

A Theory of Everything?

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Graham Harman. 2018. *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*

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As someone educated in the analytic tradition of philosophy, I find myself strangely drawn to Graham Harman's *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*, which is firmly situated within the continental tradition that is often avoided in my neck of the philosophical woods as overly poetic. My initial exposure to continental thought did not come from reading Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, however, it came from reading Timothy Morton, who works at the intersection of object-oriented thought and ecology. Heavily laden with allusions and references to works of fiction, historical events and people, Morton's style was, to me, almost inaccessible and required considerable effort to understand even the shortest of phrases. Still, I found something of serious worth within what remains a revolutionary and somewhat shadowy corner of philosophy, now known as object-oriented ontology (OOO), pronounced 'triple o.'

Harman is generally regarded as the father of object-oriented ontology, one of the few instantiations of speculative realism, a philosophical position that criticizes the anthropocentric post-Kantian position that all being is the reduction of the correlation between human cognition and the object of inquiry. His 1999 doctoral dissertation "Tool-Being: Elements in a Theory of Objects," launched the term 'object-oriented philosophy,' which Levi Bryant rechristened as an ontology in 2009. Both terms are used synonymously by speculative realists, although Bryant's formulation has greater typological appeal. With this book, Harman ignites the philosophical domain by providing the first dedicated account of OOO for a general readership.

So, what exactly is OOO? The question itself is difficult to answer because, since the small group of scholars who consider themselves OO-philosophers reach different conclusions through their object-oriented philosophies. Still, there are some shared tenets, at least five of which are of particular canonical importance to OOO. First, is the rejection of anthropocentrism and with it any post-Kantian philosophy that attributes a transcendent character to the human subject as the privileged correlator of all reality. OOO argues instead that objects and reality exist independent of the human subject. OOO is thus a staunch realist philosophy. Second, and related to the first, is the rejection of correlationism, a strand of speculative anti-realism associated with the work of Quentin Meillassoux that continues to posit human experience as the correlator of being. Given the realist foundation of OOO, this is thoroughly rejected. Third is the rejection of the philosophical tendency to reduction, either by *undermining* an object by referring to its parts as the essence of its being, as in the scientific natural-materialist method, or by *overmining* an object by referring to its relations and effects on other objects, as in social constructionism or Latourian actor-network theory (ANT). Fourth is the preservation of finitude by which OOO preserves the concept of object-object finitude, meaning that no object can attain full knowledge of other objects: Every relation necessarily distorts the other object and is thus always translated rather than direct. Unlike some other versions of finitude, OOO does not make this a quality exclusive to humans but affords it to all objects (entities). Fifth, and final, is the concept of withdrawnness through which OOO argues that objects always remain independent, both of the qualities they instantiate at any space/time and of their relations with other objects. Objects cannot be reduced by undermining them to their parts, or overmining them to their object-relations: Something is always held in surplus and is thus withdrawn from exhaustion.

While works that are specifically OOO have remained few and far between, OOO's growing influence can be felt in the way that it informs the broader field of ethics. Morton's work on ecology from an OOO stance is of particular note, especially his influential *Ecological Thought* (2012) and *Hyperobjects* (2013). While OO-philosophers commonly articulate OOO in relation to their chosen object, there has never been a work dedicated solely to the genesis and explication of OOO per se. Enter *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. Eschewing the verbose and often obscurantist tendencies of other philosopher-authors, Harman tackles what might otherwise be a complicated, controversial and counter-intuitive philosophical stance with accessible and easy-to-follow prose. OOO has never been so clear nor so convincingly presented as it is here. Covered in seven chapters, the book gives a genealogical account of OOO, chronicling the reason for its emergence, comparing it to both the past and current philosophical traditions and arguing for its potency over the competing ontologies, almost all of which are post-Kantian.

The introduction provides a thorough outline of the book's project, including a rough account of the reason for OOO's being, as well a review of some of the foundational works that now form part of the OOO diaspora. The opening chapter, however, proves to be the most incisive outline of Harman's own brand of object-oriented philosophy. Harman argues against both the physicalist-materialist understanding of reality as providing a theory of everything, as well as the contrary social-constructivist view of a total metaphysics. Both modes of understanding, *undermining* (reducing entities to their parts, as the physical materialists do) and *overmining* (reducing objects upwards to their effects, as the social-constructivists do), plus the *duomining* tendency to combine elements of material and social accounts which many disciplines now go in for, are inherently partial or inauthentic explanations of entities that merely claim to be complete.

Dancing between academic philosophy, aesthetics, linguistics and cognitive studies, Harman synthesizes these typically dissociated domains into a holistic ontology geared to a more genuine understanding of reality that, if taken, grounds the philosophical enterprise as a whole. This larger ambition becomes apparent when Harman lays OOO against its contemporaries, most notably Latour's actor-network theory. Here, Harman builds on his 2016 book *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory* to explain how OOO can help to re-evaluate objects as being social, something he demonstrates via an account of the American Civil War. The current field dominance of ANT, Harman argues, follows from its inherent potency as a flat account of the social assembly of actors that does not ontologically privilege one type of object over another, as is the case in theological and humanist traditions. This presumed flatness is what makes ANT attractive to the social sciences broadly construed. However, Harman argues, the *overmining* character of ANT ultimately reduces objects upwards to such a degree that it actively oppresses them. At this point OOO enters to save the day: Objects are not *just* their actions, something is always withdrawn and held in reserve.

While this claim is consistent with OOO's governing tenets, Harman's analysis of metaphor and aesthetics seems less anchored. Harman aims to show how art can create new objects in-themselves and how the symbiotic and often asymmetric relationship between objects creates compound objects. Although this analysis proceeds through an aesthetic lens, it is said to be of importance outside the realm of art. Here there is, to my mind at least, a curious lack of mention of the novel work of Mark Johnson and others on the metaphorical and narrative structure of human cognition. More strongly situated within cognitive science, Johnson provides a thoroughgoing analysis of metaphor that has strong resemblances to the analysis presented by Harman, although to be fair, his analysis of metaphor, narrative and aesthetics is aimed at formulating an ethical moral imagination, rather than a social theory as is Harman's aim.

The issue of metaphor is significant since the domain of OOO is currently lacking a concrete means of social application as can be detected, for instance, in Morton's deployment of theory in the ecological domain. Yet OOO does have ameliorative implications both for the environment and for human-nonhuman relations. To this end, for instance, an OOO approach might be taken to technological design in order to inform the values and modes of use that can and should be envisioned during the early conceptual phase of innovations or remediations impacting any form of matter. The OOO-technology symbiosis is just one of the many nexuses where OOO may prove informative and efficacious.

Object-Oriented Ontology is a decidedly comprehensive text, accounting for the development, current state and potentiality of OOO across a wide range of relevancies. It is also a foundational text in speculative realist thought more generally. Providing thoughtful examples from both historical and contemporary cases, Harman's book makes the petition for OOO as a practical philosophy and social theory that may provide novel avenues for the ails of our times.



About the author

Steven Umbrello is the Managing Director at the Institute for Ethics and Emerging technologies as well as a junior associate at the Global Catastrophic Risk Institute. His research interests are in speculative nanophilosophy, the design psychology of emerging technologies and the general philosophy of science and technology.