

MORE MONIST IDEALISM:
Review of Graham Harman's BELLS AND WHISTLES

by Terence Blake

Argument: Graham Harman judges science and common sense in terms of the crude philosophical criteria of another age and finds them lacking in knowledge of reality. He posits a shadowy "withdrawn" realm of real objects in order to explain the discrepancies between his naive abstract model of knowledge as access and the concrete reality of the sciences. Works such as THE QUADRUPLE OBJECT, THE THIRD TABLE and BELLS AND WHISTLES, like the whole of his philosophy, are the record of Harman noticing the discrepancies, but refusing to revise the model. His solution is a dead-end, the timid, nostalgic, and fundamentally misleading propounding of an antiquated epistemology under the cover of a "new" ontology.

OOO: A DEMI-POST-STRUCTURALISM

1) NOSTALGIA FOR THE STRUCTURE vs DECONSTRUCTION ALL THE WAY DOWN

We are living through a period of intellectual regression in the realm of Continental Philosophy, a new regression that proclaims itself to be a decisive progress beyond the merely negative and critical philosophies of the recent past. Yet the pluralist philosophies of Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard cannot be summed up in the one-sided image of pure critique. Their critical dissolution of the dogmatic residues contained in even the most innovative philosophies they had encountered did not leave us in a powerless void of negativity and paralysis. Their "deconstruction" went all the way down, deconstructing even the notion of critique and liberating the possibility of new assemblages and new processes of subjectivation. Beyond the critique of the new figures of transcendence and ontotheology they gave concrete sketches of how to see the world in terms of a very different sort of ontology based on immanence - a diachronic ontology.

2) OOO AS REGRESSIVE SUCCESSION

The recent promotion of philosophical successors to this constellation of thinkers of immanence, such as Badiou and

Zizek, has not led to any real progress but to a labour of travesty of the past (one has only to look at Badiou's DELEUZE and Zizek's ORGANS WITHOUT BODIES) and to a return to such intellectual dead-ends as Lacanian psychoanalysis. But even these regressive philosophers remain in dialogue, however one-sided and unjust, with their illustrious predecessors, and strive to confront them at the level of conceptual richness that characterised their work.

3) OOO AS POP FORMALISM

The next step was taken by the epigoni: Meillassoux, who still retains an elevated style and at least an intention of conceptual rigour; and its pop variant in Harman's adaptation of Badiou's formalist ontology for the masses. The method was to keep up the general aura of having "gone beyond" the older supposedly negative thinkers but to radically simplify the conceptual level, presenting easy summary presentations of the new thought while conveniently forgetting the conceptual paths followed.

4) DEMI-POST-STRUCTURALISM

Thus certain figures have emerged in Continental Philosophy that occupy a conceptual space that is halfway between structuralism and post-structuralism. One could call them demi-post-structuralists. Badiou is a good example, with his

mathematical reductionism. Still stuck in the problematic space opened up by the Althusser-Lacan conjuncture, these thinkers try to privilege Lacan as an alternative way out of structuralism yet they try to "rationalise" their problematic by appeals to notions of speculative knowledge based on methodological rigour.

5) ONTOLOGICAL CRITIQUE IS A FORMALISM

The problem with the primacy of formalist method is that it is not content neutral. A formal method makes substantive claims about its domains of application coded into it. The opponents of "method" are not crazy spontaneity-addicted narcissists but people like Bohr and Einstein who claimed that the empirical method was either the bottom-up heuristic liberty to explore any hypothesis by means of any suitable procedure or else a post hoc clarification, not an a priori formalist topdown imperative. The stakes do not involve blindly insisting on the priority of creation, but imply having a place for the possibility of novelty and creation versus closing off in advance some possible developments, often without even noticing.

6) BADIOU REMARKETISED:

SET-THEORETIC REDUCTION FOUNDS OOO'S AFFECTIVE REDUCTION

One can agree with both Mehdi Belhaj Kacem and Alexander Galloway that it is Badiou's set theoretic philosophy that

expresses in its purest and most general form the new paradigm that articulates explicitly what is elsewhere just blithely presupposed as a form of thought too evident to even be aware of. They indicate that the next step in consolidating the regression that Badiou's philosophy, however innovative, does not initiate but rather registers and legitimates, corresponds to the far less ambitious productions of the object-oriented ontologists. I say far less "ambitious" in the sense of conceptual ambition, because their ambition is of a different order. They are the marketised version of the Badiou-Zizek constellation, and so the extremely politicised tone has been discreetly dissolved to leave a more demagogic packaging to the stale ideas that OOO trumpets ambitiously as the new construction after so much critique. They promulgate a dumbed down de-marxised version of the set-theoretic universe explicated by Badiou.

7) OOO AS SYNCHRONIC ONTOLOGY LAGS BEHIND LARUELLE'S NON-STANDARD PHILOSOPHY

It is normal that in this context François Laruelle's philosophy is at last coming into its own. It could not fully succeed while the work of Deleuze and Derrida were in progress, as his critiques of that work were only half-true, based on giving it an ultimately uncharitable reading as remaining within

the norms of standard philosophy, and refraining from considering other possible readings. Laruelle has pursued over the decades his unwavering commitment to immanence and his critique of sufficient philosophy, and this project shines forth now against the background of the regression that Badiou-Zizek-Meillassoux and the OOOxians represent.

8) OOO AS SYNCHRONIC ONTOLOGY LAGS BEHIND LATOUR'S COMPOSITIONISM

Despite his insinuations to the contrary, Bruno Latour with his compositionism is the direct application of deconstructionist and post-structuralist thought, which he is very familiar with. His talk about his "empirical" research is very misleading and contains overtones of scientific bravado, as his system is in many places a logical continuation of the work of on these predecessors. He is however a good populariser of good ideas, and his work should be encouraged as long as we do not accept his own contextualisation of his ideas. Latour is very much an inheritor of Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, and Serres, and also the intellectual contemporary of Laruelle and Stiegler. It is this philosophical inheritance that gives his work its superiority over Badiou's and of Harman's, not any primacy of the empirical over the philosophical.

9) OOO AS SYNCHRONIC ONTOLOGY LAGS BEHIND BERNARD STIEGLER'S

PHARMACOLOGY

Bernard Stiegler is actively re-reading and re-thinking thinkers such as Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Derrida because he finds that despite the conceptual advances achieved by this generation they represent also a degree of failure in not helping us think adequately the transformations in the economy and in digital technologies that are impacting our lives and requiring of us a new orientation in our existences. Unlike Bruno Latour, Stiegler is quite up front about the influences on his ideas and the need to re-read such philosophical sources with new eyes, i.e. in relation to contemporary events.

10) HARMAN'S ONTOLOGICAL CRITIQUE IS TECHNOCRATIC FORMALISM

Bernard Stiegler has argued that it is regrettable that in Continental Philosophy a direct confrontation with Althusser's positions on the science-ideology distinction never took place. This non-engagement with Althusser's dualist and demarcationist epistemology left the field free not just for scientism (or its binary opposite, relativism) but also unprotected from the hegemony of technocrats and the tyranny of experts, and also from the primacy of management over politics. A distant consequence of this neglect has been the rise of Graham Harman's OOO packaged as contemporary Continental Philosophy when it is

in fact its exact opposite, a regression to a form of Althusserism, only de-marxed, depoliticised, and de-scientised.

11) HARMAN CANNOT UNDERSTAND SCIENTIFIC ANTI-REDUCTIONISM

For example, in THE THIRD TABLE Graham Harman gives a popularised version his own theoretical position in the form of a flawed reading of and an unsatisfying response to Sir Arthur Eddington's famous paradox of the two tables. Unfortunately, Harman shows himself incapable of grasping the anti-reductionistic import of Eddington's argument and proposes an abstract philosophical dualism to replace Eddington's pluralist vision of scientific research. It is tacitly implied that the theoretical justification for this unsatisfying presentation is to be found elsewhere in Harman's works, but this is not the case.

12) HARMAN CANNOT UNDERSTAND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANTIREDUCTIONISM

Harman's position is one of a surface pluralism (for Harman there are multiple régimes of knowing for an Object) overcoded by a deep monism and demarcationism (the humanist, the scientific, and the common sense objects are "simulacra", only the withdrawn object is real) embedded in a synchronic ontological frame (time is not an ontologically pertinent feature of real objects).

13) OOO: ONTOLOGICAL ACTIVISM, POLITICAL PASSIVISM

Today, object-oriented philosophy is at a loss. Its hackneyed set of critical terms (philosophy of access, shams and simulacra, lavalampy overmining, atomistic undermining, streams of becoming, correlationism) clearly have no point of application at all to the new lines of research opened up in recent Continental Philosophy by major thinkers such as Bruno Latour, Bernard Stiegler, and François Laruelle. One has only to look at the utter incomprehension that OOOxians manifest with regard to Laruelle's non-philosophy to see that their claim to "move beyond" deconstruction is an empty bluff.

**14) OOO'S FAILED ENCOUNTERS: TRAVESTY OF THE PAST,
INCOMPREHENSION OF THE PRESENT**

The OOOxians never understood the arguments of their philosophical predecessors, despite their pretensions to being the contemporary response to and inheritors of the philosophies of deconstruction and of post-structuralism that flourished at the end of the last century. Thus they are illequipped to engage the ideas of the true creative successors. Far from inaugurating a new more constructive philosophy that builds on the positive achievements of the past while rectifying or abandoning its erroneous problematics and procedures, Graham Harman's BELLS AND

WHISTLES: MORE SPECULATIVE REALISM is a sterile compendium of OOO's familiar but disappointing history of misunderstandings and failed encounters, and its publication is a fitting funerary monument to a set of affective gesticulations that never quite cohered into a philosophy.

20 THESES ON GRAHAM HARMAN'S ABSTRACT MONIST IDEALISM

1) OOO is an abstract monism

Harman's ontology reduces the multiplicity and abundance of the world to "emergent" unities that exclude other approaches to and understandings of the world - his objects are the "only real" objects, all the rest are "utter shams". More importantly, his own (philosophical) knowledge of objects is the only real knowledge. All that is ordinarily thought of as knowledge, both theoretical and practical, is also utter sham: "Human knowledge deals with simulacra or phantoms, and so does human practical action" (BELLS AND WHISTLES, 12). Harman's "realism" de-realises everything except his own abstract knowledge and his withdrawn objects.

2) OOO is profoundly reductionist

Repeatedly, Harman goes to great lengths to criticise a generic but non-existent "reductionism", yet he seems to have no idea what reductionism is. He easily wins points against straw

men, and then proceeds to advocate one of the worst forms of reductionism imaginable: the reduction of the abundance of the world to an abstract hidden realm of untouchable, unknowable, yet intelligible, "objects".

3) The withdrawn real object is an abstraction

Harman produces a highly technical concept of object such that it replaces the familiar objects of the everyday world, and the less familiar objects of science, with something "deeper" and "inaccessible", because withdrawn. These real objects have none of the empirical predicates of common sense experience or of scientific observation and research, they are mere abstract posits.

4) Harman's terminology is equivocal

In 000 words do not mean what they seem to. Harman equivocates with the familiar connotations and associations of "object" to give the impression that he is a concrete thinker, when the level of abstraction takes us to the heights of a new form of negative theology: the invisible, unknowable, ineffable object that withdraws. No concrete example can be given, as it would be taken from the sensual, i.e. sham, realm. Yet Harman repeatedly gives examples, which in his own terms is the very category mistake that his philosophy is designed to prevent.

5) OOO is ontological nihilism: there are no "real objects" in Harman's sense

No example of a real object can be given. All that is given in experience, all that is contained in our common sense and scientific knowledge, all that we can see and touch and create and love is "utter sham", "simulacra", "phantoms". All that we know, including what we know about ourselves, is unreal. All our hopes and joys, all our suffering and struggle, all that we strive for and value belong to the world of illusion. Nothing from the empirical world (none of its objects or properties or relations) is real, so Harman is left with nothing to populate his real world. Harman's ontology of the real is empty. There are no "real objects", this expression is an empty place-marker in Harman's ontological formalism.

6) OOO is a school philosophy

Harman's OOO is by no means a return to "naïveté" and to the objects of our experience OOO deals in generalities and abstractions far from the concrete joys and struggles of real human beings ("The world is filled primarily not with electrons or human praxis, but with ghostly objects withdrawing from all human and inhuman access", THE THIRD TABLE, 12). Despite its promises, Harman's OOO does not bring us closer to the richness

and complexity of the real world but in fact replaces the multiplicitous and variegated world of science and common sense with a set of bloodless and lifeless abstractions ("simulacra", "phantoms", "ghostly objects").

7) OOO's real objects do not withdraw, they transcend

For Harman, we cannot know the real object. The object we know is unreal, a sham, a "simulacrum". Real objects transcend our perception and our knowledge, they transcend all relations and interactions.

8) WITHDRAWAL IS VERTICAL: OOO's ontology of real objects is not flat

Harman says repeatedly that real objects are "deep", deeper than their appearance to the human mind, deeper than their relations to one another, deeper than any theoretical or practical encounter with them. This "depth" of the real is a key part of Harman's ontology, as is its transcendence. Harman's OOO is not flat at all, but centered on this vertical dimension of depth and transcendence.

9) Harman's real object is epistemically ambiguous

The epistemological status of OOO's real objects is unclear, oscillating between the idea of an absolutely

unknowable, uncapturable reality and the idea that it can be captured in some very abstract and indirect way. In virtue of the unknowability of his objects he is obliged to place all types of knowledge, including the scientific one on the same plane (knowledge of "simulacra or phantoms"), as illusory, and at the same time presume that we can know something about these objects (e.g. that they exist, and that they withdraw).

10) OOO claims to know the unknowable

Philosophical intellection in Harman's system has the contradictory role of knowing ontologically the real, as that which withdraws from knowing. In effect, science is demoted to the status of non-knowledge, as the real cannot be known. Harman is caught in a series of contradictions, as he wants to have his unknowable reality and yet to know it. Common sense cannot know reality, nor the humanities, nor even science.

11) OOO is an epistemology masquerading as an ontology

The basis of Harman's system is an epistemological critique of so-called "philosophies of access", which leads him to propose an alternative epistemology disguised as an ontology. The masquerade is necessary to give the impression that he has found a solution to what he sees as the impasse of access. Unfortunately no solution is given because Harman is still

moving inside the problematic of access, a problematic which was abandoned by every major philosophy of the 20th Century. To hide the absence of solution Harman is led to posit a solution in a previously unknown ontological dimension. This obfuscation accounts for the strange mixture of ontological and epistemological considerations that characterizes Harman's philosophical style. This generates such contradictions as pretending to accomplish a return to the concrete and giving us in fact abstraction, and pretending to criticize reduction and in fact performing an even more radical reduction.

11) OOO is epistemological relativism

Harman's epistemology is relativist, demoting science to an instance of the general relativism of forms of knowledge, all belonging to the world of simulacra. However, by fiat, his own philosophical intellection and some artistic procedures are partially excluded from this relativisation. Yet no criterion of demarcation is offered. Harman dixit must suffice.

12) For OOO real knowledge is impossible

Harman judges science in terms of the crude philosophical criteria of another age and finds it lacking in knowledge of reality. He is then obliged to posit a shadowy "withdrawn" realm of real objects to explain the discrepancies between his naive

abstract model of knowledge as access and the reality of the sciences. BELLS AND WHISTLES), like the whole of his philosophy, is the record of Harman noticing the discrepancies, but refusing to revise the model. His solution is a dead-end, a timid, nostalgic action propounding an antiquated epistemology under the cover of a "new" ontology.

13) OOO is idealism

Graham Harman proclaims that his philosophy is realist, when it is one of the most thoroughly idealist philosophies imaginable. Time is unreal, and so is every common sense object and every physical object. All are declared to be "simulacra". "Space", one may object, is real for Harman, but that is no space one would ever recognise: neither common sense space nor physical space (both "simulacra"), Harmanian space is an abstract "withdrawn" intelligible space.

14) Ontology is not primary for Harman

Harman's real polemic is in the domain of epistemology against a straw man position that he calls the philosophy of human access. No important philosophy of at least the last 50 years is a philosophy of access, so the illusion of a revolution in thought is an illusion generated by the misuse of the notion of "access", inflating it into a grab-all concept under which

anything and everything can be subsumed. But a philosophy of non-access is still epistemological, in Harman's case it takes the form of a pessimistic negative epistemology that subtracts objects from meaningful human theoretical knowledge and practical intervention (cf. THE QUADRUPLE OBJECT, where Egypt itself is declared to be an object, albeit, strangely enough, a "non-physical" one, and so unknowable and untouchable).

15) Knowledge and practice are illusory: radical change is impossible

One consequence of the reduction of knowledge and practice to the status of empty phantasms and illusions of access is that global change is impossible. The ontological neutralisation of our knowledge is allied to its practical (and thus political) neutralisation. This explains Harman's inability to deal with critiques such as that of Alexander Galloway, by any means other than denial.

16) OOO is conceptually incoherent and terminologically confused

Harman systematically confuses access, contact, relation and interaction. His argument to establish the inability of relational ontologies to explain change exhibits rather his inability to understand relations and to make simple conceptual

distinctions.

17) How can a withdrawn object "de-withdraw"?

Harman cannot explain any interaction at all, in terms of his system. One is entitled to ask: how can a withdrawn object "de-withdraw"? He can only just posit such de-withdrawal, which is why his system is condemned to be a dualist rewrite of more complex relational thinking. Withdrawal is absolute, universal, a priori, and non-empirical. There are no degrees of withdrawal. Harman just postulates an absolute bifurcation between interaction on the one hand and withdrawal on the other. Harman cannot think withdrawal or its opposite (interaction) as an empirical concept applying only in certain circumstances.

18) Discontinuities are mis-described by "withdrawal"

Harman cannot think that withdrawal is itself one type of relation amongst many others, and that it constitutes only one variant of the more general class of discontinuous relations. In contrast, Whitehead tells us that: "continuity is a special condition arising from the society of creatures which constitute our immediate epoch" (PROCESS AND REALITY, 36).

19) Withdrawal replaces complex distinctions with a simple pseudo-concept

The notion of cuts, jumps, ruptures, intervals, or discontinuities is a far more useful concept than the wholesale bifurcation operated by the notion of "withdrawal", which is both too simple and too absolute (there are no degrees of withdrawal, all withdrawal is of the same type, there are no special conditions for withdrawal, it is a purely non-empirical concept) and splits the world in two (real/sensual). Harman's system is too absolute with its summary dualisms to be able to deal with the fine-grained distinctions that come up in our experience.

20) OOO's realm of real objects is a de-qualified and de-quantified void

Real objects are not qualifiable in terms of the empirical predicates of common sense or of science, both declared to be reductionist. Nor are real objects quantifiable. In BELLS AND WHISTLES Harman declares several times that explaining things in terms of mathematical structures is reductionist. So finally his real objects are neither qualitatively distinct (in terms of empirical predicates belonging to the phantasmatic realms of common sense, the humanities, the sciences, and even mathematics), nor are they numerically or quantitatively distinct (as mathematics is itself a reductionist phantasm). So Harman's real realm is a de-qualified and de-quantified void and

his philosophy is an intellectually debased form of nihilism.

THE SR/OO PROPAGANDA "TUTORIAL"

1) Primacy: transcendental philosophy vs empirical research

One of the biggest objections to OOO concerns the question of primacy, which remains moot in contemporary philosophy. Harman's ontological turn gives primacy to (transcendental, meta-level) philosophy. Feyerabend articulates a Machian position, one that gives primacy neither to philosophy nor to physics, but defends the open-mindedness of empirical (though not necessarily scientific) research.

2) Research is transversal

This can be clarified by examining Feyerabend's defense of the "way of the scientist" as against the "way of the philosopher". Feyerabend's references to Mach (and to Pauli) show that this "way of the scientist" is transversal, not respecting the boundaries between scientific disciplines nor those between the sciences and the humanities and the arts. So it is more properly called the "way of research". Feyerabend talks of Mach's ontology's "disregard for distinctions between areas of research. Any method, any type of knowledge could enter the discussion of a particular problem" (p197).

3) Ernst Mach: Positivist vs Pluralist

Ernst Mach is often seen as a precursor of the logical positivists, an exponent of the idea that "things" are logical constructions built up out of the sensory qualities that compose the world, mere bundles of sensations. He would thus be a key example of what Graham Harman in *THE QUADRUPLE OBJECT* calls "overmining". Feyerabend has shown in a number of essays that this vision of Mach's "philosophy" (the quotation marks are necessary, according to Feyerabend "because Mach refused to be regarded as the proponent of a new "philosophy"", *SCIENCE IN A FREE SOCIETY*, 192) is erroneous, based on a misreading by the logical positivists that confounds his general ontology with one specific ontological hypothesis that Mach was at pains to describe as a provisional and research-relative specification of his more general proposal.

4) General Methodology

Following Ernst Mach, Feyerabend expounds the rudiments of what he calls a general methodology or a general cosmology (this ambiguity is important: Feyerabend, on general grounds but also after a close scrutiny of several important episodes in the history of physics, proceeds as if there is no clear and sharp

demarcation between ontology and epistemology, whereas Harman, without the slightest case study, asserts the existence of such a dichotomy. Harman's actual practice, I have argued, proceeds by ignoring the distinction and mixing in a confused way epistemological and ontological considerations).

5) MACH'S ONTOLOGY

Feyerabend discusses Mach's ontology in SCIENCE IN A FREE SOCIETY (196-203) and makes it clear that it is one of the enduring inspirations of his work. He claims that Mach's ontology can be summarised in two points:

- i) the world is composed of elements and their relations
- ii) the nature of these elements and their relations is to be specified by empirical research

6) HARMAN'S ONTOLOGY

One may note a resemblance with Graham Harman's ontology, summarised in his "brief SR/000 tutorial", reprinted as Chapter 1 of BELLS AND WHISTLES:

- i) Individual entities of various different scales (not just tiny quarks and electrons) are the ultimate stuff of the cosmos.
- ii) These entities are never exhausted by their relations...Objects withdraw from relation.

7) THE ELEMENTS: Machian openness vs Harmanian closure

The difference is illuminating. Whereas Mach leaves the nature of these elements open, allowing for the exploration of several hypotheses, Harman transcendently reduces these possibilities to one: elements are objects (NB: this reduction of the possibilities to one, enshrined in a transcendental principle, is one of the reasons for calling Harman's OOO an objectal reduction).

8) THE RELATIONS: Absolute Withdrawal vs Degrees and Qualities of Connection and Disconnection

By allowing empirical research to specify the relations, Mach does not give himself an a priori principle of withdrawal: here again "withdrawal" is just one possibility among many. Another advantage of this ontology of unspecified elements is that it allows us to do research across disciplinary boundaries, including that between science and philosophy.

9) TEMPORALITY: Synchronic vs Diachronic

Mach's ontology is diachronic, evolving with and as part of empirical research. Conversely, Harman's ontology is synchronic, dictating and fixing transcendently the elements of the world.

10) INTRA-WORLD REDUCTION: everyone else but Harman is "reductionist"

Harman has invented a new vocabulary to describe various types of reductionism that he believes he has discerned in various philosophical moves. The move of explaining a macroscopic object such as a table in terms of its atomic and sub-atomic is called "undermining". Explaining the table in terms of the flux of perceptions is called "overmining". Harman has recently detected arguments that make both moves at once, so he has baptised them "duomining". A notable feature of all three moves is that their reduction operates inside only one of the worlds that Harman discusses - the world of "utter shams".

11) TRANSWORLD REDUCTION: Harman is a speculative reductionist

But Harman himself operates a different sort of reduction that reduces the reality of one world, the "sham" world of sensual objects, to that of the "real" world of withdrawn objects. As this reduction cuts across both worlds, I propose to call it "transmining". The difference with the preceding is that intra-world reduction is an empirical hypothesis, that is to be tested and to be discarded if it does not hold up to empirical investigation. Harman's objectal reduction is an apodictic posit, invulnerable to empirical testing.

HARMAN'S TEMPORAL DENIALISM: change is "forbidden" by relational ontologies

We come now to one of Harman's more aggressive arguments against pluralist relationism - that it cannot accomodate change. Harman's philosophy in fact denies all reality to time and is an extreme form of spatialised synchronic ontology, yet he projects his difficulty with the concept of real time onto the positions that he supposedly goes beyond:

1) Harman against relational ontologies: change is forbidden

Harman's master argument against relational ontologies is that they cannot explain change, that if everything were related nothing would change. This is patently false, as relations include temporal relations. Deleuze for example talks about both kinetic (relative speeds and accelerations) and dynamic (relative forces, and relative capacities to affect and to be affected) relations. It is ludicrous to claim that Deleuze's system entails that change is impossible.

2) Harman does not understand relations

This forgetting kinetic and dynamic relations, and more generally Harman's confusion over temporal relations shows that

Harman's real world has no place for time and for change and multiplicity. Harman constantly and indiscriminately conflates relations in general with specific subsets of relations such as interactions, and also with specific types of relation such as contact and access.

3) Harman's incomprehension of diachronic ontologies

Harman is unable to understand the positions he is arguing against, and that he is supposed to have gone beyond. He critiques only straw man positions that have never existed. He has no understanding of, for example, Deleuze, and just deprecates his philosophy without getting into any detail.

4) Harman's arguments are affective and not conceptual

Harman gives pseudo-conceptual affective refutations with no citations and no analysis, mere picture-thinking designed to produce the same "eureka" experience as a comparative publicity. There is no substance to Harman's accusation, which is close to an Orwellian parody (from "war is peace" to "time is stasis"). Further, he has given no substantial account of what is wrong with so-called "relational" ontologies in general, except for his master-argument that if everything were related change would be impossible. Harman tries to insinuate that in his ontology change can be accounted for.

5) Time is unreal for Harman

Harman denies the reality of time and so his ontology is synchronic in a very strong sense. His understanding of other philosophers is based on a synchronic reduction of their style. Even his reading (in THE THIRD TABLE) of Eddington's two tables argument falsifies it by extracting it from the whole movement of Eddington's "Introduction" to his book THE NATURE OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD, and from his vision of the movement of research in general.

6) Harman's denial of temporality

Harman just doesn't "get" temporal relations. Hence his repeated, and absurd, claim that if everything was composed of relations nothing would change. As if moving faster or slower than, accelerating faster or slower than, being attracted or repelled or pushed or whirled around were not relations.

HARMAN'S ABSTRACTIVE ONTOLOGY: comparison with

Badiou

1) Harman and the neoliberal hypothesis

We have traversed a period of polarisation during which the neoliberal doxa reigned uncontested almost everywhere, except in

a few academic and para-academic enclaves, where a "refined" or aristocratic critique was elaborated. The philosophical result of the extenuation of this cognitive polarisation is in part the development of an abstractive (and a-political) ontology of objects as legitimation, relay and effectuation of the neoliberal hypothesis (Graham Harman), and in part the elaboration of the subtractive ontology of multiples as legitimation, relay and effectuation of the communist hypothesis (Badiou).

2) Truncated Pluralism and Diachronic Supplement

In both Badiou and Harman we have a truncated form of pluralism: a synchronic ontology of objectal multiples where the diachronic dimension is added on afterwards as a supplement. Badiou has two ontologies grafted together (Being AND the event), Harman has ontologically real objects, and sham time.

3) Unreality of time

For Harman time is not a real relation between real objects, but rather a "sensual" relation between sensual objects, in the illusory domain of simulacra (THE THIRD TABLE calls these sensual objects, i.e. the objects of common sense and of the sciences, "utter shams", BELLS AND WHISTLES calls them "phantoms" and "simulacra). For Badiou time in the strong

sense belongs to the event in the naming intervention, and there also, as for Harman, seems to be dependent, at least in part, on subjectivity.

4) Surface Pluralism and Overcoding Monism

There is also a monism which comes to overcode this ontological pluralism, at both the ontological and the epistemological level. At the material or sensual level we have multiples of multiples or plural objects, prehended in multiple knowledges. At the formal or meta-level we have transcendental restrictive categorisation and the primacy of philosophical intellection.

5) Ontological Monism

For Harman the real is a unique and separate domain, real objects are "withdrawn"; the objects of common sense, of the humanities and of the sciences are pure simulacra. For Badiou the real is the non-qualified mathematical multiple, and the objects of common sense, but also of the sciences and of the "humanities", are constructed out of these multiples (it is to be noted, and this signals an important difference between Badiou's and Harman's systems, that for Badiou these constructed objects are not necessarily simulacra, nor is knowledge of them necessarily sham). In both cases there is ontological primacy of

one domain placed over and above the others. For Badiou the unqualified domain of multiples of multiples has primacy and so Mathematics is ontology. For Harman the domain of real objects is unqualified in terms of knowable common sense or scientific properties, even if it is qualified in terms of its own noumenal properties.

6) Epistemological Monism

For Harman common sense and scientific knowledge do not accede to the reality of objects, the only possible knowledge is indirect and appertains to philosophical intellection or to the arts under the control of object-oriented ontology, which dissipates the ontological and epistemological illusions, such as the naturalist prejudice and the scientistic prejudice. Similarly, for Badiou, to each domain there corresponds a generic and paradigmatic truth-procedure (matheme, poem, political invention, love). Philosophy in Badiou's system is not itself a truth procedure, but serves to assemble the truths of an epoch and to enounce the common configuration of the paradigmatic procedures of the conjuncture and also to dissipate the prejudices resultng from the suture of philosophy to just one of these truth-domains. Badiou here is again more pluralist than Harman, as he recognises the existence of four truth-domains, and not just one.

7) The decline of Harman's abstractive ontology and Badiou's subtractive ontology

Abstractive and subtractive ontologies are in regression compared to the pluralist philosophies of their predecessors. They are the complementary representatives (a politicised communist version in Badiou's case, a "de-politicised" neoliberal version in that of Harman) of truncated pluralism, the synchronic shadow of the diachronic ontologies that they ape without being able to rival in their force of thought.

8) Harman's Badiouianism: Materially Pluralist, Formally Monist

Harman's OOO is a specific variant within the general paradigm set out by Badiou's philosophy. The terminological differences are important. Badiou speaks in terms of multiples and events, Harman in terms of objects. Badiou explicitly emphasises the pluralist aspect of his ontology by the choice of the ontologically basic term of "multiples" and manages to make room for time and change (events), even if he gives them a secondary place in his ontology. Harman prefers the more unitary term of "object", and consigns time and change to the realm of the "sensual", i.e. of shams and simulacra.

HARMAN'S CONFUSIONISM: ambiguous terminology and conceptual conflation

1) HARMAN CONFLATES KNOWLEDGE AND ACCESS

Harman argues against "philosophies of access", but this is just to redo, only much more sloppily, the critical work done by Popper and Sellars, Quine and Kuhn, Bachelard and Feyerabend, Lacan and Althusser, Wittgenstein and Rorty refuting and dismantling the dogmas of empiricism. Far from going beyond the post-structuralists Harman has not even caught up with the structuralists. No important philosophy of the 20th Century has been a philosophy of access, and Harman's OOO is a regression on most of the preceding philosophy that he claims to critique and surpass. Knowledge is not "access".

2) HARMAN CONFLATES RELATIONS AND INTERACTIONS

Knowledge is neither access nor contact. Propositional relations are not access. An interaction is not in general access, either. More importantly, a relation is not the same thing as an interaction. Harman conflates all this to obtain some blurry straw-man that even a 10 year old child would have no trouble refuting. So the whole picture of relations as not "exhausting" the qualities of the object accessed is erroneous. Thus "withdrawal" has no sense as a general concept. These terms

"access", "exhaust" "withdrawal" are normally part of a temporal, dynamic vocabulary. They are used illegitimately in Harman's system and serve to give an allure of temporality to what is in fact an ontology of stasis.

3) HARMAN DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THE PLURALIST CRITIQUES OF MONISM

Harman is so concentrated on criticising the privilege given to human access and to anthropocentric assumptions in general, a rearguard action if ever there was one, that he has no understanding at all for the recent and contemporary pluralist philosophies that attempt to track down and dissolve the privilege given to reified categories and to monist assumptions in general. Harman's ontology falls under the pluralist critiques of the post-structuralists and the post-empiricists.

4) HARMAN'S CONTRADICTIONS ARE DISGUISED BY AMBIGUOUS TERMINOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL CONFLATION

Harman's OOO relies on a systematic ambiguity in his key terms (object, withdrawal) between their use as meta-categories and their use as categories. We can never see or touch or know an object (meta-category) but he constantly gives examples from different domains (category). Withdrawal means ultimate abstraction from sensual qualities and relations, absolutely no

direct contact or relation (meta-category), or it just means the sensual richness of objects, always more than our immediate experience of them. We get a contradictory synthesis between a Northern asceticism and a Mediterranean sensualism. But in the last instance this concrete abundance, this aesthetic sensualism is declared to be an "utter sham".

5) HARMAN'S SYSTEM IS BASED ON HOMOLOGY

It is at the level of his ontology as rudimentary set of meta-categories that the homology of Harman's OOO with speculative capitalism can be affirmed. Badiou accepts the existence of this homology for his own ontology, and takes it very seriously as a problem. Hence his repeated engagement with the concepts of the event and change, requiring him to complete his synchronic ontology with a diachronic supplement. Harman's response is just incomprehension and denialism, as with all the other critiques that his system has received. Nevertheless it is the internal homology between meta-categories and the categories that instantiate them (which makes of Harman's system an elaborate play on words) that makes possible the external homologies between Harman's system and various concrete domains, including the economy.

6) OOO'S PHILOSOPHICAL INTELLECTION HAS PRIMACY: all else is

illusion

The question of primacy remains moot in contemporary philosophy. Despite repeated allusions to the collapse of foundations and the attempt to construct a post-foundationalist philosophy, contemporary thinkers still grapple with this question. One must ask of each philosophy: to what does it give primacy - to philosophy, science, art, religion, or common sense (or to none)? Badiou and Harman give primacy to (transcendental, meta-level) philosophy. Laruelle is more ambiguous, giving primacy to science, yet including non-standard philosophy on the same level as the sciences. Deleuze and Guattari in WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY? are somewhere between the two positions, and so seem to avoid the pitfalls of primacy: they situate philosophy on the same level as the sciences (and the arts) but make philosophy capable of meta-operations that take "functions" in physics (and affects and percepts in the arts) as objects of its own philosophical concepts.

HARMAN'S CONTRADICTIONARY HERMENEUTICS OF SUBJECTIVITY

1) OOO SPLITS EXPERIENCE INTO ABSTRACT INTELLECTION AND CONCRETE ILLUSION

Harman's OOO splits hermeneutic, i.e. participative, exploration of the world into objective speculation (an absolutised and thus "withdrawn" context of justification) and sensual or subjective encounter (an absolutised, and thus "sham", context of discovery). This splitting demotes the subject to the world of shams, which leads to a "return of the repressed", in the form of an implied subjectivity, but one that he is either unaware of or unwilling to endorse explicitly, adapted to the neo-liberal order. Far from eliminating subjectivity from the world of objects Harman's OOO is subtended by an all-pervasive degraded subjectivity masquerading as its opposite. Harman then proceeds to re-subjectify his philosophical vision with expressions connoting a subjectivity that is ruled out by the strict application of that philosophy.

2) WITHDRAWAL CAN BE PARTIALLY OVERCOME: OBJECTUAL LOVE AND THE ART OF OBLIQUITY

Waxing lyrical, Harman talks of how we must love the object: "The real is something that cannot be known, only loved"

(THE THIRD TABLE, 12); thinking must be indirect, "its approach to objects can only be oblique" (12), and "allude to objects that cannot quite be made present" (14). All this talk of loving and hunting and approaching and alluding to, all these expressions are strictly ill-formed. A sensual subject cannot love, hunt, approach, or even allude to a real object. It's not that objects cannot "quite" be made present, they cannot be made present at all. Withdrawal is all or none, it does not admit of degrees.

3) OOO IS A CONTRADICTION MIX OF NOETIC ASCETICISM AND SENSUAL HEDONISM

Yet to give appeal to the theory Harman has need of descriptors of the subjective attitude of those who endorse it. Hence the constant talk of objects that redounds in unthematized subjective participation in the theory as vision of the world. The objectal conversion as the passage to the constructed "naiveté" that sees objects everywhere is thus a subjective conversion to a hard-headed noetic asceticism of intelligible objects coupled with a soft-hearted sensual exoticism of the aesthetic play of simulacra. You can be a geek and an esthete at the same time, with the contradiction being covered up by the medial subjectivity of loving indirectness, of hunterly obliquity, and of diaphonous allusion.

4) OOO PROSCRIBES THE ETHICAL ENCOUNTER

Despite appearances to the contrary, Harman in fact privileges subjectivity in various key aspects of his philosophy: while trying desperately to contain it within his conceptual reductions it seeps out and contaminates the whole with a geeko-esthetic compound subjectivity fusing cold intellectual manipulation and warm sensual enjoyment, thus proscribing the ethical encounter which can be neither merely conceptual nor merely esthetic nor some conflicted hybrid of the two.

5) OOO CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR KNOWLEDGE

Harman is in denial of hermeneutics, and as with his denegation of epistemology (which results in his elaborating a bad epistemology under the guise of ontology), ends up doing bad hermeneutics. His hermeneutics of specific texts such as Eddington's "Introduction" is quite inadequate and erroneous, as is his hermeneutics of the history of philosophy. Harman's key terms, such as "withdrawal" and "access", are ill-formed hermeneutical concepts, giving a grotesque simplification and deformation of the history of philosophy and of contemporary rival philosophies. Feyerabend and Latour argue that the sciences are not abstract cognition only, but also have a

constitutive, and thus necessary, hermeneutic dimension. This is why even the sciences provide some resistance against neo-liberal neo-leibnizian abstraction and speculative modeling and manipulation. Harman's model is not enough to account for knowledge, and it is he who is being reductionist with his real objects and their supposed sensual instantiations.

OOO: A SUBJECT WITH A NOT SO GREAT PAST

Over the last few years the OOOxian movement has multiplied signs of success at the same time as showing unmistakable symptoms of decline. Based on a denial of epistemology and on blindness to its own status as (bad) epistemology OOO was able to capture the attention of those who were looking for a new speculative style, after the Science Wars and in opposition to those who were content to just parrot Deleuze or Derrida or Foucault. Stanley Cavell and Richard Rorty had each in his own way sought to attain to the status of homegrown American Continental Philosophy, but their Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian framework was too obscure and abstruse, too élitist and erudite. A more pop version of the same ambition was needed and Graham Harman's OOO satisfied a strongly felt need to have done with deconstruction and return to "naiveté" (Harman's word from the opening of THE QUADRUPLE OBJECT). Harman is by far the

more radical thinker when we compare his ontology of withdrawn objects to the mathematism of Meillassoux, the scientism of Brassier, and the Lacanian naturalism of Bryant. Harman alone has been willing to discard the scientific prejudice that vitiates the work of these thinkers.

Yet this superiority of Harman's position could only be maintained by sticking to the pathos of an escape from epistemology. As long as Harman did not explicitly engage with epistemological themes in his own name the denegation of its status as epistemology on which his work was built gave it even more force of conviction and persuasive power. The objectual conversion remained a potent possibility. With the publication of *THE THIRD TABLE* this anti-epistemological posture was revealed as an imposture, OOO was revealed not as superior insight over and above common sense and scientific realities, thus gratifying the narcissism of the artistic community while saving it from the accusation of postmodern relativism, but rather as a mode of philosophising that was intellectually incompetent to give a satisfying account of the domains of science, the humanities and common sense. Instead of an account we get dismissive gesticulation: these domains are "sham", their objects are "simulacra" or "phantoms". The absence of any understanding of diachrony, from the diachrony of science and that of common sense, to the diachrony of a simple argument is patent. Real

philosophical positions and arguments are replaced with absurd caricatures which are then easily rebutted, giving the impression of a lively polemical force ready to accept and reply to objections.

ON DISAPPOINTMENT IN PHILOSOPHY: the case of OOO

We easily talk about our enthusiasms in philosophy, as if our path of thinking was one of the accumulation of truths and elimination of errors, one of progress. But disappointment is just as important a driving force, a non-philosophical affect that shadows our enthusiasms. A philosophy can seem to express what we find essential to hear at a turning point in our life, and to promise a new world of insight and freedom, only to turn out to be a lure, a deceitful mirage unable to live up to its promises.

When I first read Graham Harman's books I found them promising. At least there was a reference to contemporary pluralist thinkers and a willingness to engage in explanation and argument. It took me only a couple of months to realise that the promised explanations were either totally inadequate (the myth of "epistemologies of access" for example is maintained only by lofty ignorance of huge parts of recent philosophy, and

by refusing to engage any real reading of texts: just global denunciation) or not forthcoming.

The initial shock of recognition was tempered by the realisation that Harman was building on ideas that were widespread in Continental circles 35 years ago, and that I had already subjected to a thoroughgoing critique before moving on to something else. His "progress" was in fact a regression to barely disguised rehashes of old refuted ideas. I was astounded at the pretentiousness of the claims of OOO, given their flimsy basis, and at the credulousness of the supporters, too young to have personal knowledge of the prior avatars of these ideas.

Luckily, I quickly found far more satisfying and intellectually challenging thinkers (Bruno Latour, John Law, Andrew Pickering, William Connolly, Bernard Stiegler, Catherine Malabou, and François Laruelle, to name a few) and began to elaborate the non-standard pluralist philosophy that I had discovered in Deleuze and Feyerabend and Hillman, and that I think has still not seen its day. I decided to deconstruct OOO as a way of clarifying why I had initially been attracted and why I thought it was a great step backwards.

I do not care for OOO in any of its variants, and I think its only value is pedagogical: a warning of the stupidity that dogs us all of enthrallment with the plausible products of cognitive marketing. I think that OOO's popularity is based on a

cruel misunderstanding. People seem to think that OOO announces a return to the things themselves, but as we have seen this is not so. Nor is it a return to the concrete diversity and abundance of the world. This impression is an illusion. OOO gestures at the world, even as it withdraws any real possibility of exploring it and coming to know it.

In my own case, I have used OOO to help me clarify my own ideas on pluralist ontology, and especially on Deleuze and Feyerabend. OOO is a debased synchronic travesty of the diachronic pluralism that Feyerabend and Deleuze espouse. What people are looking for and think they find in OOO is the exact opposite of what is there. People are looking for intellectuality, strange new concepts to go further on the paths opened by the preceding generation of philosophers, and concreteness, an engagement with the abundance of the world, its passions, its pleasures, and its problems. But OOO's intellectuality is a tawdry sham, and its concreteness is a cynical bluff.

Harman's OOO is the worst form of dualism imaginable, a dualist epistemology and ontology in regression from the great pluralist philosophies that preceded it. Are these pluralist philosophies that I admire perfect? No they are very incomplete and one-sided, developed in response to concrete contexts that are now behind us. Are they, these deconstructive philosophies,

themselves immune to deconstruction? Not at all! They themselves even call for their own deconstruction, and Stiegler, Latour, and Laruelle continue the effort and deconstruct, each in their own way, what remains undeconstructed in their predecessors' ideas.

A liberation from the conceptual schemas of philosophy is possible if, as Paul Feyerabend invites us, we think and act outside stable frameworks ("There are many ways and we are using them all the time though often believing that they are part of a stable framework which encompasses everything") and fixed paths ("Is argument without a purpose? No, it is not; it accompanies us on our journey without tying it to a fixed road"). This is what I have been calling diachronic ontology. It is the exact opposite of the path that OOO has chosen, where we find a synchronic ontology incapable of dealing with time and change, and a monism of transcendent withdrawn entities.