

# **Taking Things Seriously Again: An Introduction to Object-Oriented Ontology**

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**1/23/17**

**Abstract:** In the following paper, I attempt to push back upon traditional dogmas in philosophy by critiquing anti-realist views and positing a positive, realist ontology while subsequently introducing the reader to Object-Oriented Ontology. Specifically, I begin by explicating Quentin Meillassoux's concept of "correlationism" – that is to say, the supposedly necessary co-existence between thought and Being – and explaining how Kantian categorization has a) positioned philosophical questioning away from ontology and towards epistemology and b) cemented a correlationist view into Western thought. I then go on to analyze two serious problems with correlationism – those of the "arche-fossil" and the destruction of the ability to talk about absolutes – and note that if we are to 'save philosophy,' we ought to embrace a realist ontology. Finally, I lay the positive groundwork for Object-Oriented Ontology by explaining Graham Harman's view of object interactions within the framework of Heidegger, examining questions of ontological topology, and ultimately explicating the basics of this (relatively) new and promising philosophy of objects.

## Part 1: The Rise of Correlationism and Kant's Two Theses

A spectre has haunted philosophy for the past 400 years – the spectre of ‘correlationism.’ Since Kant’s formulation of his Copernican Revolution around the intersubjectivity of knowledge as a solution to the fear of skepticism and solipsism implicit in Cartesian epistemology, the philosophical worldview of correlationism has remained the dominant trend in Western philosophy. Correlationism, as defined by Quentin Meillassoux, is “the idea [that] we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” and serves to render impossible any attempts to view “subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”<sup>1</sup> In a word, correlationism states that Being is intrinsically tied up with thought.

As Levi Bryant has pointed out, the rise of correlationism has seen with it the subordination of questions of Being – that is to say, ontological questions – to questions of knowledge *about* Being – that is to say, epistemological questions – such that the question “‘what is being?’ now, everywhere and always, carries a footnote, colophon, or bit of fine print such that the question must be read as ‘what is being *for us*?’”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the history of philosophy is rife with examples of ontological subordination. Following the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, Being has ceased to be a transcendent quality and instead has been turned into another correlate of human existence due to the bracketing of questions about a world independent of the mind and a focus on the individual and her subjective experience of the world she sees. In other words, Being *as such* is subordinated to Being *for* humans such that epistemology has become first philosophy and all other questions, whether they be ontological or metaphysical, have been relegated to the sidelines.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the Ancients’ questions about the substance and materiality of the world, the subordination of ontology to epistemology has led to questions of human access to the world becoming the centerpiece of philosophy. Specifically, ontology has become “onto-epistemology” for “how can ontology make claims about the being of beings without first knowing these beings?”<sup>4</sup> The privileging of the human-world correlate has become so entrenched in Western philosophy that we are now, effectively, unable to think of an object without a subject, thus sparking Graham Harman to say “humans [now] make up 50% of ontology.”<sup>5</sup> The question with which we must now grapple is ‘what is the (brief) history of our epistemologically centered tradition of philosophical thought?’

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<sup>1</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Bloomsbury Books, 2008), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 35.

<sup>3</sup> Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

The philosophical history of correlationism extends back, at least, as far as Descartes. That history, however, is far beyond the purview of this paper and has been thoroughly documented elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Given that, to analyze the (recent) history of anti-realist movements, we must start at some stasis point. To explore the long road of correlationism, anti-realism, and Object-Oriented Ontology, we will start by discussing the father of Western rationality: Immanuel Kant.

Kant had a strong understanding of the history of philosophy and thus recognized the very real danger of solipsism that came from an untempered acceptance of Cartesian doubt and given that, he concerned himself with formulating a metaphysics that would help distance himself from it.<sup>7</sup> Kantian metaphysics, condensed, can be read in two simple theses which will be explained in order:

1. There are two worlds of existence, the “noumenal” world of “things-in-themselves” and the “phenomenal” world of experience.
2. Since we have no access to the noumenal, all we ought to (and can only) concern ourselves with is the world of experience.

Kant’s division of existence into two worlds, the noumenal and phenomenal, represented a split in our understanding of existence by creating a world of unknowability. Specifically, as Bryant notes of the noumenal:

[Kant] maintains that we have no access to these objects and therefore no means of determining whether, like the objects of our experience, things-in-themselves are autonomous, individual unities, or whether the things-in-themselves are, in reality, really a *thing-in-itself*, a primordial unity or One, that is then subsequently formatted or “cut up” by our minds.<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenal world, on the other hand, is the world of zebras, quarks, refrigerators, chamber pots, malls, nervous ticks, and so on. It is the world that contains the physical existence of the objects we interact with by way of the material and experiential manifestation of the “things-in-themselves.”<sup>9</sup> What’s more, Kant’s formation of the phenomenal world was built around categorization and *a priori* structures of the mind. Indeed, the world of phenomena is not itself intrinsically structured, but rather is structured by intersubjective human understandings. As Kant notes,

[u]p to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try

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<sup>6</sup> See Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 13-39, 57-66; Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 1-9; Peter Heft, “The Philosopher’s New Clothes: An Introductory Survey into Object-Oriented Ontology,” on *Peter Says Stuff*, published Summer 2016, accessed 1/8/17, (<https://goo.gl/CRovnR>), 3-7.

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*.

whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the world doesn't have an inherent structure; instead *we structure the phenomenal world*. Idealism, a form of correlationism, was thus affirmed by Kant in his onto-epistemic framework where all we can (and should) concern ourselves with are the objects of experience.

## Part 2: Reviving Realism

It is easy to buy into Kantian idealism (or some other form of correlationism) as our cognition *does* seem to structure the world and thinking of an unthought of thing *does* seem impossible. We must, however, analyze the implications of such a view. To examine the issues deep within correlationist logic, Meillassoux attempts to revitalize realism by wondering about the metaphysical status of what he calls “ancestral statements” which he defines as “statements about events anterior to the advent of life as well as consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> In wondering about the status of these claims, he asks the following question which structures the brunt of his inquiry: “how is correlationism liable to interpret [...] ancestral statements?”<sup>12</sup> For Meillassoux, the correlationist is not able to accept ancestral statements literally and thus, when confronted with a scientific claim such as ‘the universe is 13.5 billion years old,’ must add the caveat of “for humans”<sup>13</sup> insofar as the objective existence of a world prior to human consciousness is supposedly non-sensical. The addition of the caveat and the inability to interpret ancestral statements literally, however, is counterintuitive and antithetical to the project of science. Indeed, scientific statements are *not* making any claims that come with a footnote that necessitates human existence, but rather a “[scientific] statement’s literal meaning is also its deepest meaning.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, when cosmologists say that the universe is 13.5 billion years old, they *literally mean* that the universe is 13.5 billion years old; *not* the correlationist view that the universe is 13.5 billion years old *for us*. Empirical science can utilize evidence that exists independently of humans, such as the physical imprint of a long extinct species, to index some event anterior to the existence of human consciousness. These indices are what Meillassoux calls

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), [B xvi].

<sup>11</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 122.

“arche-fossils” and they must be taken into consideration when making any metaphysical claims.<sup>15</sup>

Summarizing the view he rejects, Meillassoux says:

[S]ince Kant, objectivity is no longer defined with reference to the object in itself [...] but rather with reference to the possible universality of an objective statement. It is the intersubjectivity of the ancestral statement – the fact that it should by right be verifiable by any member of the scientific community – that guarantees its objectivity, and hence its ‘truth’. It cannot be anything else, since its referent [the ancestral claim], taken literally, is *unthinkable*. If one refuses to hypostatize the correlation [that is to say, posit God as the universal subject thereby translating the human-world correlate to a God-world correlate], it is necessary to insist that the physical universe could not *really* have preceded the existence of humans, or at least living creatures.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, the truth of any scientific statement, for the correlationist, must not rest on any appeals to the nature of a piece of evidence in and of itself, but must rest on the validity of evidence garnered from experiments conducted in the present that can, in theory, be verified by other scientists within the present.<sup>17</sup> This view creates odd problems, however, as a counter-history of science must be accepted wherein the truth values of scientific facts do not matter as much as their agreed upon meaning does. If one wants to retain any coherent sense of science and empirical investigation where ancestral statements have a meaningful referent, the claims made must be taken in their literal, and consequently *realist*, sense. Meillassoux concludes that any ancestral statement “has a realist sense, and *only* a realist sense, or it has no sense at all”; the correlationist can have no middle ground.<sup>18</sup>

What’s more, buying into correlationist ontology not only forces us to make some very counterintuitive claims about the status of scientific statements, but it also prevents us from criticizing fideism. Specifically, for an internally consistent form of correlationism to be valid, two things must be affirmed: first is the claim that “not only is it illegitimate to claim that we can *know* the in-itself, but *also* that it is illegitimate to claim that we can at least *think* it” and second is the absolutization of correlation as a necessary logical law.<sup>19</sup> In other words, where Kant makes the claim that “things-in-themselves” exist, the strong correlationist says that we have *no grounds whatsoever* to make any claims about anything outside the correlational circle of experience.

A major impact the absolutization of correlation has is that we are thus unable to talk about absolutes. Indeed, correlationism “culminates in the disappearance of the pretension to

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 35, 37.

*think any absolutes, but not in the disappearance of absolutes*"<sup>20</sup> as no arguments can be made against them since, if the strong correlationist wants to be intellectually honest, she must stand by her words and *not* make any claims about anything outside the Circle of Correlation. The implication of this is that the logical outcome of correlationism is an inability to make offensive arguments against individuals who claim knowledge of an absolute *apart from* simply saying that one cannot have knowledge of anything outside experience.

To put the argument more concretely, strong correlationism implies that we can never speak *rationally* about questions outside of experience. What this means is that rather than destroying irrationality and absurdity, correlationism has made all metaphysical truth claims about absolutes *equally* irrational (as they are all outside our experience) and thus it becomes impossible to prove or disprove one over another. In other words, since we cannot speak rationally about a world outside of our experience, the claims that a) a magical flying gnome named Anthony created the universe 300,000 years ago and b) the universe was formed from the Big Bang 13.5 billion years ago are *both equally legitimate*. Specifically, the metaphysical truth of each statement cannot be weighed and thus must be treated as equal, while the content of the statement becomes subject to an individual's predilection. In a word, the correlationist position makes it such that empirical science is no more "objective" than the musings of a young Earth creationist.

At the end of the day, a correlational ontology cannot stand up to scrutiny as it not only makes science and empirical investigation moot, but it also eliminates the ability to speak rationally about the world before us. As such, a new, and subsequently realist, ontology must be brought forth.

### **Part 3: Towards an Ontology of Objects**

An acquaintance of mine once noted that "[Object-Oriented Ontology is] like the toy story of philosophies: the objects come to life once the humans leave the room."<sup>21</sup> While not entirely accurate, this quotation serves as a useful starting point for our foray into Object-Oriented Ontology or, as it is colloquially known, OOO. While there are many realist ontologies that are, implicitly, solutions to the problem of correlationism outlined above, I find OOO to be the most interesting.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>21</sup> Rhizombie, Tumblr Post, published 11/10/12, accessed 1/14/17 (<http://rhizombie.tumblr.com/post/35437532901/its-like-the-toy-story-of-philosophies-the>).

<sup>22</sup> See Meillassoux's "speculative materialism" in *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*; Markus Gabriel's "new realism" in *Why the World Does Not Exist* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); or Ray Brassier's "transcendental nihilism" in *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

OOO, first formulated by Graham Harman in 1999,<sup>23</sup> holds, on the most basic level, that “individual entities of various different scales are the ultimate stuff of the cosmos.”<sup>24</sup> What’s more, the central premise of OOO is that objects exist independently of any relations they have and thus cannot be undermined to their “material” constituents or “overmined” to larger cognitive structures.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, where more traditional theories of reality would attempt to explain a pine tree by appealing either to the matter that makes it up or the taxonomic place it occupies within our framework of the natural world, OOO seeks to transcend those views by recognizing that the tree is more than just a composite of wood and other chemicals and is equally as important as its place within our hierarchy of nature. OOO seeks to view the tree *as a tree*. Further, objects gain their autonomy by escaping complete relationality and holding something in reserve. To understand this, we must briefly skirt the beginnings of Heidegger’s phenomenology.

While the claim that objects withdraw from interaction is not intuitive, a careful reading of Heidegger’s tool-analysis helps to elucidate the view. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger notes that our interactions with objects goes like this: we do not sit back and gaze at objects while describing them – “presence-at-hand” (*Vorhandenheit*) – rather we use objects in such a way that we also do not notice them – “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*).<sup>26</sup> For example, in building a house, we don’t think about the hammer upon which we are relying, rather it recedes out of view, withdrawing from us until something happens to bring it forward: namely, it breaks. Indeed, this analysis can be extended to every aspect of human existence. I rely upon, and subsequently do not notice, my heart beating, the pads under the keys on my keyboard, the stability of the ground beneath me, etc. until something breaks. Indeed, “Heidegger contends that our primary way of dealing with things is *absence*.”<sup>27</sup> What’s more, our usage of objects – no matter how reliant upon them we are – does not exhaust their existence insofar as there is always something new that can happen; there is always some way they can change or surprise us. In this sense, objects have a hidden existence and surplus that always eludes human interaction.

What’s more interesting, however, is that this withdrawal of an object is not relegated strictly to the human-object relationship, but is also found in object-object relationships. Indeed, “[r]eadiness-to-hand does not mean ‘usable by people’.”<sup>28</sup> The end of a hammer’s interaction with the flat of a nail is no different in kind than a human’s interaction with the handle of the hammer; they are merely different in degrees. The hammer does not exhaust the nail’s existence

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<sup>23</sup> See Graham Harman, “Object-Oriented Philosophy (1999),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 93-104.

<sup>24</sup> Graham Harman, “Brief SR/OOO Tutorial (2010),” in *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2013), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), 8-13.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York City: Harper and Row, 1962), 97-99.

<sup>27</sup> Graham Harman, “The Return to Metaphysics (2011),” in *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2013), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Graham Harman, “Phenomenology and the Theory of Equipment (1997),” in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 8.

as it only interacts with the relevant parts of the nail (namely the physicality of it); the non-relevant parts (e.g. the color or smell of the nail) withdraw from that relationship into an eternal abyss. Indeed, the fact that the same object has different interactions with different things where only the relevant qualities for that specific interaction are foregrounded means that objects encounter one another differently. For example, a leaf running up against a wall encounters the solidity of the wall; it does not encounter the wall's color or smell, etc. Further, it does not exhaust the wall's solidity as the wall remains solid after the leaf has landed. The leaf touching the wall "does not exhaust the wall's reality. It does not shatter against it, nor does it engage in chemical reaction with the materials that bind the stones together."<sup>29</sup> In this way, objects can be seen as interacting with other objects *in the same way* as humans interact with objects; there is a univocity of Being, so to speak.

Finally, lest we leave out a large portion of OOO, we must briefly discuss what I call the topology of ontology. What I mean by this is that we must discuss how objects are viewed as existing – that is to say, as entities strictly correlated of other entities or as having an independent existence – and whether some objects 'exist more' than others. More concretely, ontological topology examines questions such as "is Donald Duck any more real than Donald Trump?" To answer these questions, we must understand what "real" means. If real means physically existing, for example, answering the aforementioned question is easy. Surely, however, that cannot be the definition of "real." Marriage, for example, is real. Married couples are granted special privileges that non-married couples are not. Marriage, however, is just a concept, a construct of human devising. If a social construct can be considered so real as to trigger State granted privileges, then what is the fundamental difference between it and, say, an ice cube? Thinking of ideas in this way, it seems difficult to deny that they are just as real as physical objects. This equality of existence is, ultimately, the thesis of what is called 'flat ontology.' Flat ontology, as extrapolated by DeLanda, is an ontology "made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not ontological status."<sup>30</sup> Phrased differently, the thesis of flat ontology is that all things (e.g. ideas, concepts, numbers, physical objects, fictitious entities, etc.) equally exist – that is to say the number 7 is no less real than a bar of soap – despite the existence and degree of spatio-temporal and other differences between them. In a word, flat ontology affirms that all things equally exist *despite* the vast differences between them. Donald Trump is no more 'real' than Donald Duck...although I'm sure we'd all agree that the impact he has on the world is much more significant.

At the end of the day, not all Object-Oriented Ontologists agree on everything – some question the extent to which objects withdraw claiming that we can, in fact, exhaust certain objects' potential. Others reject the thesis of flat ontology by claiming that some things are more real than other things. Still others dispute what an "object" even is and whether ideas ought to count. While a diffuse movement, no doubt, OOO is bound by one thing: an acceptance of

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<sup>29</sup> Graham Harman, "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit* (1999)," in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 58-59.

<sup>30</sup> Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science & Virtual Philosophy* cited in Levi Bryant, "The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology" in *The Speculative Turn* (Victoria: re.press, 2011), 269.

realism in the face of correlationism. As for the nuances, those are for us individual ontologists to fight out.

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