it to refer to whatever is ontologically irreducible. In other words, anything may be said to be an object as long as it cannot be reduced downward—"undermined"—into nothing more than its ultimate component pieces (*e.g.* "physicalism" and "smallism"), or reduced upward—"overmined"—into nothing more than its relations and effects on humans or other objects (*e.g.* "anti-fictionalism" and "literalism").

These forms of "mining" philosophies may be dubbed OOO's "negative" theses of objects—even if Harman himself does not use such a description—insofar as they seek to account for what an object *is not* within an OOO framework. Nonetheless, the latter may also be said to identify more "positive" features of objects, leading in turn to a "quadruple" model referenced throughout the book. In a nutshell, this model distinguishes between *real* and *sensual* objects (RO and SO). The former objects are said to exist autonomously from their relations, while the latter ones only exist in relation to some other object, whether human or otherwise. Furthermore, he claims that each of these objects exists in tension with its own respective real and sensual traits (RQ and SQ). Together, what I here call the "negative" and "positive" theses of objects constitute the cornerstone of OOO and, as the book progresses, Harman often brings them to bear on the different aspects of OOO under discussion. As the subtitle of the book clearly indicates, Harman's hope is to be able to explain the basic structure of all and any possible existing "object" using this fourfold schema as his guide.

One of the central OOO theses emphasised and developed throughout Harman's book is that all individual objects—whether human or otherwise—must be thought of as existing in *total excess* of their relations. Nevertheless, he simultaneously insists that objects must be able somehow to encounter and influence one another, for otherwise change and affect would be unachievable. This simultaneous commitment to complete autonomy and inter-objective influence in turn entails that all possible interaction between objects must be indirect or "vicarious," occurring via the mediation of an "aesthetic" or "sensual façade" (SO/SQ), which also serves as the medium for the oblique transference of qualities between objects. This is the heart of Harman's account of causality, and it is one of the central problems that his object-based ontology must tackle.

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Pour obéir à un ordre deux choses au moins sont requises : il faut comprendre l'ordre et il faut comprendre qu'il faut lui obéir. Et pour faire cela, il faut déjà être l'égal de celui qui vous commande. C'est cette égalité qui ronge tout ordre naturel.

— Rancière, La mésentente

This account of causality yields at least two far-reaching consequences, detailed in the second and fourth chapters, respectively. First, OOO opposes the prevalent assumption that contact between objects must be either direct (i.e., "literal") or impossible. Against this form of flawed binary thinking, it boldly argues for the priority of aesthetics as both a creative means for the creation of new objects and as an indirect, and hence "anti-literalist" means of alluding to the real. In the second chapter, Harman homes in on metaphorical language and suggests that an analogous mechanism is at work in every real interaction between objects. In sum, he holds that a metaphor such as "the cypress is a flame" as a whole produces a new third space, through which flame qualities detach from an underlying flame-object and "allude" to a concealed cypress-object. Second, Harman emphasises a crucial distinction between knowledge and aesthetic forms of cognition. He describes the former as "justified untrue belief" insofar as it ultimately constitutes a useful albeit reductive enterprise and is thus considered by Harman to be a form of "mining." (180) Contrastingly, he describes aesthetics as an "unjustified true belief," insofar as it allows us to hint or allude to an underlying reality without attempting to render it directly present. (180) This claim, along with his claim that all causation is aesthetic in nature, in turn gives the reader a better sense of OOO's reason for its emphasis on the priority of aesthetics. In contrasting the latter to knowledge, Harman therefore also links the ideas covered here to those of chapter two. The account of causality and aesthetics is one of the more difficult aspects of his theory, and while Harman develops his arguments in a clear and cogent manner throughout both these chapters, the work as a whole would have benefitted by bringing the content of two chapters closer together in order to better illustrate the connection between the analysis of metaphorical language developed in the second chapter and that of cognition developed in the fourth.

Among his numerous publications, Harman has produced two separate texts dealing with the social and political implications of OOO. In his account of "Society and Politics," Harman provides a convenient summary of the views detailed in these works, while also developing several fresh examples to sustain his views. As in his previous works on politics, Harman largely frames his analysis in relation to Bruno Latour's "Actor-Network Theory" (ANT), a close ally of Harman's own theory. Overall, the chapter is crisp yet detailed enough to give the reader a clear idea of OOO's central social and political position. In keeping with its unwavering dedication to the existence of autonomous individual objects, OOO's socio-political commitments are largely founded on the following: first, Harman insists that any robust social or political philosophy must lay emphasis on the independent existence of compound social entities as new objects in their own right, rather than being nothing more than the transient effects of human relations. Second, he underscores the importance of considering the crucial role of non-human objects in the creation and sustenance of social and political reality. Thus, rather than advocating a specifically radical, democratic, liberal, or conservative political position, Harman's "object-oriented politics" is founded on the staunch rejection of "human-centred" positions, which see politics as the exclusive product of human history and relations. Instead, it invites us to consider the possibility of political transformation which is firmly "grounded in reality" and thus faces up to the imminent challenges of our present day. (146)

In many of his publications, Harman emphasises his divergence from other influential contemporary philosophers. In the fifth chapter of this book, he focuses on the differences between OOO and the work of "rival" thinkers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. In brief, Harman characterizes both as staunch "anti-realists" and hence "anti-object-oriented" thinkers. The former is said to deny the independent reality and identity of individual objects in favour of a reduction of beings to nothing more than a series of differentially constituted surface manifestations. The latter is in turn said to "overmine" objects by treating them as nothing more than relational by-products of discourse and power. At stake here is really the question of to what degree these thinkers approaches and that of those who are influenced by them are or can be made compatible with the recent turn to realism in continental thought. While I undoubtedly concur with Harman that the work of these thinkers has, bar a few exceptions, mostly been represented in a way not easily amenable with the forms of philosophical realism being developed in continental philosophy, there is also much work to be done on this issue, and it is my hope that Harman's relatively short critique here might encourage scholars to pursue such work.

In the concluding portion of the book, Harman provides the reader with an overview of the different approaches to "object-oriented ontology." This chapter is useful in highlighting the similarities and differences between thinkers, whose work has explicitly been classified as OOO (Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton), as well as thinkers who share enough conceptual similarities with OOO to be loosely considered "object-oriented" thinkers in their own right (Jane Bennett and Tristan Garcia). The final section of this chapter is interesting in that it briefly considers the work of architects who have in one way or another contributed to OOO's vast influence in the field of architecture (Erik Ghenoiu, Jeff Kipnis, David Ruy, Tom Wiscombe, and Mark Foster Gage). The chapter highlights how any position may qualify as "object-oriented"—for as long as it lays emphasis on the dignity of individual objects, even if it does not ultimately shore up this commitment with the details of Harman's specific position, a position would be, on Harman's account, object-oriented.

Harman's objective in this work was to present a comprehensive yet introductory guide to OOO aimed at a broad readership. This is also one of the goals of the Pelican Book series, one that *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* achieves admirably, In addition, this work contains enough innovations on his previous ideas to keep even the most avid reader of Harman interested. The ideas he progressively articulates and develops throughout the book are profound, dynamic, and insightful; however, the author also manages to present them in a typically refreshing and approachable style, which is likely to appeal to readers who are new to OOO and to seasoned object-oriented veterans alike.

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