



## Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

Stanford Howdyshell\*

# The Essences of Objects: Explicating a Theory of Essence in Object-Oriented Ontology

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0001>

Received June 29, 2019; accepted November 07, 2019

**Abstract:** In this paper, I will discuss the need for a theory of essences within Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and then formulate one. I will do so by drawing on Graham Harman's work on OOO and Martin Heidegger's thought on the essence of being, presented in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Harman touches on essences, describing them as the tension between a withdrawn object and its withdrawn qualities, but fails to distinguish between essential and inessential qualities within this framework. To fill in the gaps, I will turn to Heidegger's explication of *phusis* in order to show that an essential aspect of being is how one enters into causal relations and continually reveals oneself to other beings. In bringing OOO and Heidegger together, I will find that each object has a unique way of exerting itself in the world and that the domestic relations that make up this unique profile are essential to it, while other domestic relations, those that do not influence its particular way of exerting itself, are inessential. Thus, the essence will be found to be the set of domestic relations that make up the determinate form, or unique causal profile, of the object.

**Keywords:** Object-Oriented Ontology, Harman, Essence, Heidegger

## Introduction

The essences of objects are a reoccurring theme in Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), either in brief, explicit definitions or implicitly in the discussions of related ideas. Even still, essences remain, for the most part, unaddressed within the majority of writings on OOO. This paper will seek to fill in this hole in the discussion by developing a theory of essences based on the writings of Graham Harman and drawing from Martin Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

The paper will start with a brief overview of OOO, which will highlight the problems presented in OOO that a theory of essences will seek to resolve, namely: how can one account for an object coming into being for a duration and then ceasing to exist, and what makes one object itself rather than another. I will then address Harman's account of essences, showing both where it falls short and how it can serve to shape the development of the theory going forward.

The second section will be a discussion of *phusis*, pulled from *Introduction to Metaphysics*. I will show how Heidegger found that a being unfolding and exerting itself on its surroundings was an essential aspect of its way of being. As such, all beings are continually in a process of showing themselves to and affecting other beings.

In the final section, I will bring the previous two together and integrate Heidegger's *phusis* into OOO. I will show how every object is continually holding sway over other objects in a way that is unique to that

\*Corresponding author: Stanford Howdyshell, University of South Florida, Tampa, United States of America;  
E-mail: howdyshells@mail.usf.edu

object. This unique way of exerting itself, which I will call the “determinate form” will become the basis on which essences can be built, where essences are domestic relations which are necessary for an object to maintain its unique determinate form and which allow it to exert itself on others in the fashion that is unique to it.

## 1 Basics of OOO and the Problem of Essences

In OOO, an object is anything that exists as its own reality, apart from the effects of its environment and above the summation of its component parts. It is a thing that is composed of relations between other objects, and which relates to foreign objects, but “is a real thing considered apart from any of its relations with other such things.”<sup>1</sup> Since each object is a real thing, it does not rely on other objects or a fundamental ground of being, and instead is grounded in its own emergent reality.

Objects are always composites of other objects that, through their relations to each other, create the object in question. The object stands above its individual relations to these smaller objects because the structure of the relations that create the object also create emergent properties. Emergent properties are novel ways that the object can enter into relations and effect the world due to the constituent objects and their particular arrangement. A classic example of emergent properties is water, where hydrogen and oxygen come together in a relation that, due to the bonds formed, results in a molecule with different properties than either of them, which they would not hold if the structure of their relation were different, such as two gasses at room temperature combining to form a liquid at room temperature.

Not only do the relations of constituent objects serve to make up the new object, but the affection is, in some ways, reciprocal. The object serves to constrain its constituents. In other words, the object has a causal effect on its components, limiting how they can move about, interact with other objects, and what relations they can form. The way the water molecule is arranged prevents the oxygen from bonding with carbon to form carbon dioxide.

These constituent objects also bring to the fore one of the tensions that highlights the need for a theory of essences. On the one hand, objects are created by new relations, and any new relation will create a new object.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, objects exist for some duration, and through that duration some of their domestic relations, or relations between constituent objects which are internal to the object,<sup>3</sup> may change: constituent objects may be lost or replaced, their arrangement may vary, or a new constituent object may be added. The object will survive some of the changes while other changes will spell the death of the object. Thus, objects can survive some, but not all, changes to their constitutive network, and some domestic relations are more important than others. Furthermore, it seems that often the particular constituent object does not matter as much as the fact that there is a constituent object fulfilling the role. For example, in the object that is my car engine, any given piston can be swapped out while the engine still has its emergent properties, but if the pistons were to be pulled out without being replaced, it would no longer behave as an engine.

Thus, there are three things that are important for the object. First, once the object is produced by a relation it stabilizes such that it can enter into new relations and its constituent objects can change. Second, the survival of the object is based on its emergent properties and the constituent objects fulfilling the role that provides for those properties, rather than the constituent objects themselves. In other words, the structure of relations matters, rather than the related objects themselves. Third, and consequently, the constituent objects can change as long as the emergent properties are provided for.

Since the objects can weather some lost relations but other lost relations destroy it, some relations must be more important to the continued existence of the object than others. This means that some relations are essential to the object and others are not, and a theory of essences will need to account for the different relations.

<sup>1</sup> Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 215.

Before any investigation into essences can go further, a brief explanation of causation and the relationships between objects is necessary. Firstly, in any relation the objects are withdrawn from each other. The objects themselves never meet. Instead, they are mediated by what Harman termed the “sensual objects.” Sensual objects are the way that the withdrawn “real” objects present themselves to others, based off of both their own emergent properties and the emergent properties of the objects they are in relation with. Another way of thinking about it is that the emergent properties of the second object set the terms for how it is able to interact with the first object, and the sensual object is the properties of the first presented in the terms defined by the second. For example, my coffee mug is a structure of related silicate molecules arranged such that it has certain properties, such as its hardness, color, conductivity, and so on. When I enter into a relation to it, my own structure gives the ability to perceive a certain set of those properties in a certain way. When I look at it, I don’t see the particular set of domestic relations that form the mug, but the properties of the mug translated in such a way that they line up with the properties of my vision. It appears black to me, based both on my ability to perceive, if I had better eyesight it might be dark blue, and the way the domestic relations of the mug are organized, its surface is such that colored light is absorbed. I don’t see the surface roughness, but rather the sensual projection of it, the color black. Thus, the structure is never available in relations, but only sensual presentations mediated through an overlap in qualities of the objects.

The relationship between the presented sensual object and the withdrawn real object is also where causation occurs. When the sensual object is presented, the interaction can affect the withdrawn object or the other relations in which the object can enter. This can occur because when two objects enter into a relation, as seen earlier, a new object is formed, and this object then constrains its constituents. When one object presents its sensual profile to the other real object, they form a third object, which can serve to change its constituents or constrain further relations that said constituents can enter. This can take the form of changing the object’s network of domestic relations. If I drop my mug on the floor, on contact they would form the mug-floor object, which would then constrain the relations of the mug and the floor in such a way that the structure of the mug would come apart and the mug would shatter. It can also serve to constrain the relations that the object can enter into. If I place my mug on my desk, the mug-desk object would constrain the mug such that it could not enter into direct contact with the floor, limiting its possible relations. These two causal possibilities will come into play later in the discussion of essential relations.

From this brief description of OOO and the structures of the objects that compose it, both the problems that lead to the need for a theory of essences and the desiderata that any theory of essences must meet become apparent. Objects are built from interrelated constituent objects, but some of the parts and domestic relations can change while the object remains itself, while others cannot. Furthermore, objects come into being, exist for a while, and then cease to exist, all while their constituent objects and domestic relations can change and adjust throughout the course of their life. From these factors it seems clear that any theory of essences ought to be able to account for not only how objects can be born and then die, but also account for how some domestic relations are essential while others can come and go without threatening the life of the object.

Each object, additionally, exists due to its emergent structure and properties, or exists as its own ground and on its own terms. This implies that each object exists as a unique object, rather than as part of a class or genus. This means that one cannot look outside of the object to find its essences, so it cannot be located in some fundamental level of being or in the human mind. Secondly, the essence must be found in the withdrawn object, or else it would be reliant on an outside object and no longer be grounded in itself. Thus, the essence cannot be grounded in foreign relations, or on relations to other objects.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, the essence of the object will be unique to the object, because the object does not fit into any schema or class beyond itself.

While the formulation of a theory of essences in OOO has been, for the most part, neglected, Harman addresses it briefly. He lays out four poles of the object, one dimension is the presented, or sensual, and the withdrawn, or real. The second dimension is that of the object and the qualities that result from the

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 214.

network of domestic relations that form the object, which he simply refers to as qualities.<sup>5</sup> Harman locates the essence of an object in the tension between the withdrawn (or real) qualities and the withdrawn (or real) object, or the object and the various aspects of the object that are able to manifest as individual components of the object.<sup>6</sup> Another way of putting it is that there is a tension between the object itself and the way in which it is able to enter into causal relationships with other objects. It is, thus, a tension between two withdrawn components that is made manifest in relation to foreign objects, or “is first produced from the outside through causal interactions.”<sup>7</sup>

The first problem that arises from this description is: if the essence is first produced by a foreign relation, then it seems that the essence of an object is not located completely within the real poles of the object. Thus, the object would not serve as its own grounds completely, and instead be dependent on other, exterior beings. The tension further increases because Harman also believes that there is the possibility of “dormant objects,” or objects that exist without any foreign relations.<sup>8</sup> The contradiction is deepened when objects (with essences) exist without foreign relations, and essences being produced by foreign, causal relations. This objection may be avoided if the production of the essence is meant to be how the essence can be made apparent or manifested in the world, rather than how the essence is created within the object. In other words, while Harman claims that “the relation between an object and its own real qualities (we called this essence) is a relation produced by outside entities”<sup>9</sup> and that dormant objects are possible, the apparent contradiction can be avoided if it is meant to say that foreign relations bring the object’s essence to the fore, or reveals them.

A deeper problem remains. As previously stated, Harman locates the essence of an object as the tension between the real object and its real qualities. It seems to follow straightforwardly that any quality that participates in this tension is then an essential quality. A new question arises: which real qualities participate in the tension between the two real poles? At first glance, it seems that all real qualities are part of the tension because they are built on the same domestic relations that structure the real object. If this were the case, though, it would destabilize the object such that it could not survive any changes within its domestic relations. If all real qualities are essential, and these real qualities are built on domestic relations, then changes in domestic relations will bring changes in real qualities, which would be manifested in changes in sensual qualities. Thus, any change in a domestic relation that brings a change in quality would also change the essence of the object. The change in essence implies that the object would no longer be itself, but a new object. Thus, if all real qualities are part of the tension that makes up the essence, then any change in relations would result in the death of the object and the creation of a new object, which is against Harman’s commitments to the persistence of objects.<sup>10</sup>

The alternative is that some real qualities participate in the tension that constitutes the essence while others do not. Then, some of the real qualities are essential and others are not, and thus some domestic relations are essential and others inessential to the continued existence of the object.

For objects, both essential and inessential qualities, built on the essential and inessential domestic relations which constitute the object, become manifest in the foreign relations. While the tension between the object and the quality will exist for only essential domestic relations. The tension described as essence will envelop the essential qualities and discriminates out the inessential. In this case, Harman’s theory of essence may accurately describe essence, but it leads to the question: what is it about an essential quality that makes it participate in this tension while other qualities do not? Harman does not answer this question and thus his account of essences fails to elucidate which properties and domestic relations are necessary for the survival of the object and which are inessential and can change or fall away while the object continues to exist.

5 Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 77.

6 Harman, “Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos: A New Theory of Causation,” 15.

7 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 107.

8 Harman, “Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos: A New Theory of Causation,” 15.

9 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 106-107.

10 Harman, *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*, 104-105.

In order to fill out a theory of essence for OOO I will turn to Heidegger's thought on Being and its essential traits and characteristics.

## 2 Heidegger's Investigation of Essence

In this section I will look to Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* to feel out some of the boundary conditions for the being of objects. This will develop a clearer picture of what the essence of any particular being is.

In his investigation into the essence of being, Heidegger begins with the question of "why are there beings at all instead of nothing?"<sup>11</sup> He finds that since nothing is the alternative to being, rather than simply different beings, then the possibility of not-being opens up. Thus, there stand alternatives to the existence of any given being, that they are different beings or that they could not exist at all.

With these alternatives in mind, Heidegger found that being was binary.<sup>12</sup> In other words, a thing either exists as a being or does not, there is no middle ground or partially existing being. He also found that being is not an aspect of a thing.<sup>13</sup> There is no component or part of the thing that makes it participate in being. Instead, the whole of the thing participates in being, and the being of the being must, in turn, be found in the whole of the given being.

He was led to find an aspect or way of being that everything in existence shared. That thing was a way of being or mode of comportment in the world. This way of being was the continual act of a being putting itself forward as present in the world, or of *phusis*.

Heidegger describes *phusis* as "the emergent self-upraising, the self-unfolding that abides in itself."<sup>14</sup> That is to say, *phusis* is the continual act of a being revealing itself to its world. It is emergent and is the act of a being raising itself up and unfolding itself. Thus, *phusis* comes from the being itself, rather than from an external source. Heidegger also refers to it as an "emerging sway,"<sup>15</sup> meaning that it not only reveals itself, but affects other beings in its environment and the networks that it finds itself within. *Phusis* is a continual way of being. To be a being, one must be in a state of continual self-unfolding, continually showing oneself to one's environment and continually exerting oneself on that environment.

The continual self-unfolding in *phusis* is a self-upraising as well.<sup>16</sup> This means that the act of unfolding and the upraising of beings is done by the being itself, not other beings or some outside force. An entity's act of unfolding is what gives it its being, and this continual action is carried out by the entity in question. This means that entities that participate in being through *phusis* are independent from their environments and surroundings. They do not rely on outside forces in order to participate in being.

The insight that all entities participate in being through a continual process that is performed by them pushes the ontology presented in *Introduction to Metaphysics* towards becoming flat. While, for Heidegger, beings are still correlates of *Dasein*, they take an active role in the relationship by supporting themselves, or "standing on [their] own."<sup>17</sup> While *Dasein* is the correlate to these beings, the correlation does not create the being, and there is no ultimate source of being that grounds the being of all other entities nor is it all just tied up in human minds and interpretations. Rather, all beings participate in being equally in so much as they are able to unfold and reveal themselves within their environments to *Dasein*. While Heidegger's ontology is not flat in the way Harman's is, his lack of hierarchy among beings who are not *Dasein* provides overlap between their ontologies, and his insights into the relationship between *Dasein* and other beings can provide insight into the relationships between beings when integrated into OOO's flat ontology.

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, "The Thing," 164.

For Heidegger, the very act of existing and participating in being is to have an effect on another being, namely *Dasein*. To be an entity is to affect *Dasein*'s surrounding world by continually coming into being. This effect is seen in how the entity reveals itself to those around *Dasein*.

While the unfolding and coming-to-be is a self-sustained process, it is not a one-sided affair. While a being is revealing itself to *Dasein*, it shows itself also interacting with others, while other beings and its environment are shown as unfolding themselves and revealing themselves to it. For example, when I look at my mug, it does not raise itself up in isolation, but shows itself as interacting with its surroundings. I see it constraining the coffee within and resting on my desk. At the same time, I see the desk holding up my mug and the coffee resting within it. This mutual interaction forms dynamic activity between beings, where they show themselves as holding sway, the being cannot help but have other beings hold sway over it.

*Phusis*, then, is the fundamental interaction between beings, where they each hold sway over *Dasein* and can be seen interacting with one another. All other processes take place as certain, particular instantiations of *phusis*. Susan Schoenbohm explains it as “process’ in an originary sense of that eventfulness that enables or allows the processes of things to come into appearance, to take a stand ‘for the first time.’”<sup>18</sup> Thus, all the processes of nature, like the carbon cycle, the growth of cells, the bacterial reduction of sulfate, and so forth, are occurrences of beings holding sway, or are particular, concrete moments of beings’ continual coming-to-being. Beings, of course, take part in multiple processes: the oak tree converts sunlight into food, but also grows roots. *Phusis* is the origin of all of a being’s process as “a process, but not as a process among others.”<sup>19</sup> It is the originary way of being that enables the processes through which beings affect others and unfold themselves before the world.

Since beings are never completely present to *Dasein*, a being’s act of holding sway over them is ongoing. There is always more to unfold and one being holds sway over another throughout the life of their interaction. Thus, in every interaction, throughout the course of the interaction, the *phusis* of the being is never complete, but rather is a continual revealing of itself. It holds sway over *Dasein* throughout their relationship, and if the holding sway ceases, the relation ends along with it. In a similar way, if a being were to no longer be able to hold sway, nor was it able to come to a state of coming-to-be for *Dasein*, then it would mark the death of the entity. Without the possibility of coming-to-be and holding sway, the being would no longer be a being. It would be missing an essential component of its being and no longer exist as itself.

While Harman’s ontology grants being universally and Heidegger’s prioritizes a particular being, that of *Dasein*, they overlap in how they trace the continual interactions of beings, one universally, the other with *Dasein*. For Harman, Heidegger’s theory maps out how the human-object interacts with other objects, and this interaction is not ontologically any different than any other object-object interaction. Thus, Heidegger’s theory can play a central role in explaining a theory of essences within OOO because object-object relations ought to take the same ontological form as human-object relations. Since *phusis* is an essential aspect of being for Heidegger, and the theories share this overlap, an investigation of how *phusis* can be integrated into OOO will prove fruitful for the further development of the theory.

### 3 Integrating Heidegger into OOO

In the final section of this paper I will bring the insights that Heidegger provided to bear on OOO and use them to explicate a theory of the essence of objects. To do so, I will begin with an explanation of OOO’s flat ontology, which will set constraints on how Heidegger’s thoughts on essence can be integrated into OOO. Then I will move into a discussion of how *phusis* can be used to develop a new theory of essence.

A key feature in OOO is that no object or relation has ontological priority over any other object or relation. One object cannot be ‘more real’ than another, nor can one object define the reality of another. In other words, the reality of one object cannot be defined by its relation to another object, nor can it be reduced to its relation to a specific object or class of objects.

<sup>18</sup> Schoenbohm, “Heidegger’s Interpretation of *Phusis* in *Introduction to Metaphysics*,” 146.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

The flatness of the ontology implies that humans, or any other object that may possess consciousness, do not have any ontological priority over other objects. The being of objects is not confined to how they relate to or show themselves to humans. Indeed, in OOO, the way that a consciousness interacts with objects is not ontologically different than that of an interaction with an object that lacks consciousness. As Levi Bryant puts it, “humans occupy no privileged place within being...between the human/object relation and any other object/object relation there is only a difference in degree, not kind.”<sup>20</sup>

In OOO, all relations between objects take the form of the real qualities of the object withdrawing from contact while the sensual qualities are presented and interact with the real qualities of the other object, providing a sensual translation of the real qualities of the first in terms that the real qualities which are dictated by the second.

In the flattening of ontology, OOO offers a radical shift, where the main ontological rift is no longer between consciousness and what lacks consciousness, but now lies between the withdrawn objects and qualities and their sensual counterparts. This shift is made possible because, in OOO, the being of all objects is fundamentally the same: all objects are emergent structures of relations between constitutive objects. Human consciousness is one emergent structure, while a running car another, a functioning university is a third, and the deciduous ecosystem of the Appalachians a fourth. Similarly, all relations are ontologically the same, they are the presentation of a sensual, causal profile of one object being translated by and acting on the real profile of qualities of another. The causal profile a book exerts upon the reader is ontologically the same as the causal profile of its weight pushing down on the desk, or the page soaking up the coffee that was spilled on it.

This all leads to two points that will constrain the search for essences within OOO. The first is that the essence itself cannot be dictated by human consciousness. The essence does not exist within human experience, but rather is a withdrawn quality of the object and thus cannot be defined as simply the subjectively most important aspect as it reveals itself to human consciousness. Secondly, any account of essences must give equal weight to all relations that the object is in. In other words, no single object-object relation can be prioritized over another in accounting for the essence of the object. The relation between my book and my desk, or my book and the coffee I spilled, are just as important as the relation between my book and myself.

I will now turn to defining essence within the constraints that I laid out. In Heidegger’s exploration of being, he found that the act of holding sway over others, or in exerting oneself onto one’s world, is essential to beings.<sup>21</sup> Within the parlance of OOO, one could say that it is the act of presenting its sensual pole or causal profile to other beings. A being cannot exist without holding sway, and there can be no causal profiles without beings. I will use this fact as the groundwork for explicating a theory of essences. On its face, this may seem to exclude the possibility of dormant objects, or objects that do not, and may never, have any foreign relations.<sup>22</sup> I will address this concern later in the paper, after I have more fully explicated the nature of holding sway within OOO.

For Heidegger, everything participates in being insofar as it can become a correlate of *Dasein*, and “every being counts as much as any other,”<sup>23</sup> whether it’s a chemical process, animal, scientific theory, work of art, or anything else. When flattened further to align with Harman’s flat ontology, it follows that all objects share the same fundamental ways of being, since they all count the same and are all on the same ontological playing field. Then, the way that beings unfold themselves to *Dasein* should be ontologically the same as how they unfold themselves to other beings. It follows that *phusis* is the fundamental way of being for all objects and being able to hold sway over other objects and its environment is essential to the object’s being as an object.

As was briefly noted earlier, *phusis*, or holding sway, in OOO, seems to mean the exertion of an object’s causal profile on other objects. This can take the form of a normal interaction between two objects, such as my desk exerting a normal force against the weight of my mug as it rests on it. The desk presents the

<sup>20</sup> Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 194.

<sup>22</sup> Harman, “Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos: A New Theory of Causation,” 15.

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 4.

sensual profile of its solidity upwards towards the mug, causing it to sit still instead of falling to the ground. Holding sway can also take the form of preventing relations from occurring, such as the fact that my desk is preventing the causal profile of the floor from exerting itself as a solid body on my mug, or my mug is preventing my coffee from pooling on my desk by constraining it to the mug's shape. Finally, since all relations create new emergent objects, the causal profile of an object defines the way in which it forms more complex objects through its relations. The sensual mug holds sway over its environment by creating the coffee-mug object that I relate to while drinking from it. Importantly, while these are three different ways in which an object can hold sway over its environment, they are related by the real object that withdraws from contact, but sets the terms for the sensual object. The solidity my mug presents to the desk is due to the molecular relations in the ceramic, which also insulate the heat of the coffee.

The sway an object holds is constrained by the structure of the real object. It is not fluid and arbitrary, but distinct from other objects and, as Harman showed in his discussion of the Dutch East India Company, has distinct moments of birth and death.<sup>24</sup> This means that the form that the object takes is particular to it. Thus, complete causal profiles are also unique and particular to individual objects. The sway that the object holds over other objects and its environment, as well as the possible ways it could affect objects that it is not currently relating to, and to which it may never relate. Additionally, the object's unique structure is the determining factor in what other objects can be formed out of it. For example, the network of domestic relations that form my mug allows me to use it as part of a tower while I procrastinate, but that same structure precludes me from using it as an ingredient in my lunch.

In summation: the way an object interacts with the world and holds sway over the world is based on the withdrawn, real object, and the network of domestic relations that form the real object is unique to the object. Thus, each object holds sway in a way that is unique, and has a causal profile that is particular to it. I can now turn to look for the relations that allow the object to participate in being, and thus whose existence the object relies on, or their essential relations.

First, foreign relations can be ruled out in the search for essential relations. Objects exist beyond their relations to exterior objects, and could theoretically exist without any foreign relations.<sup>25</sup> These are called dormant objects. Since dormant objects still have essential relations, then those relations would have to be on their interior. Thus, there can be no foreign relation that is essential to the being of an object. One implication of this is that, without a foreign relation, the object would not be a constituent of another object. In OOO, objects need not be constituents of other objects.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it follows that an object's ability to exert its causal profile on objects who are not its constituents is also not essential to the object. It could be objected that without foreign relations, the object cannot be an object because it is no longer holding sway over other objects, but this overlooks the fact that all objects are composed of a unique network of related constituent objects. The object still holds sway over its constituents. Thus, it seems to follow that essential relations must be found within the domestic relations of the object.

While the object can exist without any foreign relations; it is built out of domestic relations. These domestic relations come to set the terms for how the foreign relations can be formed. The arrangement of the domestic relations also set the terms of how the object as a whole can relate to any of its parts. The object as a whole exerts a causal force onto the part and constrains its interactions with the other constituent objects, and any given exterior object, due to the emergent reality of the object. The network of the molecular relations that make up my mug also serves to constrain all the individual silicate molecules, limiting how they can bond. Thus, the object exerts its causal profile and determines the ways in which its constituent objects can interact with the world; it holds sway over its constituent objects through its network of domestic relations. The way it holds sway over its constituent objects then, in turn, sets the terms for how it can hold sway over objects that are outside of it.

Thus, holding sway is essential to the being of an object. The essence must also be independent of any foreign relations. As seen above, since any constituent object can be swapped out for a like object, and

<sup>24</sup> Harman, *Immaterialism*, 123-124.

<sup>25</sup> Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.



objects can survive losing some of their parts, then no individual case of holding sway is essential. All of these points add up to the essence not being any giving event of an object effecting other objects or any given domestic relation, but instead as the set of domestic relations that dictate the way that the object holds sway over the world. In other words, the essence is the set of domestic relations that set the stage for the object's causal profile.

To summarize: it is essential to an object that it holds sway over other objects, but, as demonstrated with dormant objects, not all objects enter into foreign relations. All objects, including dormant objects, are composed of a network of constituent objects and exert a causal profile downward on those constituents.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the object is holding sway over its constituent objects through its domestic relations. In other words, the dormant object still holds sway over other objects because it is composed of other objects to which it presents a causal profile. At the same time, the essential holding sway of objects must apply to dormant objects as well as objects that partake in foreign relations, and therefore the essential holding sway of an object is the sway it holds over its constituent objects.

As seen previously, each object is a system of related constituent objects that creates an emergent reality which is unique to that object. Thus, no two objects are identical, but rather, each object exists in a way that is unique to itself. Thus, the causal profile created by the domestic relations is specific to the object. The way the object reveals itself to and affects other objects, and the way that the object can come into contact with them, is unique to that object. I will call this unique way that the object interacts with the world its determinate form. It is the way in which the object affects other objects and its environment that is particular to it. In other words, it is the aspect of the causal profile that makes the interaction between it and another object unique, rather than the qualities of the object that are interchangeable with any other object.

The determinate form, as the causal profile of an object, is made of the effects of the domestic relations. These domestic relations, then, would be the essential relations, because if they broke, the way the object holds sway as itself, rather than as any other object, would have changed. Without these essential relations, the object would no longer be itself, but some other object. On the other hand, any domestic relation that can be broken or changed without fundamentally altering the way the object exerts itself, or theoretically could exert itself, on its environment are inessential relations. For example, my coffee mug has a determinate form that can be seen in its foreign relationships: it exerts a downward force on the desk, it constrains the coffee, it insulates heat, and so on. If the paint were to fade, and the domestic relations that dictate its color changed, the way it primary relates the world, as a pressure profile, as an insulator, as a coffee holder, etc. would remain the same. Its causal profile would remain essentially the same, and one could reason that the relations that dictated its color were inessential. On the other hand, if it broke down the middle, the way that it exerts itself would fundamentally change, it would no longer constrain coffee, the profile of the downward force it exerts would no longer be in a circle, but in two shards, and so on. It would seem safe to say that the determinate form was different and that its essential relations were broken. Thus, one can reason back that the domestic relations that bound the mug in its shape were essential to it.

Both essential and inessential relations are domestic. They both are part of the withdrawn, real object and only become available through the sensual presentations of the object and qualities. While they are both withdrawn, they show themselves as essential or inessential through the way that they exert themselves onto other objects through their sensual profiles. The essential relations show themselves as inextricable to the determinate form of the object as it holds sway over others; they are necessary to the way the object exists and holds sway over its constituents. Inessential relations are then domestic relations that are not necessary to the particular way that the object constrains its component parts.

While this theory of determinate forms may serve to explicate what the essences of objects are, it leaves an epistemological problem behind. Namely: if (1) the essences are located in the real poles of the object, (2) my only access to the object is through its sensual presentations, (3) its presentations to me are no more important than any other presentation, and (4) I do not have access to the relations it is having with other objects, then (5) any knowledge of the object's essences will be speculative, at best. While the specific way an object has to present itself to me to keep a similar hold over me may be apparent in my own experience,

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 123.

I do not have access to the way that object must appear to other objects. I may know, or be able to figure out, what makes the mug a mug for me, but I don't have access to what makes the mug a mug for my desk.

This problem may result in making it difficult or impossible to figure out which domestic relations are essential, but this objection remains in the realm of human knowledge, of which the reality of objects and their relations are not dependent. So, while this problem requires further thought; it does not preclude the possibility that an object's essence is the set of domestic relations that make up its determinate form.

## 4 Conclusion

Each object has its own structure, and that structure allows it to exert itself on the world in a way that is particular to it. This way of exerting itself on the world is made up of both essential relations and inessential ones. The essential relations are those which need to be in place in order for the object to exert itself in its particular way, while the inessential can come and go while the objects determinate form remains intact.

This theory of essence can account for the life and death of objects, where the death is when the relations that dictate the determinate form are broken. The theory also keeps the essence within the withdrawn poles of the object. Due to the fact that the essence is the set of domestic relations that make up its causal profile, these relations are not dependent on outside entities or grounded in a fundamental level of being. Instead, they come into being with the emergent properties of the object itself.

## References

- Bryant, Levi R. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011.
- Harman, Graham. *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005.
- Harman, Graham. *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016.
- Harman, Graham. *The Quadruple Object*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2011.
- Harman, Graham. "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos: A New Theory of Causation." *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 6:1 (2010), 1-17.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 163-180. New York: Harper 1 Perennial, 1971.
- Schoenbohm, Susan. "Heidegger's Interpretation of *Phusis* in *Introduction to Metaphysics*." In *A Companion to Heidegger's Introduction to Metaphysics*, edited by Richard Polt and Gregory Fried, 143-160. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.