

The Road to Objects*

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Since 2007 there has been a great deal of interest in speculative realism, launched in the spring of that year at a well-attended workshop in London. It was always a loose arrangement of people who shared few explicit doctrines and no intellectual heroes except the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, an improbable patron saint for a school of metaphysics. Lovecraft serves as a sort of mascot for the “speculative” part of speculative realism, since his grotesque semi-Euclidean monsters symbolize the rejection of everyday common sense to which speculative realism aspires. The “realism” part of speculative realism was aimed not at idealism, which few people openly defend today, but at what Quentin Meillassoux calls “correlationism”: the view that philosophy cannot speak of human or world in isolation, but only of a primal correlation or rapport between the two.¹ The goal of the speculative realists was to bring the things-in-themselves back into discussion, though there was ferocious disagreement amongst us as to how these things could be talked about: whether the things themselves remained inaccessible to direct access as in Kantian and Heideggerian philosophy, or whether they could be the object of direct mathematical insight as for Alain Badiou and his circle.

This diversity of opinion led to an early break-up for the speculative realist movement, which quickly broke into numerous splinter groups bearing little resemblance to one another. In an earlier essay published in this journal,² I discussed Meillassoux’s “speculative materialism”; a more detailed account can now be found in my recently published book on his philosophy.³ In this essay I will discuss the “object-oriented” branch of speculative realism, with which I have a more direct personal involvement as one of its founders. One of the primary differences between speculative materialism and object-oriented ontology (OOO) concerns the point just mentioned. Both schools are united in their resistance to the banal claims of continental philosophy to stand “beyond” the realism/anti-realism dispute (Husserl and Heidegger, unfortunately, must take the blame for such assertions). Yet there remains a question as to what extent reality can be *known*. Are the things-in-themselves *directly* accessible to humans or not? Simply put, the answer of speculative materialism is yes, while the answer of object-oriented ontology is no.

The question can be restated as follows. We might summarize the philosophical position of Kant by saying that he makes two basic claims:

1. Human knowledge is finite, since the things-in-themselves can be thought but never known.
2. The human-world relation (mediated by space, time, and the categories) is philosophically privileged over every other sort of relation; philosophy is primarily about human access to the world, or at least must take this access as its starting point.

Object-oriented philosophy agrees with the first Kantian point and disagrees with the second, while for speculative materialism it is precisely the reverse. For object-oriented philosophy, the things-in-themselves remain forever beyond our grasp, but not because of a specifically *human* failure to reach them. Instead, relations *in general* fail to grasp their relata, and in this sense the ghostly things-in-themselves haunt inanimate causal relations no less than the human-world relation, which no longer stands at the center of philosophy.

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¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier. (London: Continuum, 2008.)

² Graham Harman, “Meillassoux’s Virtual Future,” *continent*, 1.2 (2011), pp. 78-91.

³ Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.)

For speculative materialism it is exactly the opposite. Here, humans remain at the center of philosophy, though their knowledge is no longer finite. Humans are capable of the absolute; any qualities that can be mathematized are primary qualities that can be known absolutely, with no dark residue lying behind them. And since this “absolute” exists even when we sleep or die, speculative materialism often claims to be a form of realism rather than a transcendental idealism. The present essay is confined to the internal challenges of the object-oriented approach, the one I prefer myself.

1. Objects

In the beginning, philosophy was an *anti*-object-oriented enterprise. Normal human experience seems to confront a world broken into units: natural objects such as flowers, stars, and wild animals, artificial objects ranging from pirate ships to copper mines, and both the natural and artificial kinds ranging widely in size from tiny to gigantic. Despite our constant experience of objects in daily life, philosophy began in the pre-Socratic era as an effort to find a more basic reality lying beneath all these entities. For various pre-Socratics the world was made of immortal elements such as water or air, of four elements in combination mixed by love and hate, of atoms swerving in the void, or of a formless *apeiron* rumbling beneath all tangible things. No matter which of these is chosen as the foundation of the world, the familiar individual entities of the cosmos are not treated as fundamental. In this way all the flowers, stars, wild animals, pirate ships, and copper mines, not to mention the objects of religion and flat-out superstition, are *undermined*. They are treated as composite things built of something more fundamental; in the pre-Socratic period, it was simply a question of deciding what was the most fundamental element. Nor is this attitude confined to ancient pre-Socratic times, since we find the same thing even now: in the crude present-day materialism that holds objects to be nothing more than conglomerates of molecules, atoms, quarks and electrons, or strings; in philosophies of the so-called “pre-individual,” which treats the world as a semi-articulate lump arbitrarily carved into pieces by the human intellect; and in even more recent philosophies that treat the world as a mathematical structure that breaks into isolated “real patterns” only at different levels of observational scale.⁴ Let’s use the term “undermining” for those theories which think that objects are too shallow to be the truth. Here, the real action supposedly unfolds at a deeper layer than individual things, whether that of tiny elemental pieces or of a semi-liquid, holistic quasi-lump.

But for those who wish to denigrate objects as the basic theme of philosophy, there is another way to do it. Rather than undermining objects by dissolving them downward into some component element, we can dissolve them upward or “overmine” them, to coin a new English term. Rather than viewing objects as too shallow to be the truth, we can treat them as too falsely deep to be the truth. This happens whenever a philosophy tells us that an object is nothing more than how it appears to the observer; or an arbitrary bundling of immediately perceived qualities; or when it tells us that there are only “events,” not underlying substances; or that objects are real only insofar as they perceive or affect other things. In all these cases, objects are treated as a useless hypothesis, a false depth lying beneath the immediate givens of consciousness or the concrete events of the world. As I have written elsewhere, it is also possible to combine overmining and undermining in a single philosophy. This happens most often in scientific materialism, which undermines when it finds tinier components from which our everyday objects are built, but overmines when it thinks these tiny pieces are nothing over and above their mathematizable properties.

In short, a large part of present-day philosophy is devoted to contempt for individual objects, which it denounces as the gullible fantasies of common sense—or “folk psychology,” as it is arrogantly phrased by a number of scientific hacks. The main counter-tradition to undermining and overmining is, of course, the Aristotelian tradition. Here individual entities are treated as the primary substance, which both undermining and overmining philosophies enjoy mocking as “mid-sized physical objects.” But it seems to me that the Aristotelian tradition is closer to the truth than the other two. Admittedly, there are numerous features of traditional substance that we might not wish to accept. Consider the philosophy of Leibniz, for instance. While Leibniz distinguishes between substance and aggregate, we do not have to agree with him that a mushroom is a substance but an army is not. While Leibniz holds that every substance is eternal, we can follow Aristotle’s brave decision and recognize *destructible* substances such as plants, insects, and humans, which he was the first in Ancient Greece to do. Nor is it necessary to agree with Leibniz that substances have no windows and do not affect one another directly (though in fact I do agree with Leibniz on this point, if not with the others).

Anyhow, we can see that Aristotle, the Scholastics, and Leibniz, with their primary substances and substantial forms, make up an early object-oriented school surrounded on both sides by legions of

⁴ See also Graham Harman, “I Am Also of the Opinion That Materialism Must Be Destroyed,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 28, No. 5, 2010. Pages 772-790.

underminers and overminers who reject individual entities as the basic stuff of the world. But I myself came to that tradition indirectly, through a less obvious but more contemporary tradition of object-oriented thought: phenomenology. Here I mean both Husserl and Heidegger, each of them making a different innovation in the philosophy of objects. We should speak briefly about these two different but deeply related currents.

Like Brentano before him, Husserl is concerned with the sphere of intentionality, or “immanent objectivity.” Suspending all theories about an extra-phenomenal outside world, Husserl analyzes the phenomena as they appear to us, with attention to the subtlest contours of our dealings with phenomena such as blackbirds or mailboxes. There can be no question that Husserl is an idealist to the core—even in the *Logical Investigations*—for him it makes no sense to say that there could be realities not observable *in principle* by consciousness. Nonetheless, Husserl often *feels* like a realist. The atmosphere of his writings is one in which individual things seem opaque and resistant, not entirely exhausted by their appearance in the mind. By contrast, one rarely or never has this sense when reading someone like Hegel, at least not when it comes to individual entities. Despite the scholarly precision of his thinking, Husserl often seems puzzled by the many facets of concrete individual things, rather than merely overmining them and reducing them to their appearance in consciousness. This paradox must be considered briefly.

Like Brentano, Husserl is focused on intentionality, which means: on objects lying before the mind. All perception, judgment, love, and hate is perception, judgment, love, or hate *of some object*. This object is never a concealed thing-in-itself lying beyond access, but purely immanent: intentionality means immanent objectivity. But in one of the most important passages of the *Logical Investigations*, Husserl takes a distance from Brentano when determining exactly what this means. Whereas Brentano views intentionality as a matter of “experienced contents,” for Husserl intentionality consists of “object-giving acts.” The difference may sound dry and technical, but I would call it Husserl’s most important contribution to philosophy. To say that our encounter with an apple consists of “experienced contents” is to say that we experience hundreds or thousands of qualities on a democratic plane, all of them pressed together into a single thing called an apple. The exact shape of the apple, its temperature in the hand, its degree of hardness, the exact profile it displays in this very moment, its precise momentary sweetness—all these are equally qualities of the apple as an experienced content. Husserl views the situation differently. For Husserl, the experience of an apple is an object-giving act quite apart from the list of qualities it now seems to possess. We can toss the apple in the air, view it from numerous angles, observe it in various degrees of sunlight, describe it in moods of euphoria and in crippling depression, but for us it remains the same apple in all these cases. To use Husserl’s famous technical term, there are countless “adumbrations” (*Abschattungen*) of the apple. The apple itself is not obtained by adding up all the different surfaces and profiles it can display; rather, the apple is there from the start as an enduring unit that exhibits numerous different facets at different times.

Against all the empiricist theories, Husserl establishes a permanent rift between intentional objects and the various intentional qualities they might have at any given time. In the realm of conscious experience, objects are not “bundles of qualities,” but units lying deeper than any display of surface qualities. In short, there is a permanent tension in the sphere of intentional experience between objects and their qualities. It seems to me that this is why Husserl feels like a realist: for him, intentional objects are not just bundles of qualities lying before the mind, but places of fracture where an object grinds up against its own qualities, displaying different qualities at different times even while remaining distinct from them. As far as I am aware, this is also something completely new in the history of philosophy. It is true that Husserl cuts off the real world, collapsing everything into an immanent phenomenal sphere. But precisely in so doing, he is able to discover a previously unknown drama within the intentional sphere, which is broken up into objects with constantly shifting faces. Instead of calling them intentional objects, I prefer to call them “sensual” objects for at least two reasons. For one thing, the phrase “intentional objects” is dry and technical, unpleasant to repeat as frequently as it needs to be when we discuss such topics. But more importantly, the word “intentional” is used ambiguously; many philosophers use it to refer to the object lying *outside* the mental sphere, a distant object at which our thoughts “point.” But that is not what Brentano and Husserl mean when they speak of intentionality, and thus the phrase “intentional object” often leads to confusion. For this reason, we can speak instead of a permanent tension between sensual objects and sensual qualities, or between an apple that remains the same apple from one moment to the next, and the wildly fluctuating kaleidoscope of its surface features.

Here we can see how the strife between object and quality unfolds in the purely sensual arena described by phenomenology. And this brings us to Heidegger. If Husserl turns philosophy into a description of how things appear in consciousness, we know that for Heidegger our primary mode of dealing with things is not through their appearing to consciousness. The place where Heidegger breaks with Husserl is the famous tool-analysis published in *Being and Time*, but first presented to his Freiburg students eight years earlier, in 1919. A

brief summary will be enough for our purposes here. What is key for Heidegger is that insofar as something is present to consciousness, it is merely present-at-hand (*vorhanden*). But what is present to our minds in this way is only a tiny proportion of the entities with which we are involved. The air we breathe, the floor on which we stand, the heart, kidneys, and lungs that function within us, all tend not to be present insofar as they are doing their work. As every reader of Heidegger knows, it is usually broken equipment that comes to conscious attention. Equipment in its seamless functioning is ready-to-hand rather than present-at-hand, *zuhanden* rather than *vorhanden*.

A few additional points need to be made. In the first place, the tool-analysis is not limited to a specific *kind* of entity called “tools” in the narrow sense, which would include hammers, drills, cars, guns, and computers, while excluding family, friends, house pets, and God. Instead, every entity has both sides: ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. This is not because we “use” our family and friends in the same way that we exploit hammers and drills, but because our friends no less than our tools are deeper than any possible access we might have to them. The hammer-in-itself is not the same as our perception of it at any given moment. But the same holds for people, and just as much for the cryptic, concealed God who communicates only by signs.

In the second place, we need to avoid the frequent reading of the tool-analysis as equivalent to a distinction between praxis and theory, as if Heidegger were merely telling us that all perception of hammers and theories about hammers were grounded in a pre-theoretical use of them. The problem with this interpretation is clear enough: for if tools are always deeper than our perceptions or theories of them, they are also deeper than our use of them. To sit in a chair is no closer a relation to the chair than thinking about it is; in both cases, the chair itself retains an unexhausted surplus deeper than our relation with it. It is not a difference between theory and praxis, but a difference between the things themselves and our relations with them. But there is one more step to the argument, one that Heidegger never considered. The failure of both theory and praxis to exhaust the things of the world is not some tragic mental feature of humans and a few smart animals. Instead, it is a limitation of relationality in general. Objects withdraw from each other in the case of inanimate causation no less than in the human use of tools. Rain striking a tin roof does not make intimate contact with the reality of the tin any more than the monkeys on the roof or the impoverished resident of the tin-roofed shack are able to do. Let it simply be added that the withdrawal of objects from one another in causal relations turns causality into a serious philosophical problem. For if objects cannot touch directly, then how do they influence one another at all? There must be some third term, some medium through which they interact. Causation must be indirect or vicarious rather than direct and immediate.

The final point to be made is that Heidegger’s withdrawn, sub-phenomenal world of tool-beings must be made up of individual things. This apparently runs counter to the spirit of *Being and Time*, where all tools seem to melt together into a single system: “there is no such thing as ‘an’ equipment,”⁵ as Heidegger puts it. This even seems true in his later writings on “the thing,” where the concealed portion of individual entities is called “earth,” and the earth is generally treated as a monolithic lump rather than a set of fully articulated individuals.⁶ It might seem as though the subterranean world of being were a rumbling, unified chunk broken into pieces only by human consciousness, a conclusion drawn by Emmanuel Levinas during his ardently Heideggerian phase in the 1940’s.⁷ But this is impossible. Hammers break in different ways from drills, which break in different ways from hearts, kidneys, and lungs. The shocks and surprises generated by failing equipment are not random. The world is not a single lump broken into pieces by consciousness, but consists of individual pieces from the start.

To summarize, we can definitely say that for Heidegger there is a real sub-phenomenal world in a way that is not true for Husserl. By pushing Heidegger a bit beyond what he wanted to say, we can also conclude that this real world is made up of individual objects that are withdrawn from all theoretical, practical, and even causal access. And furthermore, each of these real objects must have specific real qualities. For as Leibniz observed,⁸ even the simple unified monads must have diverse qualities: otherwise they would be interchangeable, with hammers equally able to function as drills, kidneys, dolphins, or monkeys depending on the whim of the observer. But this is ridiculous.

When considering Husserl, we found that the sensual realm was broken into both objects and qualities. By pushing Heidegger’s tool-analysis just slightly, we find an analogous distinction between real objects and their real qualities. We thus have a world made of four terms: real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, sensual

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962.) Page 97.

⁶ See Martin Heidegger, “Einblick in das was ist,” in *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*. (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994.)

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988.)

⁸ G.W. Leibniz, “Monadology,” In *Philosophical Essays*, trans. R. Ariew & D. Garber. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.)

qualities. I have often made the case that this is what Heidegger was aiming at with his mysterious theory of *das Geviert* (“the fourfold”) and will not repeat that case here. What is more important is that we now have a model to play with that points to a number of puzzles and to possible gaps in our understanding, much like any scientific model. Let’s draw a few more conclusions from this idea before getting into some of the trickier questions it raises.

2. The Fourfold and Vicarious Causation

At first the model seems to consist of four terms linked by just two tensions. Within the confines of experience, there is a strife between sensual objects and their shifting sensual qualities, precisely as described by Husserl. Even if I sit motionless before a bowl of pears and apples, these objects vary in profile depending on the angle and distance at which I sit, and vary in color depending on the increase or decrease of afternoon shadow in the room, or the lamplight and candles in which they are viewed after nightfall; their imagined tastiness alters as my mood and appetite alter. This is true all the more if I actively stand and maneuver through the room to view them from dramatically different vantage points, and they vary all the more for living species of different size and capacity, whether it be fruit flies or even monkeys. But within certain limits, these shifting features and contours and possibilities of objects do not turn them into different objects. If we consider that they are merely caricatures, exaggerated versions of real pears and apples, then we allude to a dark subterranean underworld of beings that no perception and no relation can ever touch. This underworld, too, is made of objects, but objects that exceed any attempt to grasp them. Since we deduce that they must be individuals rather than a single inarticulate or semi-articulate lump (for otherwise, hammers and pears would not be able to surprise us in specifically hammer-fashion and pear-manner), these real objects must have qualities as well. But for the very same reason, there cannot be a total disconnection between these two realms. The real must be able to affect the sensual, to surge up into the visual realm when tools break or by other means. There must be various crossovers between these two kingdoms—some relation between real objects and sensual qualities, and also between sensual objects and real qualities.

When speaking of Husserl, we have so far referred only to a strife found only within the sensual realm. A sensual object has countless adumbrations, countless sensual qualities, depending on the manner in which it is observed. But Husserl already knows that there is more going on than this. A pear, apple, or hammer not only bathes in a shifting flux of qualities that portray it according to different adumbrations. There are also truly *important* qualities that these objects must have in order to remain what they are for us. Through the method of eidetic variation, we strip away the noise and confetti of the accidental profiles of a thing, and move toward some sense of what the thing really needs in order to be what it is in the sensual realm. True, Husserl thinks we can determine what these important properties are through a kind of direct intellectual or essential intuition, but we need not follow him on this point. Instead, we need only agree that there is a distinction between the wild masquerade of a thing’s surface appearance and the deeper, enduring apple-qualities that the apple must retain for as long as we acknowledge it to be this very apple. In this way we are led to see that the sensual object crosses into the underworld through its possession of *real* qualities as well. They are real because they withdraw from direct access no less than efficient hammers or unnoticed lungs and kidneys do. In short, Husserl’s intentional objects, which we can rename “sensual objects” for the reasons mentioned earlier, are a remarkable crossroads where both sensual and real qualities belong to the same sensual object, as if the same planet had both visible and concealed moons. We now have a third tension in our model, and the kingdoms of real and sensual are now linked by a strange sort of bridge, crossing between shadow and light: a rigorous scientific phenomenology generating the sort of strange communicational infrastructure between real and unreal that might be found in a fairy tale.

We should also ask about another unusual crossing, the one between real objects and sensual qualities. And here we are in luck, since Heidegger’s tool-analysis already points the way. When the hammer shatters in our hand or the floor collapses beneath our feet, we experience a kind of shock. These tool-beings no longer function invisibly or simply withdraw unnoticed into shadow. Instead, numerous features of the hammer now erupt explicitly into view. But contrary to some readings of Heidegger, the hammer-object itself never does so. The real hammer remains just as distant as ever before, even when it is “broken.” Yet we are able to get a strange indirect sense of it anyway: our minds do not encounter it directly, but *allude* to it, or see the hammer without seeing it. The sensual qualities of the hammer no longer just swirl around the phenomenal hammer in the mind, but seem to be enslaved to a dark and hidden object that forever eludes our grasp despite its apparently obtrusive malfunction. And here we have the fourth tension in the model, one between real objects and sensual qualities.

There is no need here for a detailed discussion of Heidegger’s fourfold, which is analogous but not identical to the quadruple structure presented here. Although I have argued elsewhere that his earth, sky, gods,

and mortals have some analogy to the fourfold of real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities—and have argued further that Heidegger was on the scent of this model as early as 1919—what is really of interest are the four just-described tensions between the four poles, which he notices but never names. He speaks of the interrelations between the four solely in poetic terms as mirrors, dances, weddings, and songs. But we are now in a position to give them more familiar names.

Few topics are of greater philosophical interest than time and space. Daydreaming children dig for paradoxes here, as do Nobel Prize winners and the criminally insane. But one common assumption among all these groups seems to be that time and space are peerless queens, or special dimensions of the cosmos devoid of any rivals. Kant sequesters them in the Transcendental Aesthetic, on a different footing from the categories of the understanding. But the polarized model of objects and qualities allows us to integrate time and space into a wider theory in which they are just two dimensions of the world among others.

According to the object-oriented model only the present exists: only objects with their qualities, locked into whatever their duels of the moment might be. In that sense, time seems to be illusory, though not for the usual reason that time is just a fourth spatial dimension always already present from the start. Instead, time does not exist simply because only the present ever exists. Nonetheless, time as a lived experience cannot be denied. We do not encounter a static frame of reality, but seem to *feel* a passage of time. It is not a pure chaos shifting wildly from one second to the next, since there is change within apparent endurance. Sensual objects endure despite swirling oscillations in their surface adumbrations, and this is precisely what is meant by the experience of *time*. Time can be defined as the tension between sensual objects and their sensual qualities.

Turning to space, one thing we know is that space cannot be located entirely within the sensual realm. John Locke noted that our experience of space is in some way an illusion. Everything in experience itself is flat and equidistant, as seen from the fact that babies reach with equal confidence for nearby toys, distant doorways, and the moon. Space is not directly accessible to our senses, but inferred, and this skill must be acquired at a specific point in child development. Despite what Leibniz claims, space is not the realm of relation, but of both relation *and* non-relation. There would be no space if everything were pressed directly up against us. Space means that there is something at a distance from us, or withheld from us. But this is precisely what Heidegger gives us in the tool-analysis. The hammer seems to be an entirely domestic creature of our experience, until it breaks, and then we recognize that there is a hammer-thing at some distance from us, not entirely a creature of our experience. Space can be defined as the tension between real objects and sensual qualities.

Perhaps it is now clear where we are going. Two tensions still remain, and though they are less often the topic of romantic speculation than are time and space, they belong on the same footing in the model and hence deserve to be mentioned in the same breath. In Husserl we found a third tension between sensual objects and their real qualities. Better yet, he already names it for us: *eidōs*. *Eidōs* is the tension between a sensual object in experience and the withdrawn pivotal features that we can only hint at rather than confronting directly.

And finally, we should not forget the fourth tension, the only one that has nothing to do with sensual experience at all: the tension between real objects and real qualities, which we can simply deduce and never experience at all. For this unity and duality in the heart of real things, the traditional name is essence, and there is no problem with using it here. Essence is the tension between a real thing and its real qualities. Once the terms are defined in this way, the world can be viewed as the composite drama of time, space, essence, and *eidōs*, so that the object-oriented model of the world is further enriched. And in fact, there are more than just these four. We also need to consider the relations between real and sensual objects, and between real and sensual qualities, as well as the relations between each of the four poles and another of its own kind. That yields ten terms rather than four, but there is no point developing the other six here. For those who are interested, they are classified in my book *The Quadruple Object*.⁹ For now we can leave open the question as to whether the coincidence of this number ten with that of Aristotle's ten categories is significant or not.

Before moving to the conclusion, we can add three more interrelated ideas to the mix. It was clear from the start that if real objects withdraw from one another, they cannot affect one another directly. Between real objects, only indirect or vicarious causation is possible. There must be an intermediary between any two real objects, and two points are evident here. First, this intermediary cannot itself be a real object, or there would simply be an endless process in which the intermediary would need further intermediaries between itself and the other objects, with the result that nothing would ever succeed in touching anything else. In fact, this is the very criticism I made in *Prince of Networks* of the model of indirect causation offered by Latour in *Pandora's Hope*, in which actors can touch only by means of an intermediate actor, but since all actors are of the exact

⁹ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*. (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011.)

same type for Latour, none of them is truly capable of linking with anything else. Second, the intermediary must be capable of making direct contact with both of the other terms.

Now, there is only one place where that can happen, and that is the *interior* of an object. This idea also comes from Husserl, though he never draws the needed radical conclusions from it. Namely, Husserl points out the paradox that intentionality is both one and two. On the one hand, in intentionality there is I myself and then there is the pine tree, not fusing together into a single lump, since the very fact that I am perceiving it proves otherwise. But on the other hand, the intentional relation between me and the pine tree must certainly be one, since we are joined together in the perception rather than being painfully and eternally separated. Given that perceptions are generally held to occur inside the mind, the easy conclusion would be that I and the sensual pine tree meet inside the mind. Husserl implies this point, and it is stated quite openly in the altogether different (and completely overrated) system of the neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger. The problem with this notion is that I myself cannot be simultaneously the whole of the relation and merely half of it. The sensual object and I cannot meet inside of me. Instead, our encounter occurs on the interior of the relation between me and the real tree (which must be indirect, but there is no need to complicate things here). When the tree and I somehow form a link, we become a new object; every relation forms a new real object. This idea will be resisted for the simple reason that we normally think of “objects” as solid physical things that hold together firmly, whereas something like the relation between me and the tree seems much too flimsy and transient. But remember, the definition of a real object is simply a unified thing with specific qualities that withdraws from any attempt to grasp it. The relation between me and the tree certainly meets these criteria: the intentional relation must be one, or it could not occur; it must have specific qualities, or it would be interchangeable with any other relation; and it withdraws from any attempt to grasp it, since I can never exhaustively grasp my own relation with the tree, and *a fortiori* the tree can never do so. So, what we have is the contact between me and the sensual tree on the interior of the relation between me and the *real* one. The same could be true in reverse, assuming the tree can perceive me in some fashion, but this would be a different and parallel relation in which the real tree encountered a sensual caricature of me. This may sound like a mere panpsychist amusement as long as a tree is one of the two terms. But consider a relation between two people, and the insight suddenly becomes much more threatening. A relation between friends or lovers then splits into two simultaneous but asymmetrical relations in which each person deals with the other as if with a ghost. In any case, we should add that this contact between a real object and a sensual one, on the interior of a third object, is precisely the sort of direct contact we are looking for. For contrary to some readings of Husserl, intentional objects never “hide.” If I see an apple from one specific angle, the apple is not “hidden” behind that current profile such that we would have to run hysterically through all possible angles, distances, and lighting conditions in order to add up all the profiles to amass one apple. Instead, the apple is there from the start, from the mere fact that I recognize it, and is simply covered over with fleeting qualities like cheap jewelry or encrustations of brine.

Finally, we need to reject the idea that all objects must be in relation with other objects at any given time. Although all objects are made up of relations between component objects, it is not necessarily the case that all objects enter into larger components in turn. While it may be the case that there is an infinite regress of entities downward into the depths of the world, it is not the case that there is an infinite progress upward. There may be countless real entities that exist (since their components have already formed them) which have not yet managed to have an effect on anything else in the world. These can be called sleeping objects, or dormant objects. They exist, but currently affect nothing. Perhaps there are millions of entities that remain in this state forever, passing through the world with the purely unlucky fate of never affecting or being affected by anything else at all.

3. Some Paradoxes

But right now I would like to consider the reverse case, that there may be things that *do* have an effect on other things but without being real. There is a relevant term here that has reversed its meaning over time: “flat ontology.” When the phrase “flat ontology” was used by Roy Bhaskar in the early 1970’s in his book on the realist theory of science, it was a polemical term. Namely, he used it to refer to theories that flatten the world into its accessibility to human observers; it was a dismissive phrase aimed at positivism, not a flattering description of realism. The meaning of the phrase was reversed in 2006 by Bhaskar’s admirer Manuel DeLanda. For DeLanda, “flat ontology” simply means that all entities must be treated alike. That is to say, it is an anti-reductionist term, such that armies, cities, and herds of cattle might be just as real as steel girders and atoms of potassium. “Flat” has now reversed its meaning: rather than referring to a world without levels in which everything inhabits the realm of human consciousness, it means instead a world in which all levels are on the same playing field.

There can be no better example of a perfectly flat ontology than the early philosophy of Bruno Latour. At that point in Latour’s career, all human and inhuman things, all chunks of physical matter and people and

cartoon characters, are equally actors. What makes all things actors, despite the vast differences between them, is that they have an effect on other things. As Latour puts it as recently as 1999 in *Pandora's Hope*, to be real means "to modify, transform, perturb, or create" something else. Reality is defined not by what it is, but by what it does. Not everything is equally strong, since the Chinese government affects more things than does a stick figure drawn in the notebook of a Chinese schoolboy, but everything is equally *real*, since even that stick figure has some faint emotional resonance in the boy's mind and is therefore not just an empty hole of non-being, while the mighty effect of the Chinese government on its citizens is different only in degree from the stick figure, even if that degree of difference is huge. Reality for the early Latour means having an effect on other things. And just as for Aristotle all humans are equally humans and all trees equally trees, for the early Latour all actors are equally actors.

But I just finished claiming that there are objects called dormant objects that affect nothing, not now and perhaps not ever, depending on how things unfold. The question I want to address briefly as this essay comes to a conclusion is whether the reverse is also true: are there things that have an effect despite not being real? And here is where I have been in disagreement with another philosopher friend, Levi Bryant of the Larval Subjects blog.¹⁰ For Bryant, anything that has an effect of any sort is real, and given that Chinese stick figures, Popeye, and the monsters of H.P. Lovecraft all have some greater or lesser effect on someone's moods or the sales of some cinema or bookstore, all are real as well. This apparent reality of all fictional characters has led some to accuse Bryant of defending an absurdly inflationary universe, in which all actual and possible things are real.

For Bryant and the early Latour, then, reality and efficacy are interchangeable terms. And given that lots of different things can have an effect, this seems to balloon the scope of reality to an absurd degree. What I want to suggest here is that just as not all real things have an effect (at least not in any given moment), not all effective things are real. Unlike Bryant and the early Latour, this puts me *automatically* in the good graces of Ockham's Razor, given that I can multiply merely *sensual* objects as much as I please and let them have as many effects as possible without ever saying that they are "real," that they have autonomous existence outside their presence in the experience of some other entity. Stated differently, I do not advocate a purely flat ontology. Certainly I would agree with Bryant and DeLanda that there are real entities at all levels of scale; I am completely in accord with their anti-reductionist platform. But I do not agree further with Bryant that just because something in the mind is having an effect on me, that it is therefore real.

At first this might seem to place me in the same camp as what might be called the epistemological wing of speculative realism. For such people it is ridiculous to think that entities such as Popeye are real, and equally ridiculous to believe in many other things experienced by everyday common sense. Their goal is to destroy what they call the "manifest image" in favor of the true scientific image of things. Epistemology here means a way to debunk gullible Christians, alchemists, and Latourians, and make the world safe for science. In their darkly clouded eyes, while Bryant wants to say that all images are real, they want to insist that some are real and some are false. However, I have nothing to do with this position, for the simple reason that I think *all images are false*. And this is what makes my position more in keeping with Ockham's Razor, since it is only this position that never confuses the sensual with the real, while the epistemological wing of speculative realism grants reality to countless objects that are really nothing more than images, even if we agree to call them "scientific" ones. For me nothing sensual is ever real, no matter how many effects it might have.

Here is another way to put it. We can talk about the sensual trees, chairs, cartoon characters, and hallucinated unicorns that might populate human experience. The question is sometimes asked how we know which of these sensual objects correspond to things in the real world and which do not; "criteria" are then demanded for sorting the wheat from the chaff, so that we might praise our images of quarks as truly corresponding to something real while ridiculing or exterminating our manifest folk images of Popeye and unicorns. Yet the problem must be reframed. None of our images "correspond" to anything at all; none of them bear any isomorphic resemblance to the real objects that withdraw into darkness. All are fictions. Or to put it in Latourian terms, all are translations. We can see this by considering that no matter how excellent our scientific concept of a tree may be, this concept *is not itself a tree*: the concept of the tree may grow every summer just as a tree does, but it neither sheds leaves nor bears fruit. Whenever I raise this complaint, it is objected that it is a "straw man," since no one really believes that a real tree and its image are the same thing. In response I say that *of course* no one says this, because it is too ridiculous to maintain for an instant. Nonetheless, this ridiculous doctrine is directly *entailed* by the theory that the image of Popeye does not correspond to anything but the

¹⁰ See for example the following post at Bryant's popular Larval Subjects blog: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2011/03/11/the-ontological-status-of-fictions/>

image of a tree does correspond. All they might be able to add is that while the image of a tree is simply a form or structure, the real tree is that same form or structure stamped in physical matter. But this would give us nothing but a dubious traditional metaphysics of form and matter, its banality barely concealed by the table-pounding aggressions of hack scientism.

The truth, I believe, is that *no* sensual objects “correspond” to real ones, just as no translations of Shakespeare into French or Dutch “correspond” to the English text. Not all translations are equal—there are better and worse translations of Shakespeare, just as there are better and worse meals with which to catch the flavor of certain wines, and better and worse ways (in Latour’s best example) to refine crude oil into gasoline for your car’s tank, which by no means implies that the gasoline is a “copy” of the crude oil. This is not relativism, but rather the most hardcore possible realism. It is not relativism, because there really are better and worse translations; it is hardcore realism because it takes real objects so seriously that it holds them to be irreplaceable by any conceptual model—no model of a banana or apple, however detailed, can step into the world and become a banana or apple.

In short, I join Bryant wholeheartedly in rejecting this cop’s-fantasy epistemological project of distinguishing between bad commonsense images and good scientific ones, which would reduce the greatness of philosophy to a series of small-time drug busts. But that said, what about Bryant’s further claim that fictions are real? As I see it, the problem needs to be reframed. Granted that all real objects can be converted into translations, the question is this: when can translations retroactively affect the real? It cannot be denied that this happens regularly. Our sensual experience of a room may displease us, and this leads us to rearrange the furniture, thereby causing shifts among real objects. The insufficient sweetness of strawberries may lead to genetic work that alters those very strawberries. A fictional character can provoke genuine suicides, as famously happened with Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Some loose political ideas in the heads of a dozen Egyptian protestors might turn into a real Constitution that affects millions of people for generations. Even an object with as flimsy a claim to reality as Popeye or unicorns can have retroactive effects on the real by making huge contributions to the toy and video game industries.

From considering the *eidos* in Husserl’s phenomenology, the strange fact emerged that sensual objects always have real qualities. Simply by dreaming up any random monster, we have not automatically generated a real object, but we have generated real qualities. Why real qualities? Because even though no unicorn or dragon is automatically real just because it is in my mind and affects my moods, it does automatically have real qualities. We can never say exactly what the crucial features are of the fictions in my mind that make up the *eidos* of any one of them; those features are withdrawn from direct access and exceed any possible analysis or interpretation of them. And that is what makes them real, even though they belong to an unreal thing—a mere sensual object. The question is under what conditions the real qualities of an unreal thing can be split up and rearranged into real objects, so that in this way the fictional objects of our mind can cross the bridge toward the real. As I have said, it happens all the time, and at other times it fails. It is merely the way in which it happens or fails to happen that remains a puzzle.

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