



Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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A Dream of a Stone: The Ethics of De-anthropocentrism

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Abstract: De-anthropocentrism is the leitmotif of philosophy in the twenty-first century, encouraging diverse and competing thoughts as to how this goal may be achieved. This article argues that the method by which we may achieve de-anthropocentrism is ethical rather than metaphysical – it must involve a creation of the self, rather than an interpretation of the given human conditions. Through engagements with the thought of Nietzsche, Levinas, and Foucault, and a close reading of Baudelaire’s poem “La Beauté,” I will illustrate three ethical commitments essential to de-anthropocentrism: to abandon the claim to knowledge associated with human reason, to remain in perpetual quest of an object, and to transgress the given perceptual structure through aesthetic experience. In contrast to Kantian philosophy built upon universal human reason, art is the ethical arena where each artist creates their own way to relate to the object, while de-anthropocentrism occurs – this article argues – when the artist includes the self as the field of creation. Object-Oriented Ontology in my assessment is the only branch of philosophy that truly achieves de-anthropocentrism.

Keywords: de-anthropocentrism, ethical metaphysics, aesthetics of the self, Object-Oriented Ontology

In the twenty-first century, de-anthropocentrism has become the driving motif of most new metaphysics. A philosophy with a *built-in value* such as de-anthropocentrism may be called a virtue epistemology or (to coin a new term) virtue ontology,¹ for they ask not merely “what is the condition for knowledge?” nor “what is the meaning of being?,” but rather *ethical questions* such as “how ought we to approach knowing things?” and “how ought we to understand the meaning of being?” And the answers to these questions, this article argues, invariably demand *ethical work on the self*. Kant’s philosophy is anthropocentric not because he establishes human finitude, but because, after understanding human finitude, he artificially defines human reason – which he asserts is universal – as the measure of knowledge. That is, the very key to defying Kantian anthropocentrism would be to defy the normative human reason as well as its association with knowledge, rather than to escape human finitude. To achieve de-anthropocentrism, then, we must cut the correlation – not between thinking and the world as Quentin Meillassoux argues – but between human reason and the *possession* of knowledge as Graham Harman proposes. There are three requirements, I submit, for any de-anthropocentric school of thought. We must abandon the claim to knowledge (requisite 1) and still perpetually quest for it (requisite 2). The end of the de-anthropocentric quest is not absolute and mind-independent knowledge – but rather a transformation of the self so as to trespass the given perceptual structure (requisite 3), which we might call an aesthetic experience. All three

¹ Another useful and more elegant term is “ethical metaphysics”, coined by Edith Wyschogrod in her discussion of Levinas. Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*.

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requisites, this article emphasizes with references to Nietzsche, Levinas, and Foucault, are questions of ethics rather than of metaphysics – they ask how each of us may create *the self* as the prerequisite to creating new relations with things.

To necessitate this ethical creation of the self as the premise to de-anthropocentrism requires, further, an entirely new approach to metaphysics, whose field of investigation involves not a re-interpretation of the given, universal conditions, but rather active creation of subjectivity on an individual level. While philosophy after Kant mostly presupposes a universal subjectivity (and thus universal knowledge), I propose a paradigm shift in understanding the subject-object relation as a matter of individual creation. Art, I argue, exemplifies this new paradigm. A work of art is where the individual artist creates new relations with things, while true de-anthropocentrism occurs when the artist creates a new relation with things through a transformation of the self. To illustrate this point, I engage in a close reading of Baudelaire’s poem “La Beauté.” It is a poem where the poet dreams of a stone, where the poet demonstrates how we may be in a perpetual quest toward an object that is predestined to be inaccessible. What we gain in this quest is a subjective transformation from which works of art will be produced, and Baudelaire defines this perpetual quest as the beautiful.

This ethical nature of de-anthropocentrism has not been sufficiently emphasized in the new metaphysics of the twenty-first century, and as a result, confusions abound. The article therefore proceeds patiently and slowly to clear the ground for the edifice of de-anthropocentrism. Section 1 begins by explicating a common mistake among speculative philosophers and their critics, which equates the de-anthropocentric ideal with a quest for mind-independent knowledge. This attempt to remove the human is the greatest obstacle that prevents our understanding of the ethical, self-reflective nature of the question of de-anthropocentrism. Section 2 proceeds by clarifying why Kantian philosophy is anthropocentric: not for understanding our finitude but for substituting (allegedly universal) human reason with knowledge. Section 3 suggests that the path to de-anthropocentrism would be to break free from Kantian universal reason and to constantly create new relations with things. This is where I propose my thesis that art is the ethical arena where each individual artist creates new relations with the object, while de-anthropocentrism requires a transformation of the self. Section 4 illustrates my thesis with Baudelaire’s poem “La Beauté,” where I demonstrate how the artist might create new relations with the object through metaphor. Section 5 is a brief, summative conclusion to reinforce the ethical nature of the question of de-anthropocentrism.

1 Cutting the correlation is not de-anthropocentrism

Broadly defined, de-anthropocentric scholarship may include various forms of posthumanities, ecocriticisms, new materialisms, and theories of thinghood. But my focus here will be limited to the school of thought that addresses directly the Kantian heritage. Speculative realism as a movement gathers diverse efforts which take Kantian finitude seriously, all with a burning desire to reapproach reality or the thing-in-itself.

The fascinating brand name speculative realism was born at a conference entitled “Speculative Realism: A One-Day Workshop,” which took place on April 27, 2007, at Goldsmiths, University of London and invited four thinkers – Ray Brassier, Ian Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux. The goal of the conference, according to the published program notes, was to “problematise the subjectivistic and anthropocentric foundations of much of ‘continental philosophy,’ while differing significantly in their respective strategies for superseding them.”² In Harman’s later effort to consolidate the heterogeneous thoughts into a philosophical movement, he picks up the term “correlationism” to characterize the central sentiment of continental philosophy and announces that “the original Speculative

² Mackay, *Collapse III*, 307.

Realists were united by their rejection of correlationism.”³ Correlationism is a term coined by Meillassoux, who defines the term as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”⁴

We should note, however, that speculative realism never actually rejects correlationism in a clean-cut manner; rather, the thinkers struggle with correlationism in difficult dogfights. Meillassoux seeks to escape anthropocentrism by seeking “the great outdoors, the eternal in-itself, whose being is indifferent to whether or not it is thought.”⁵ But this Holy Grail cannot be obtained through the means of the naive realist who simply approaches reality without consideration of the conditions by which we approach knowledge. Rather, for Meillassoux, to be an heir of Kant means that the heroes who do the knowing always have to remain inside *their own thought*. As he formulates his paradoxical question: “How then is *thought* to carve out a path towards the outside for itself?”⁶ As for Harman, he never really seeks to get rid of correlationism. Rather, his project of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) begins with *affirming* correlationism as the condition under which we approach the object: the object is “withdrawn,” and all our interactions with the object are only caricatures of them. One main intervention of OOO aims to further expand our understanding of correlationism by including in this ontology the interactions among all objects, living or inanimate. The correlation between, for example, a thrown stone and a pond for Harman has equal ontological weight with the way a human perceives a silent, incomprehensible stone.⁷ In this article, I will therefore use anthropocentrism rather than correlationism as the target of critique: for we can accurately claim that “OOO rejects anthropocentrism,” but not “OOO rejects correlationism.”

Notably, in Kant’s original arguments there is nothing anthropocentric about the self-reflective understanding that we cannot escape human finitude. Quite the contrary, for Kant, *to understand this correlation as our epistemological condition is the best way to prevent human-centeredness*. Kant’s critical philosophy demonstrates that space, time, and causality – which constitute for us mathematics and natural laws – are only properties of human reason. To prevent human-centeredness, Kant rather urges that we ought not to transfer these properties of reason to the thing-in-itself. In the conclusion to his *Prolegomena*,⁸ Kant suggests that there are many other possible ways of relating to things besides that of human reason:

But it would be on the other hand a still greater absurdity if we conceded no things in themselves, or set up our experience for the only possible mode of knowing things, our way of beholding (*Anschauung*) them in space and in time for the only possible way, and our discursive understanding for the archetype of every possible understanding; in fact if we wished to have the principles of the possibility of experience considered universal conditions of things in themselves. (§ 57, p. 120)

Kant argues that his project aims to avoid a “dogmatic anthropomorphism” by preventing us from transferring properties of reason to the thing-in-itself and by rigorously separating appearance from its unknown substratum. For Kant, it is hubris if we imagine the way humans perceive things as the only possible way of relating to things, neglecting the ways that a bat, a whale, a tree, or a mechanical watch otherwise interact with their world. But since for Kant it is impossible for us to escape *a priori* reason that organizes for us the human experience, the second best option is to rigorously separate the human appearance and the thing-in-itself – knowing that the way we perceive the world is only a human way of perceiving the world. Kant calls this second-best option “symbolical anthropomorphism,” an option that “in fact concerns language only”: that is, symbolical anthropomorphism concerns only the way in which we perceive and describe things, “and not the object itself” (§ 57, 129). In his attempt to avoid “dogmatic anthropomorphism,” Kant urges us to understand that what we perceive the thing to be is never the thing-in-itself, but rather *our relationship with the world*.

³ Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 4.

⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 12, 20.

⁸ Kant, *Kant’s Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*.

For Kant, the best way to avoid “dogmatic anthropomorphism” is to always carefully preserve in our understanding a place for the thing-in-itself that is independent of thought, independent of our claim to knowledge. If there is any qualifier that we may ascribe to the thing, it would be *freedom* from propensities of reason, viz., causality. In Kant’s *Prolegomena*:

If without contradiction we can think of the beings of understanding [*Verstandeswesen*] as exercising such an influence on appearances, then natural necessity will attach to all connexions of cause and effect in the sensuous world, though on the other hand, freedom can be granted to such cause, as it is itself not an appearance (but the foundation of appearance). Nature therefore and freedom can without contradiction be attributed to the very same thing, but in different relations – on one side as a phenomenon, on the other as a thing in itself. (p. 112, § 53)

For Kant, what is outside of human reason is simply and gracefully “the Unknown” (§ 57, 129) – which manifests itself through our perception and reason as we relate ourselves to it. In the conclusion of the *Prolegomena*, Kant asks “what is the attitude of our reason in this connexion of what we know with that we do not, and never shall, know?” (§ 57, 125). At this point, Kant curiously abandons his habitual dispassionate, scientific tone, and begins to refer repetitively to the noumena that generate for us the phenomenal world as “a Supreme Being” (*ibid*). Syntactically, Kant clearly uses the term “Supreme Being” to refer to the noumena, and not to the Christian God, but in his narrative he purposefully confuses the two. Kant argues that the thing-in-itself creates the sensible world for us in the same way a watchmaker creates a watch. Just as a creature should never claim that she knows God, we should not infer from the sensible world sensible world that we know the thing-in-itself:

For we then do not attribute to the Supreme Being any of the properties in themselves, by which we represent objects of experience, and thereby avoid dogmatic anthropomorphism; but we attribute them to his relation to the world, and allow ourselves a symbolical anthropomorphism, which in fact concerns language only, and not the object itself.

If I say that we are compelled to consider the world, as if it were the work of a Supreme Understanding and Will, I really say nothing more, than that a watch, a ship, a regiment, bears the same relation to the watchmaker, the shipbuilder, the commanding officer, as the world of sense (or whatever constitutes the substratum of this complex of appearances) does to the Unknown, which I do not hereby cognize as it is in itself, but as it is for me or in relation to the world, of which I am a part. (§ 57, 129)

With a religious deference, in the same way as we are forbidden to create images of God, for Kant “the Unknown” and “freedom” should be the only adjectives that we ascribe to the thing-in-itself. We might argue that Harman’s dictum “the object is withdrawn” aligns very well with Kant’s strategic symbolical anthropomorphism. Harman proposes that we affirm all creative perceptions as attempts to approach the object, while recognizing that the object can never be grasped, with an excess beyond any translation.⁹ That is, our relationship with the object should not be a zero-sum game, but a perpetual quest, advanced through artistic translations, or metaphors, of the object.

Meillassoux’s term “correlationism” summarizes the Kantian heritage well. But this understanding of the correlation as the inherent epistemological condition does not function to encourage anthropocentrism, as Kant’s argument above shows us – *but neither does cutting the correlation and seeking the thing independent of thoughts lead to de-anthropocentrism*. Meillassoux eventually defines his speculative absolute not as what is independent of human reason but rather *as a negative to human reason*, as “the unthinkable, the illogical, and the self-contradictory.”¹⁰ As it turns out, Meillassoux’s absolute is not an absolute existent in the thing and independent of thought but paradoxically an absolute *for ourselves*, an absolute relative to our reason – an absolute that is absolute precisely because it is outside of *our reason*. Meillassoux calls this speculative absolute “a principle of unreason” (*AF* 60, emphasis removed). For example, we can think about our death or afterlife – “For I think myself as mortal only if I think that my death has no need of my thought of death in order to be actual” (*AF* 57). Meillassoux’s most powerful

⁹ Harman, “The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy,” 139. *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁰ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 66. Hereafter *AF*.

argument – which inspires this article – is that our mind is capable of escaping itself through transformation of the self, at the moment when it is other than itself: “this capacity-to-be-other cannot be conceived as a correlate of our thinking, precisely because it harbours the possibility of our own non-being” (AF 57, emphasis removed).

What I find troubling in Meillassoux’s project, however, is his attempt to translate this relative absolute – an absolute that is outside of human reason – into an objective fact about the universe. At the point when Meillassoux proudly announces his thesis, we find that he in fact surreptitiously passes from subjective transformation (“*thought’s* relinquishment of the principle of reason”) to his Great Outdoors¹¹ (his statement that “*there* is no ultimate Reason”). Meillassoux’s own language deserves to be quoted in full:

Speculation proceeds by accentuating *thought’s* relinquishment of the principle of reason to the point where this relinquishment is converted into a principle, which alone allows us to grasp the fact that *there* is absolutely no ultimate Reason, whether thinkable or unthinkable. *There* is nothing beneath or beyond the manifest gratuitousness of the given – nothing but the limitless and lawless power of its destruction, emergence, or persistence.

We can now claim to have passed through the correlationist circle – or at least to have broken through the wall erected by the latter, which separated thought from the great outdoors, the eternal in-itself, whose being is indifferent to whether or not it is thought. (AF 63)

Meillassoux then gives a very graphic picture as to what this speculative absolute may look like: “a *hyper-Chaos* [...] since, far from guaranteeing order, it guarantees only the possible destruction of every order” (AF 64). Through dazzling logical gymnastics, Meillassoux conflates this inverse of human reason as the Kantian thing-in-itself (AF 67–71). Contrasted with what Kant proposes – to keep the thing simply as the Unknown – it becomes clear that Meillassoux theorizes the thing as only the inversion of human reason. Meillassoux’s elevation of unreason is yet another form of anthropocentrism.

Unfortunately, just as Meillassoux’s term correlationism is selected as the common enemy of speculative realism, critics often misunderstand the agenda of speculative realists as *removing the subject*. Too often, scholars confusingly graft Meillassoux’s stance onto that of OOO. Zahi Zalloua, who is well versed in continental philosophy and has authored five books in the field, still writes emphatically: in his 2019 article “On Not Selling Out the Subject,” “While there are many contenders for the spot, it is the movement called Object-Oriented Ontology [...] that has made the strongest push to sell out the subject, to eradicate the subject from the humanities and social science.”¹² Similarly, in Benjamin Boysen’s recent article, titled “The Embarrassment of being Human” (2018),¹³ he criticizes OOO and new materialism as strands of “antihumanism” and questions the ethical ramifications of both projects:

New materialism and OOO formulate a materialistic antihumanism informed by what I would label a *semiophobia*, by which I mean, an unease and malaise with the idea of human reality as being semiotic. Striving to cast off the semiotic dimension of human reason, consciousness, perception, and agency and condemning it for representing a mistaken idea about human exceptionalism, new materialism seeks to formulate a flat, monistic ontology, in which humans are merely to be understood as one agency among others. The ethical and political ground is consequently relocated outside human beings – who are thus dispossessed of their supposedly moral preeminence – to things themselves (thing-power or material agency).¹⁴

But it is Meillassoux rather than Harman who advocates an anti-humanism that displaces the moral ground outside of the subject. As I will discuss in what follows, in OOO our subjective perception is clearly our foremost and only ethical ground. Niki Young rightly argues that OOO should dissociate itself from critiques of correlationism,¹⁵ because it is inevitable that readers would wrongly infer from the term that

¹¹ For another critical discussion on Meillassoux’s “Great Outdoors,” see also Šatkauskas, *Where Is the Great Outdoors of Meillassoux’s Speculative Materialism?*.

¹² Zalloua, “On Not Selling Out the Subject,” 291.

¹³ Boysen, “The Embarrassment of Being Human,” 225–26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Young, “On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access.”

Harman, just like Meillassoux, seeks to cut the correlation between thinking and the world, and to remove the subject from the picture.

2 Why Kantian philosophy is anthropocentric?

We have seen that Kantian finitude has nothing to do with anthropocentrism. Our next step is to ask in what specific ways the Kantian framework *is* anthropocentric. It is not due to understanding our own finitude – but to the fact that after finitude, Kant seeks to *still give certainty to knowledge*. The criterion for philosophical certainty is artificially imposed and valid only within the human community, with Kant singling out a portion of human reason to be universal, on which our knowledge is built. As we read in Section 19 of his *Prolegomena*:

Therefore objective validity and necessary universality are equivalent terms, and though we do not know the object in itself, yet when we consider a judgment as universal, and also necessary, we understand it to have objective validity.

The object always remains unknown in itself; but when by the concept of the understanding the connexion of the representations of the object, which are given to our sensibility, is determined as universally valid, the object is determined by this relation, and it is the judgment that is objective. (56)

Kant's terms "objective validity" and "necessary universality" refer in fact only to human reason, excluding from the realm of knowledge other possible ways – such that of a bat and an ant – of relating to things. Kant's solution is anthropocentric because he replaces the mystery of objects with the certainty of human reason, and redirects the source of knowledge from objects to structures of human reason. This universality of human reason plays an important role in the Kantian system in that it guarantees the foundation of knowledge. But this mandate of universality, as I will later discuss, also effectively prohibits the possibility of self-cultivation and aesthetic transformation in our quest for knowledge. Kant thereby sets up the framework in modern philosophy that the condition of our access to truth is universal (among humans) rather than individual, while the philosopher's task is to discover this universal law.

Now it should be clear that the correlation between subject and object is not the cause of anthropocentrism. The causes are rather the attempt to define the object in relation to a particular kind of subject (*viz.* humans) *as knowledge*, and the claim that there exists a universal human reason on which knowledge can be built. Nietzsche doubts if there exists a universal human reason at all: "the very relation of a nerve stimulus to the produced percept is in itself no necessary one."¹⁶ To achieve (human) knowledge, the only means is to impose an artificial standard in human society through a communal language and to exclude the abnormal: "just as a dream eternally repeated would be perceived and judged as though real."¹⁷ In his essay, "Truth and Falsity in an Extra-Moral Sense," Nietzsche points out that it is through our "forgetfulness" that we imagine we can ever arrive at knowledge.¹⁸ And if we always remember our perceptual finitude, we should remember that our common perception and everyday language are already metaphors since they are particular – anthropomorphic – ways of relating to the object. It is after long usage that metaphor becomes binding and thus turns into 'human knowledge,' as Nietzsche famously proclaims:

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relationships which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seems to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions, worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, "Truth and Falsity in an Extra-Moral Sense," 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, "Truth and Falsity in an Extra-Moral Sense," 61. Hereafter *TF*.

Kantian finitude establishes that our relationships with things are anthropomorphic metaphors, but Nietzsche reminds us that metaphors – our relations with things – are a realm of free and poetic creation. Anthropocentrism occurs only when we name our prosaic perception as universal reason and as what is capable of knowledge – thus condemning all that departs from normative perception as unreal fiction.

3 How do we achieve de-anthropocentrism?

Having examined the Kantian framework and *in what specific ways* it is anthropocentric, we are now in a better position to overcome anthropocentrism by responding directly to Kant's artificial definition of knowledge. I will outline three interconnected requisites to overcome anthropocentrism from this vantage point – and OOO is a school of thought which achieves each of these.

Requisite one: remove the illusion of knowledge and stay where Kant acknowledges that we have no access to the thing-in-itself. We have seen that Kantian philosophy can be called anthropocentric only when he backpaddles from his insight into perceptual finitude and again elevates human reason (or unreason, as Meillassoux proposes) as the measure of knowledge. Thus, if we want to defy anthropocentrism, the first step would be – not to break through perceptual finitude and cut the correlation – but rather to remove the human measure of knowledge and to include in our metaphysical understanding, as Harman urges, the way each being interacts with the world. This is why Harman's axiom "the object is withdrawn," by which he means that no interactions between objects ever exhaust their reality, is the right point of departure to defy anthropocentrism.

Requisite two: affirm the perpetual quest for the object as the essence of philosophy. After acknowledging that metaphysical truth is ultimately unattainable, we are left with an *ethical* question – how then do we posit our relationship with an object? This question is *ethical* in nature because after we remove the illusion of absolute knowledge, how we relate to the thing is *a choice placed entirely upon ourselves*. And by the term *ethics*, I mean that our relationship with the world cannot be defined by an absolute truth that we have discovered, which might even conveniently suggest to us a pre-defined moral system, but that *we have to create a relationship with the world*. This understanding of ethics, just as the absolute is removed, is akin to the spirit of aesthetics, as Nietzsche puts it:

Between two utterly different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no accuracy, no expression, but at the utmost an *aesthetical* relation. I mean a suggestive metamorphosis, a stammering translation into quite a distinct foreign language, for which purpose, however, there is needed at any rate an intermediate sphere, an intermediate force, freely composing and freely inventing. (TF 66)

Our relationship with the object is fundamentally a created relation and an ethical choice. This created relation may be called aesthetics, while the value that we implement in the realm of the subject-object relation concerns ethics. Such efforts to remove knowledge should not at all be confused with a relapse into subjectivism or idealism.

Nietzsche chooses for himself the ethics of nihilism,¹⁹ a determination to expel the illusion of knowledge. But there is another, more object-oriented choice, which is best articulated by Levinas: that is, we might choose to be in a perpetual quest toward knowledge even if we never attain it. Levinas proposes a "metaphysical desire" that is strongest when the object of our quest is an ultimate Other, forever beyond our possession: for it is precisely this separation from the object that provokes our desire for it.

Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible. Invisibility does not denote an absence of relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea.²⁰

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 9, aphorisms 2 and 3.

²⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 34.

An object-oriented philosopher is someone who chooses the ethics of de-anthropocentrism, acknowledges that knowledge in its entirety is unattainable, and yet still desires the object. Harman often mentions that this perpetual quest in the formula of a Socratic *philosophia*, as the *love* of the object rather than the possession of it.²¹

Requisite three: acknowledge the subjective transformation. This is an often misunderstood but highly important element of de-anthropocentrism: *to step out of the human center and to be other than ourselves!* We have seen that Kant, in order to achieve certainty in philosophy, arbitrarily chose a universal human reason to be the measure of knowledge – and thereby effectively prohibit the possibility of subjective transformation in the quest toward the object. But Foucault argues that for the ancient Greeks, subjective transformation is always presupposed in one’s quest toward truth.²² In Plato’s myth, we humans are born to be trapped in our perceptual finitude as if we were chained in a cave and saw only the shadows of the world (*Republic* 514a–520a). But to see the real world, we must fall in love and be thoroughly transformed by the power of love – as in the metaphor of the lovers growing wings on their souls (*Phaedrus* 245c–267d). Foucault calls this ancient mode of thinking “spirituality”²³ and elsewhere an “aesthetics of existence,”²⁴ both of which presuppose the possibility of a fundamental transformation of the self beyond the given perception. Spirituality for Foucault means an intimate connection between self-cultivation and one’s elevated vision – the creation of the self in one’s attempt to approach truth.

I propose that our access to the world is not an epistemological question but an ethical one: it is a difficult question not for philosophers but for ourselves; it posits that our subjective constitution is not to be interpreted but to be cultivated. It suggests that we carry within ourselves the responsibility to know the world as Plato’s lover does: to be open to the world, seeking the world, revealed by the world. Just as the original meaning of de-anthropocentrism is to go beyond the given human perception, I argue that any inquiry into de-anthropocentrism should be built upon a methodology that entails – not a matter of universal application – but rather of individual creation. To emphasize this element of self-creation, I propose a thesis that *art is the arena where the artist may create subject–object relations, while true de-anthropocentrism happens when the artist recreates the self so as to relate to the world.*

OOO is one branch of philosophy that regards art as the path to de-anthropocentrism, for art allows us to see the object in a way different from normative reason. A most surprising upshot of Harman’s OOO is that he does not discredit reality, even as it appears only in our subjective experience, insofar as we firmly understand that the existence of objects always exceeds far experience of them. Rather, a major innovation of OOO is that Harman seeks to reconceptualize the dire opposition between the human and the unknown thing-in-itself, as an unfolding process in which the subject may be in quest of all different kinds of powerful impacts that an object is capable of generating. If an aesthetic experience has an impact on us, this experience is of course real – it unpacks the powers of the object and our sensitivity, eliminating the perceptual distance and confronting us with a direct exposure. In an aesthetic experience when we see a cypress aflame, we are in effect the only real object to witness and recognize a facet of the executant reality of the cypress. Harman argues that a metaphor such as “the cypress is a flame” is capable of making us experience the object as if we became the cypress aflame ourselves, of lure us to “step in and attempt the electrifying work of becoming the cypress-substance for the flame-qualities.”²⁵ Harman calls this transformative power of metaphor its “theatricality.”²⁶ In OOO, our subjective experience is still the anchor of reality, for the simple reason that we are the only real objects accessible to ourselves, while all real objects in the world are withdrawn. De-anthropocentrism is thus achieved not because we can now

²¹ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 6.

²² Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 14–9.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 255. For a discussion on Foucault’s aesthetics of existence, see O’Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*.

²⁵ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81–5.

achieve a nonhuman worldview, *but because we have the capacity to go beyond any given perception* – to be carried away by an aesthetic experience, to see a cypress aflame and to see space and time in a way other than what is dictated by *a priori* reason, to be other than ourselves in order to approach the ultimate otherness of the world.

4 Metaphor, or how should we love the stone?

I agree with Harman’s assertion that art should be the cognitive mode in which we approach the object, after we remove the human measure of knowledge (which Harman sometimes states in the slogan “aesthetics as first philosophy”). However, theories of art abound, and art is not inherently object-oriented or de-anthropocentric. Metaphor – as a medium that transfers between humans and things – is always already anthropomorphic, *but how humans relate to things in a metaphor, I argue, depends entirely on our ethical attitude*. The transfiguration of the thing in a metaphor may be charged with the meaning of the independence of consciousness from the physical world, as Hegel argues: “it evinces its power to bring into representation its elevation about everything external.”²⁷ Metaphor may even be a site of human dominance of the object, as an exertion of will to power, for example, as Nietzsche writes: “The states in which we infuse a transfiguration and fullness into things and poetize about them until they reflect back our fullness and joy in life.”²⁸ But Heidegger asks whether, within the framework of anthropomorphism, our relationship with things might be different. Heidegger’s own language deserves to be quoted that length:

All idealist philosophy has always maintained, namely that properties do not accrue to things themselves, but are representations, ideas that we as subjects transfer onto objects. ... Ever since Aristotle’s *Poetics* we have had the expression ‘metaphor’ [μεταφορά] for this.

Certainly, this is the general view and conclusive explanation. However, does it explain anything? [...] After all, this does not happen by chance or arbitrarily, but evidently because we find something *about things* which demands of its own accord, as it were, that we address and name them in this way and not otherwise. [...] *What* is it, then, that here causes the attunement or *gives rise to transference*? In that case, we are no longer transferring something, but in some way *apprehending it from the things themselves*.²⁹

Within this very framework of human finitude, where all that we see and think is already an anthropomorphic metaphor, Heidegger proposes that our relationship with the thing might be one of attunement rather than of dominance. Another theory of metaphor Heidegger proposes is that metaphor serves to frame anew and bring forth the unique quality of the object, out of the concealment of our everyday perception and abstract theorization. A Greek temple is a metaphor, which serves to bring forth the firmness of the rocky ground it stands on and the violence of the storm it sustains.³⁰

But what makes up this difference? What allows Heidegger to propose that one’s relationship with things may be marked by an openness and susceptibility? How to live a life where “Man and Being are appropriated to each other [because] they belong to each other”?³¹ Perhaps the answer is as simple as that we, each of us, has to cultivate the virtues of openness and susceptibility. We must be able to allow ourselves to be transformed and affected by things in our attempts to resist human-centeredness. What Heidegger posits for us is a matter of ethical exhortation: “we must experience simply this owning in which man and Being are delivered over to each other, that is, we must enter into what we call *the event of appropriation*.”³²

²⁷ Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, I:407.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 421, aphorism 801.

²⁹ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, § 21, 85. Emphases original.

³⁰ Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 41.

³¹ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 31.

³² *Ibid.*, 36.

Within the domain of metaphor, the difference between Hegel and Nietzsche on the one hand and Heidegger on the other, is that Heidegger urges that the relationship between humans and things should be a two-way street. De-anthropocentrism means the capacity of subjective transformation, the capacity to be affected by things just as things are morphed by us.

So far, we have established that de-anthropocentrism cannot be achieved by removing the subject and seeking the inhuman absolute. Rather, living in a world that is always already anthropomorphic, where, as Harman asserts, all perception is translation,³³ the question of how we may escape human-centeredness is entirely subjective and ethical: what should my attitude toward the object be? Here ethics more specifically refers to our predisposed value to create our relationship with the withdrawn object, while aesthetics is the arena in which these created relationships manifest. I propose that de-anthropocentric ethics can be formulated as a perpetual quest for the object, and a subjective transformation in which we might escape our given perception. The two types of ethics might still be unfamiliar to my readers, and in what follows I will introduce a literary example – Baudelaire’s poem “La Beauté” – to illustrate them.

Baudelaire’s poem “La Beauté”³⁴ tells the story that the poet loves the stone statue, which is a motif that began in Parnassian poetry in the 1840s. A comparison between Baudelaire’s poem “La Beauté” and its Parnassian predecessors can illustrate how Baudelaire rewrites the relationship between the poet and the object from an anthropocentric transfiguration into an object-oriented quest. Around the motif of loving the stone, different kinds of desire – egoistic possession and unrequited quest – may be read as metaphysical allegories of how humans relate to the object. Parnassian poetry is a conscious movement that rebels against emotional expression in Romanticism, and adopts as the symbol of poetic ideals a white marble statue of Venus or a sphinx – which symbolizes the desired poetic qualities of impassivity, eternity, and perfect form. Also, the ideal statue symbolizes the autonomy of a work of art which demands the poet’s disinterested love, for her existence serves only an aesthetic purpose and fulfills no carnal desire. Hegel argues that the ethical significance of Romantic art lies in a celebration of the victory of self-consciousness over the external world, and as a result the formal requirement of Romantic art is that the material employed is “inessential and transient,” “just as readily [imagination] can jumble the shapes of the external world and distort them grotesquely.”³⁵ The Parnassian poets, in contrast to Hegel’s Romanticism which reduces materiality to plastic mental image, often emphasizes that the material they work with is resistant – but only to eventually conquer it, so as to elevate their poetic prowess. As Théophile Gautier writes in his manifesto “L’Art” (1852),³⁶ the poet aims at asserting his prowess by shaping the difficult stone into a statue so that it will contain his floating dream, and thereby grant his fleeting ideas eternity: “Sculpte, lime, cisèle;/Que ton rêve flottant/Se scelle/Dans le bloc résistant!” [Carve, file, chisel; let your irresolute dream be sealed in the unyielding block!]

The relationship between mind and matter in Parnassian poetry often translates into metaphors of the lover and the beloved, into battles of possession and resistance. In his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), Gautier’s hero posits that the ideal object of love should be a statue, since it inspires the poet’s disinterested love while at the same time it perpetually sustains his desire – for she forever eludes possession:

Il y a quelque chose de grand et de beau à aimer une statue, c’est que l’amour est parfaitement désintéressé, qu’on n’a à craindre ni la satiété ni le dégoût de la victoire, et qu’on ne peut espérer raisonnablement un second prodige pareil à l’histoire de Pygmalion.

[There is something grand and beautiful in loving a statue, in that the love is perfectly disinterested, that you have not to dread the satiety or disgust of victory, and that you cannot reasonably hope for a second wonder similar to the story of Pygmalion.]³⁷

³³ Harman, “The Only Exit from Modern Philosophy,” 144.

³⁴ Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, No. 17.

³⁵ Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, I:81.

³⁶ Gautier, *Émaux et Camées*, 132–34. The translation is quoted from Rees, *The Penguin Book of French Poetry*, 121.

³⁷ Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, 153; the translation is quoted from Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin: A Romance of Love and Passion*, 100–1.

But Gautier himself rarely demonstrates this perpetual love in his poems. More often, he is too eager to possess the object, whose resistance is only a pretense. In Gautier's "Symphonie en blanc majeur" (Symphony in White Major) (1852),³⁸ the poet compares a woman he loves, who in his imagination is chaste, pure, and beautiful, to a series of white substances and animals, in no logical order: marble, clouds, lilies, the white foam of the sea from which Venus is born, ivory, ermine, quicksilver, may hawthorns, alabaster, and doves. These white substances are evoked as similes to build an impression that the woman is otherworldly and out of reach. The poet exerts his poetic prowess to convince us that her beauty is divinely pure – but then, when it comes time to conquer this divine beauty, the poet conveniently chooses the white substance that can be melted, metaphorically, by the poet's passion:

Est-ce la Madone des neiges,
Un sphinx blanc que l'hiver sculpta;
Sphinx enterré par l'avalanche,
Gardien des glaciers étoilés,
Et qui, sous sa poitrine blanche,
Cache de blancs secrets gelés?
Sous la glace où calme il repose,
Oh! qui pourra fondre ce cœur!
Oh! qui pourra mettre un ton rose
Dans cette implacable blancheur!

[Is she the Madonna of the snows,
a white sphinx sculpted by winter;
A sphinx buried by the avalanche,
guardian of the starlit glaciers,
who, beneath her white breast,
hides white frozen secrets?
Under the ice where it lies calmly at rest,
oh! Who can melt this heart!
Oh! Who can touch with a pink tint
this relenting whiteness!]

The snow sphinx has a white breast, underneath which she bears a secret love. Perhaps because the sphinx's love is exclusive to someone, she remains icy to all other pursuers. For that special person, her heart would be melted, perhaps dissolved, and she herself unable to preserve her icy identity. Unlike a sphinx carved out of white marble, the snowy sphinx's existence resides no doubt in the poet's imagination, for she exists to fulfill the poet's widest fantasy: to create the most beautiful woman and one who is exclusive to himself. What we see here is precisely what Heidegger calls "the attitude of representational thinking,"³⁹ in which the poet never relates to the thing but resides only in his own imagination.

Of course, the reader may doubt the value of the argument here, since we know *in advance* that the white substances in "Symphonie en blanc majeur" are only figures of speech evoked to adorn the object of desire, here obviously a woman. In Théodore de Banville's "À Vénus de Milo" (1842), however, the poet explicitly addresses himself to a marble statue:

Ô Vénus de Milo,
...
Rêve aux plis arrêtés, grand poème de pierre,
...
Et vous savez si bien ces amours éperdus
Que si vous retrouviez un jour vos bras perdus
Et qu'à vos pieds tombât votre blanche tunique,
Nos froideurs pâmeraient dans un combat unique,

³⁸ *Émaux et Camées*, 22–4. *The Penguin Book of French Poetry*, 120.

³⁹ Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 32.

Et vous m'étaleriez votre ventre indompté,
Pour y dormir un soir comme un amant sculpté!

[O Venus de Milo,

...

Still, frozen-folded dream, great poem of stone,

...

And you know so well those uncontainable loves
That if one day you got back your lost arms
And your tunic slipped down over your broken feet,
Our coldnesses [sic] would swoon in unique combat,
And you would spread out your unconquered body
For me to lie on all night like a sculpted lover!]⁴⁰

Here again we find that the poet reenacts Pygmalion's myth and that the statue turns to life – and we realize just how difficult it actually is to let the statue be a stony statue and to refrain from possessing it by transforming it into a living woman. The rhetorical figure that de Banville employs here is *apostrophe*, “the calling out to inanimate, dead, or absent beings.” And as Barbara Johnson comments, apostrophe as a poetic power often demonstrates itself as “the seemingly involuntary transformation of something material into an instrument capable of sounding the depths of humanity.”⁴¹ The poet calls out to the Venus statue, and while he is merely counting on the possibility that she may one day, somehow, regain her lost arm – the power of the poetic voice is such that he can *visualize* anything imaginative in his poem, including restoring Venus's lost arm, turning the statue alive, stripping her of her tunic, putting her down and spreading out her body on his bed! The poet in return is turned into a “sculpted lover,” which is supposedly a punishment for his profane fantasy. But he in fact assumes no qualities of the statue; he just swoons out of ecstasy. Turning a Venus statue into his mistress, de Banville asserts his poetic sovereignty almost shamelessly. Venus's unconquered loins (“ventre indompté”)⁴² is virgin and sacred for unimaginative mortals, but is there to be relished by the poet's omnipotent imagination.

To love a statue is an allegory developed by Parnassian poets to explore the relationship between mind and matter in works of art, in which we discover that they are often too eager to *possess* the object of love by transforming the statue into a living woman. But Baudelaire's poem “La Beauté”⁴³ is one that truly demonstrates the poet's perpetual love for the stony statue, while the reward of this love is that the poet will be inspired to create works of art. As Nietzsche notes that the relationship between subject and object is always already metaphorical, Heidegger only hopes that the appropriation between humans and things can be mutual. The poet's quest in “La Beauté” is de-anthropocentric, because it includes the poet himself in the realm of transformation.

The poem begins with the first-person narrative from Beauty's own voice:

Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,
Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,
Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour
Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.

[I am beautiful, mortals, like a dream of stone,
And my breast, where each is wounded in his turn,
Is made to inspire in poets such a love,
Eternal and mute, like matter itself.]⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Banville, *Les Cariatides*, 373–4. The translation is quoted from Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 115–6.

⁴¹ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 6–8.

⁴² Banville, *Les Cariatides*, 374.

⁴³ Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, No. 17.

⁴⁴ Trans. Barbara Johnson in Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 124.

Beauty claims that she is beautiful, like “a dream of stone.” “Un rêve de pierre” is ambiguous in meaning as the proposition “de” connects two ontologically distinctive entities: subjective desire and insensible matter. We cannot be certain who is dreaming (the poet or the stony Beauty), nor what the dream is composed of (the stone or the beautiful). But this ambiguous linguistic connection seems to be a point of ontological transformation, as Beauty claims that the poet in love aspires to *a transformation of himself toward Otherness*, to assume qualities of matter in square contrast to life, as mute as it is eternal. The philosophical definition of “the beautiful,” then, is explicated as a *relationship* between two entities – the dream of stone – that stands for the dynamic of the subject and the object. It is beautiful because the poet loves the stone, and because the breast is stony, which at once frustrates and fascinates the poet. Already mind and matter are conceptualized through a sharp contrast: the poet is inspired, the stone indifferent; the poet vulnerable to wounds, the stone eternally mute. Beauty as the object of love seems to be incorporated as plainly as a stone, the exemplar of mute, insensible matter itself, rather than any objects that are conventionally associated with poetic values such as gold or gems. But then Baudelaire metaphorizes the qualities of matter itself – mute, impassive, and eternal – as the virtues of an absolute ideal. Already in the first stanza, Baudelaire makes his remarkable aesthetic statement: *the beautiful is defined by the eternal love of the poet toward matter and by the disparities between the two*. The poet is desirous; the stone is mute; the love will not be fulfilled in human terms but rather sets up the structure of the poetic quest.

The theme of a transformative yearning toward matter or the thing-in-itself is proposed as early as Plato, but also by a few Romantic thinkers. One of the Platonic myths, already cited above, is in *Phaedrus* where the transformative power that allows the soul to regrow its wings and fly upward to see real things is called love. Another myth is in *Symposium*, where we read that a personified Love, a son born of Poros (wealth) and Penia (poverty), is by definition a desire that is driven toward Otherness (203b) for qualities that it lacks, such as that the mortal poet loves eternal matter. Wagner in his “The Art-Work of the Future” translates Schopenhauer’s will – the monist, essential force of nature and the only necessity of our life – into love. He argues against the narcissist idealism that seeks the self-same inwardness, and champions a metaphysical longing that must be directed toward the shore of the objective world so as not to drown us in “the sea of unallayable heart-yearning” (125).⁴⁵

But Baudelaire as the poet of modernity emphasizes the alienation between mind and matter, despite the poet’s existential yearning. In the second stanza, Beauty pronounces that she refuses to be shaped into a work of meaningful art, perhaps as she asserts her identity as matter, as plain as stone:

Je trône dans l’azur comme un sphinx incompris;
 J’unis un cœur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;
 Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,
 Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.

[I sit enthroned mysterious like a sphinx
 I join my snowy heart to the whiteness of swans;
 I hate the motion that disturbs the lines
 And never do I cry and never laugh].

Matter is eternal: it hates the poetic manipulation that displaces the lines; matter is impassive: it neither laughs nor cries. If the poet tends to want to represent materials as mental images that he can manipulate, beauty claims its material existence will not lend itself to meaning or expression. The image of “sphinx incompris” is the metaphor that Baudelaire casts onto the stone, which brings forth its mysteriousness. Precisely because the stone would not yield to terms of subjective desire, its impassivity for the poet is a sheer fatal fascination. The poetic quest is rather predicated upon a misunderstanding – stony impassivity taken for psychological mystery – in which mind and matter exchange traits, in the same way the sphinx

⁴⁵ Wagner, “The Art-Work of the Future,” 125.

proclaims that she unites the snowy heart with the swan's plumes.⁴⁶ This is what Heidegger means by mutual appropriation. For Harman, the power of metaphor resides precisely in the fact that the subject will be induced to experience the metaphorical qualities of the real stone, by fusing the qualities of the stone and the sphinx and, I might add, by translating between the physical and the psychical.

The third stanza reveals that the sphinx has the power of inspiration that she in fact borrows from human signification, which will set the poet on an austere journey of production:

Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,
Que j'ai l'air d'emprunter aux plus fiers monuments,
Consumeront leurs jours en d'austères études;

[The poets, facing my grand attitudes,
Which I borrow from proud monuments,
Will consume away their days in austere study]

The stone inspires the poet by her grand attitudes which she *seems* to borrow from the proudest monuments. The monument is another metaphor for the stone, which brings forth its eternity. This eternity, because it outlives life, often serves as a memorial for significant mortals. This monumental attitude seems to suggest to the poet that he should work hard to achieve beauty and thereby leave a lasting fame to future generations. The stone suggests some monumental significance in human history that is more than itself: this excess, this exchange between the poetic desire (toward beauty, to accomplish his work, and to achieve immortality himself as the stone does) and its material existence, is precisely the power of mystery/metaphor that inspires the poet to conduct all his austere studies. Again, here we see the poet stepping into the metaphor to experience the monumental qualities of the stone, as Harman's theory of metaphor suggests. Beauty's proud attitude and her power of misrecognition at once humiliates and arouses the poet in his masochistic love. But the creative process is predicated precisely upon this perpetual quest.

Beauty has been hinting at her power of misrecognition and, by the final stanza, Beauty reveals as an epiphany that from this exchange between the subject desire and object qualities springs precisely the source of poetic inspiration:

Car j'ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:
Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!

[For I, to fascinate those docile lovers,
Possess pure mirrors that beautify all things:
My eyes, my wide eyes, charged with eternal light.]

The poet yearns for matter, but Beauty's eyes are like mirrors that reflect back only the poet's self-images and deflects the poet's search for herself. The metaphors of the sphinx and the monument are like the mirrors that reflect back the poet's yearning for the absolute and eternity – but these mirrors are also the eyes of the stone. This collusion between the mirrors and the eyes, this exchange between subjective desires and material qualities, is precisely the power of the metaphor. Baudelaire here seems to repeat the Kantian dictum that we only see the appearance of things produced by our own consciousness, not the thing-in-itself. If the sphinx's mysterious air appears to the poet like a linguistic riddle, the answer to this riddle will not capture the stone, but will be “the man” himself. *But* the poem is structured in such a way that it is Beauty who raises the mirrors with her magical eyes – and thus reverses the power dynamics between the lover and the beloved, and negates any idealist pride about our productive consciousness. For Baudelaire, our love cannot be persistent if we love only a narcissistic self-image; rather, we must love

⁴⁶ Paul de Man notes that a trademark of symbolism is that the language is “able to cross the gap between subject and object without apparent effort, and to unite them within the single unit of the natural image.” de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 153.

the absolute even as the very definition of the absolute is precisely that it is inaccessible. The sphinx's riddle invites devotion but never allows achievement. The poetic practice will then reside forever in quest and never in rest, while the metaphors – the sphinx and the monument – invite the poet to experience the qualities of the stone. I have suggested that art is the ethical ground where the poet creates a relation with the object, while de-anthropocentric art takes place when poets also create and transform themselves. Harman defines art as “the disappearance of a real object behind its sensual qualities.”⁴⁷ For Baudelaire, art is neither an easy imitation of reality, nor a self-sufficient and self-referential Eden of enclosure. It is rather an eternally suspended desire, a wound open to the incomprehensible stone, whose appearance reflects and transforms the lover but reveals not itself.

Baudelaire's de-anthropocentric quest is indeed peculiar, even by contemporary standards. Just as Parnassian poets propose to love the statue but rarely fulfill their promise, critics today still rarely read the poem as one in which the poet loves the stone. Judith Ryan, for one example, supposes that the stony Beauty in the poem is an image of “the courtesan Phryne posing for the sculptor Praxiteles.” Ryan poses the hypothesis in order to answer the question of why the stone has human eyes:

This hypothesis would explain the curious shifts between statue and human being, while locating the ambiguities of the poem in the situation of the sculptor's model. Accustomed to remaining motionless during long hours of posing in the studio, she feels estranged from ordinary life, more like a statue than a person. Yet although the statues are designed to eternalize her much vaunted beauty, she claims that she herself is superior to them, both because she is their inspiration and because one part of her cannot be petrified however long she poses: her clear, living eyes, which enhance the beauty of all they reflect.⁴⁸

In her interpretation, Ryan insists that the human model feels superior to the statues carved after her form, because she is the source of inspiration, and because she is human and has human eyes. Yet, bearing in mind that in the poem any fleshly description about Beauty is curiously absent, I disagree with Ryan's interpretation. In Gautier's “Symphonie en blanc majeur,” the woman who is compared to an icy sphinx has a vivid carnal charm. Gautier names each of her bodily parts – her breast, her shoulder, her skin, her flesh – although these parts are then compared rather abstractly to all white substances. De Banville's “À Vénus de Milo” likewise emphasizes the sensual charm of the marble statue, and following this he flaunts poetic fantasy to relish it, by virtue of his power of apostrophe that is capable of transforming the stony statue into a living mistress. In both cases the desired women, whether living or stony, are symbols of the poetic ideal in the poets' anthropocentric imagination, of their ambition to conquer the most difficult matter. In Baudelaire's “La Beauté,” by contrast, Beauty has no physical traits and all the description that we read is about her aloof attitude, which we can rightly expect from a real stone. Her chest is not “neige montée en globe” [snow-modeled into a sphere] as we see in Gautier's “Symphonie,” but rather it hurts because it is figuratively, perhaps also literally, stony. Two major figures in the poems, an incomprehensible sphinx statue coupled with the attitude of proud monuments, are metaphors for the qualities of the stone, not of a living woman. In return, the poet's love toward her is not carnal but metaphysical, and is related explicitly to the kind of love that the poet imbues into a work of art: that this love inspires the poet in austere study to learn how to carve the stone. Ryan's interpretation, however, is very telling with regard to how strong the impulse is to transform the inaccessible stone into a violable woman. De-anthropocentrism is difficult, because few are willing to admit that the object is forever withdrawn, and to be on a perpetual quest in which the reward is not the stone, but a transformation of the self.

5 From metaphysics to ethics

The article has dedicated itself to the argument that de-anthropocentrism cannot be achieved by removing the subject and achieving an inhuman absolute. Rather, I argue that Kantian finitude is the very first step

⁴⁷ Harman, *Art and Objects*, 24.

⁴⁸ Ryan, “More Seductive Than Phryne,” 1134.

of de-anthropocentrism, along with Harman's understanding that our relationship with the object is only one among all kinds of relationships between all objects. The dictum of OOO "the object is withdrawn" is thus the first requisite of de-anthropocentrism. It then follows that we must establish a de-anthropocentric relationship with the absolute beyond our grasp. And since the object is forever inaccessible, this relationship is entirely subjective, or stated differently: ethical. We must create ourselves in order to relate to the object, and such created relationships may be called art. I suggest that a de-anthropocentric art can be formulated as a perpetual love of the withdrawn object (requisite two), and a transformation of the self that escapes from our given perception, while offering ourselves as the experiential ground of the object (requisite three). Just as the object is withdrawn, de-anthropocentrism is in the first place ethical – it involves a creation of the self to love and experience the stone.

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