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# Touching without Touching: Objects of Post-Deconstructive Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a juxtaposition of the understanding of objects in Jean-Luc Nancy’s post-deconstructive realism and Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology, particularly with reference to their respective notions of touch. Nancy incorporates a tension between the phenomenological accounts of touch and embodiment given by Merleau-Ponty, who focuses on the relationality of the flesh, and Levinas, who focuses more on non-relational alterity. Furthermore, Nancy does not accept the anthropocentric assumptions whereby phenomenology accounts for objects insofar as they correlate to human existence. Following the deconstruction of sovereign humanity, Nancy approaches what Derrida calls “post-deconstructive realism,” accounting for touch with regard to the relationality and alterity of all objects, human and nonhuman. However, abjuring the metaphysical interiority posited by panpsychists, Nancy admits that his philosophy cannot account for the discrete, atomistic differences between beings. Graham Harman agrees with much of Nancy’s philosophy, but he criticizes Nancy on this point, offering a corrective supplement in the form of his object-oriented ontology, which avoids panpsychism while nonetheless accounting for the discrete differences between objects.

**Keywords:** Jean-Luc Nancy, Graham Harman, object-oriented ontology, phenomenology, realism, touch, anthropocentrism

The understanding of objects articulated in thinkers based in the francophone line of the phenomenological tradition, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Nancy, can be explicated in terms of the ways that those thinkers understand bodies. Through their analyses of topics like embodiment, perception, sense, and carnality, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Nancy each make important contributions toward recognizing the intentionality and alterity of bodies and rethinking objects without a subject-object dualism. However, phenomenology tends to restrict the field of objects to those encountered by humans, thus omitting or marginalizing questions about nonhuman bodies and about object-to-object relations unmediated by human observers. Between Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Nancy, it is Nancy’s philosophy that most thoroughly breaks through anthropocentrism and philosophizes about all bodies, human as well as nonhuman, and his concept of touch has a crucial role to play. It is for this reason that Jacques Derrida considers Nancy’s philosophy of touch to enact a “post-deconstructive realism,” which recovers a sense of real beings beyond the privileged reach of human access.<sup>1</sup> However, by Nancy’s own admission, his philosophy ultimately falls short when it comes to accounting for the specificity of real bodies, with all of their discrete, quantized differences. I argue that Graham Harman’s object-oriented philosophy provides a corrective supplement to Nancy in this regard. After reviewing notions of the body and touch in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, I discuss Nancy’s post-deconstructive realism and consider how it makes contact with the objects of object-oriented philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 46.

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# 1 An ontological rehabilitation of the sensible

In “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” Merleau-Ponty, reflecting on Husserl’s legacy for the phenomenological tradition, discusses the reversible “relation of my body to itself,” which is given in a classical phenomenological example: my own hand touching and being touched by my other hand. Citing Husserl’s *Ideen II*, Merleau-Ponty gives the following description:

When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a “physical thing.” But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right, *es wird Leib, es empfindet*. The physical thing becomes animate. [...] Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes “a sort of reflection.” In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body—that the body is a “perceiving thing,” a “subject-object.”<sup>2</sup>

What does Merleau-Ponty take from this? Sensing dwells in the sensible; touching inhabits the tangible; the body becomes a subject-object; things become animate. The sensible is thus rehabilitated from the schematization that makes sensible objects ontologically subordinate to sensing subjects. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “It is imperative that we recognize that this description also overturns our idea of the thing and the world, and that it results in an ontological rehabilitation of the sensible.”<sup>3</sup> His concept of the “flesh” is part of this rehab project, bringing subjectivity and objectivity into one crisscrossing tissue or “intentional fabric,” interweaving the “self-sensing” flesh of my body and the “sensible and not sentient” flesh of the cosmos.<sup>4</sup>

This rehabilitation is not aiming for a subject-object fusion. The reversibility of touching and touched is “always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching.”<sup>5</sup> There is separation in the connection, a chasm in the chiasm. It is the intangible in touch. It is the silence in language.

It is this fecund negative that is instituted by the flesh, by its dehiscence—the negative, nothingness, is the doubled-up, the two leaves of my body, the inside and the outside articulated over another—Nothingness is rather the difference between the identicals— [...] a nothingness one can turn over, and where then one sees *things*.<sup>6</sup>

However, from a Levinasian perspective, bodies exhibit a much more radical dehiscence. Merleau-Ponty ontologically rehabilitates the intentional fabric of the sensible but does not sufficiently rehabilitate the alterity of the sensible, as his touch grasps and assimilates the otherness of sense into an economy of the same—the reciprocal exchange of the flesh. Instead of the totalizing touch of reciprocal relationality, a rehabilitation of sense calls for a lighter touch, a touch without touching, contact that leaves the other intact. This lighter touch can be found in an aimless “caress” or an ethical “relation without relation.”<sup>7</sup>

One could respond that Merleau-Ponty’s touch doesn’t touch *everything*. Something—specifically, nothingness—remains intact, untouched. For Levinas, this kind of nothingness appears assimilated within the horizon of phenomenology (totalized; derivative of identicals). It is possible to defend Merleau-Ponty on this point. Consider this defense, for example, by Jack Reynolds:

We are now in a position to see why his conception of alterity does not succumb to Levinas’ critique. An imperialism of the same would be any totalizing system of judgment (be it personal, philosophical, or political) that ensures that the other may gain entry into a particular world perspective only on condition of surrendering its difference. What I have endeavored to illustrate is that for Merleau-Ponty the other is truly other only if it gains entry into this world perspective by altering this

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 166.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-167.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 250.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 263-264.

<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80, 258.

totalizing system precisely on account of its difference. [...] This is an effort not to reintegrate difference into sameness, but to transform the notions of self and other in any attempt to behave responsibly toward the alterity of the other.<sup>8</sup>

Considering that Reynolds is defending Merleau-Ponty's ethics of others and not addressing his ontological claims as such, it still seems as though Levinas is the thinker who more adequately accounts for otherness, including what alterity is and how we ought to respond to it. However, comparing the accounts of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty is not my aim. I only want to note, first, that for both Merleau-Ponty and Levinas touch is exemplary for understanding interconnections and differences between bodies beyond any simple opposition between subjects and objects, and second, that for both thinkers touch is primarily human touch, such that neither thinker is really up to the task of rehabilitating the sensible beyond its correlation with the human. Ultimately, this means that neither thinker is ultimately up for the task of talking about real beings outside of human access, which is not to say that these thinkers have in any way exhausted their contributions to philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty and Levinas speak of the body, but like much of the philosophical attention given to "the body," they have an unmarked focus on the *human* body, despite the fact that nonhuman bodies vastly outnumber the comparatively minute sample size of all human bodies. In their dialogue comprising *The Rise of Realism*, Graham Harman and Manuel DeLanda discuss this anthropocentrism of "the body." Harman brings this up while mentioning one of the reasons that he is "suspicious of Merleau-Ponty's supposed ontological novelty. Namely, whenever philosophy shifts to discussions of 'the body,' it often feels like little more than an alibi for not having much to say about non-human entities more generally."<sup>9</sup> DeLanda agrees "about the role that the concept of the body tends to play in non-realist ontologies: a kind of token material object, invited to the ontology just to include at least one member of a minority." However, nobody is throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The point is not thus to get rid of the concept of the body, which, as DeLanda notes, "provides the necessary interface with both the brain and the world."<sup>10</sup> The point is to develop a non-anthropocentric concept of the body. This is something that Derrida finds in Nancy's sense of the body, which is epitomized in the sense of touch, and not primarily or exclusively the touch of the human hand.

## 2 Beyond the human hand

Merleau-Ponty and Levinas both orient their examples of bodies to touch, specifically around the touching hand, which is always a human hand, comprehending the reality of the other with a handy humanism, which Derrida names with the portmanteau, "humanualism" (*humainisme*).<sup>11</sup> This humanism is not simply about humanity or humans in general. The privileging of the hand and the human has a specific history and context, going together hand in hand with other hierarchies that emerged in the philosophies of ancient religious traditions, such as the subordination of the material to the spiritual, or darkness to light, and of women to men. Humanualism is not just anthropocentric but androcentric, and it is not only about secular humanism, for it resonates with religious tones.

And so we at our own pace approach the place of a resemblance that we can already guess at: a hand and especially a hand of "flesh," a *hand of man*, has always begun to resemble a *man's hand*, and thus a fatherly hand, and sometimes, more "originarily," the hand of the merciful Father, which is to say his Son—the hand that the Son is, according to the Logos or Word of Incarnation.<sup>12</sup>

Following the deconstruction of humanualism, Derrida finds intimations of a "post-deconstructive realism"

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and the Alterity of the Other," 74-75.

<sup>9</sup> DeLanda and Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, 116.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *On Touching*, 152, 185, 192.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

in Nancy's sense of touch.<sup>13</sup> This realism emerges in the breakdown of principles beyond this world of sense, principles like God, Will, Reason, Human, or any such supervening agent or world behind the scenes. In other words, Nancy articulates a sense of the world from within a "crisis of sense": "Sense can no longer be referred from beyond: that is certain. However, this is not merely a crisis to be overcome. It is a mutation: we are changing our world."<sup>14</sup>

In philosophy since Plato, sense is assimilated into a dualistic schema that sets the intelligible (*to noeton*) over against the sensible (*to aistheton*); the true world of ideal forms is opposed to the illusory world of appearances. The crisis of sense marks the end of the world. There is "no longer any sense of the world," as Nancy says, "no longer a *mundus*, a *cosmos*, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation [...] no longer the 'down here' of a world one could pass through toward a beyond or outside of this world."<sup>15</sup> We have lost the sense of the world ("beyond or outside") along with the world of sense ("down here"). This is the death of God and the death of Nature. It is Nietzsche's conclusion about "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fiction": "*Along with the true world, we have also done away with the apparent!*"<sup>16</sup>

"However, this is not merely a crisis to be overcome. It is a mutation: we are changing our world."<sup>17</sup> Now that the old fictions about the true world and its apparent opposite are gone, another sense is introduced, one for which the true world is the world of sense. The phrase "the sense of the world" does not refer to a meaning or truth that the world has. The world does not *have* a sense, "but it is sense." This is a multivalent sense of sense: "the sense of the word *sense* traverses the five senses, the sense of direction, common sense, semantic sense, divinatory sense, sentiment, moral sense, practical sense, aesthetic sense, all the way to that which makes possible all these senses."<sup>18</sup> All of these senses touch. Indeed, the world, as sense, is contact. As with Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, touch is given a privileged role in this ontological rehabilitation of the sensible. The world is sense, and "sense is touching."<sup>19</sup>

Like Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, Nancy recognizes the dehiscence or alterity of touch. He touches without touching, leaving bodies intact, not assimilated into an economy of the same. As Marie-Eve Morin notes, "Derrida in *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* recognizes that Nancy breaks with the traditional haptocentrist metaphysics in as much as he emphasizes the moment of break and distance which interrupts the immediacy and continuity normally associated with touch."<sup>20</sup> The world is a plurality of irreducibly singularities in contact: touching bodies touching bodies, *partes extra partes*. Nancy minds the "gap intrinsic to touch," tending to the "insurmountable edge-to-edge" relationship that unites while also separating.<sup>21</sup> Nancy's concept of touch accounts for the sensual intertwining of bodies as well as the withdrawal of bodies from any relation. In his critical analysis of Nancy's "Corpus" essay, Harman gives a clear explanation of this point.

As a term for our dual access and non-access to bodies, Nancy selects the excellent name of touch. To touch something is to make contact with it even while remaining separate from it because the entities that touch do not fuse together. To touch is to caress a surface that belongs to something else, but never to master or consume it. It requires a certain space between beings, but also an interface where they meet.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>14</sup> Nancy, "Interview," 161.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, 23-24.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy, "Interview," 161.

<sup>18</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>20</sup> Morin, "Thinking Things," 52n10.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Harman, "On Interface," 98. It should be noted that Harman's analysis is of the "Corpus" essay in Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, 189-207. That essay is an earlier and shorter version of Nancy's later book, *Corpus*, and those ideas are further developed with specific attention to sexual difference in Nancy, *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality*. Nancy's philosophical position does not seem to have changed throughout these iterations, at least not in a way that would change the applicability of Harman's analysis.

What makes Nancy's touch unique is not just that it accounts for contact and separation between bodies. Merleau-Ponty and Levinas do that, at least to some extent. Nancy is unique for addressing contact and separation between *all* bodies. All entities touch while remaining withdrawn from contact, touching without touching. In Harman's ontology, this is called "vicarious causation," whereby objects have mediated access to one another while remaining inaccessible, such that they "touch without touching."<sup>23</sup>

Ian James eloquently summarizes this convergence between what he describes as "the post-phenomenological realisms of Nancy and Harman":

Obscurity becomes ontologically primordial and touch becomes the fundamental mode of vicarious access to the obscure being of things. [...] An exhaustive, total knowledge is impossible given the ultimate withdrawal of the inner reality of things and given also that they are known only through vicarious and partial relations of adjacency and contiguity and not through any elevated position of a 'survol' of the subject over an object. [...] Knowledge would, however, be no less real for all that, because it arises out of real contact with really existing entities or things and the reality of the proximity and distance between them.<sup>24</sup>

James correctly observes that the realisms of Nancy and Harman shift the focus of philosophy toward the obscurity and mediation of touch and away from the lucid subjectivity of vision, and furthermore, their realisms democratize touch so that it is liberated from the exceptional grasp of the human hand, even the phenomenologically sensitive human hand. These post-phenomenological or post-deconstructive philosophies are realisms exactly insofar as they exceed the limits of humanism, which correlates the real with what is accessible to the human. Humanism is not unlike what Quentin Meillassoux calls "correlationism" or what Harman calls "the philosophy of access."<sup>25</sup>

Nancy is among a chorus of voices who recognize that Heidegger's infamous claims in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* about the worldless (*weltlos*) stone and the poor in world (*weltarm*) animal fail to do justice to this: "that the world beyond humanity—animals, plants, and stones, ocean, atmospheres, sidereal spaces and bodies—is quite a bit more than the phenomenal correlative of a human taking-in-hand [...]."<sup>26</sup> For Nancy, a lizard touches a stone. It is not just a human who touches. Even a stone touches.<sup>27</sup> Sense makes sense for everything, not just for humans. "It does not make sense only for, through, or in *Dasein*."<sup>28</sup>

There is a plurality of bodies, touching each other without centering on the human, and each body is enmeshed in the sense of the world while nonetheless withdrawn from relations, intact. Does this mean that Nancy's philosophy successfully completes the phenomenological project of the rehabilitation of the sensible? Yes and no. While the sensible in general is rehabilitated in Nancy's philosophy of touch, something specific appears to be missing. This can be understood in terms of Harman's object-oriented supplement to Nancy.

### 3 The discreteness of things

Harman has used "a 'hyperbolic' method for assessing the merits of philosophers," which he has applied in readings of DeLanda, Latour, and Meillassoux.

The method consists in no longer nitpicking the supposed mistakes of a philosopher, which tend to be relatively trivial. Instead, the hyperbolic method imagines the complete triumph of a philosopher, focusing on virtues rather than vices.

<sup>23</sup> Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 204.

<sup>24</sup> James, "Lucidity and Tact," 17.

<sup>25</sup> Correlationism is Meillassoux's term for "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being." Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5. On the philosophy of access, see Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

We then ask ourselves: what would still be missing from philosophy if this particular thinker were to triumph completely? Why should I not cease my individual efforts and simply embrace this thinker as the final hero of all philosophical effort?<sup>29</sup>

Harman seems to apply this method to some extent in his reading of Nancy, whose philosophy bears some profound similarities to Harman's object-oriented ontology.

In terms of intellectual DNA [i.e., phenomenology], object-oriented philosophy surely has more in common with Derrida and Nancy than it does with Deleuze, Badiou, Žižek, and cognitive science. Hence, the usual failure of Derrida and Nancy to take an object-oriented turn should be viewed as generously as possible, like the unfamiliar mannerisms of visiting cousins.<sup>30</sup>

Using a hyperbolic method, imagining the complete triumph of Nancy, one can affirm that his post-deconstructive realism facilitates an ontological rehabilitation of the intentionality, alterity, and non-anthropocentric plurality of bodies. What is still missing? Nancy himself provides an answer to this question.

In *The Sense of the World*, Nancy admits that he has not thought through the discrete differences of nonhuman bodies. He says that there is an "atomistic" discreteness separating or distancing things: "This discreteness that one could call a *quantum* discreteness, borrowing from physics the discreteness of material *quanta*, makes up the world as such, the 'finite' world liable to sense."<sup>31</sup> However, he cannot find a way to articulate the specificity of these quanta. He considers some available options but chooses to pass them by. He does not want to propose "an animism or a panpsychism," which would endow bodies—a stone in Nancy's example—with "an interiority," and interiority presupposes a distinction from exteriority that would bring back a defunct dualism between an inner subject and outer object: "There is not 'subject' and 'object.'"<sup>32</sup> James misleadingly suggests that there is a "possibility of some kind of panpsychism at work in Nancy's account of things," saying that Nancy "never mentions panpsychism as such."<sup>33</sup> James must have missed Nancy's explicit disavowal of panpsychism.

Nancy's conflation of animism and panpsychism is somewhat dubious, since the former is an anthropological concept related to indigenous perspectives whereas the latter is a metaphysical theory. Furthermore, there might be forms of panpsychism that do not posit an interiority opposed to exteriority. For now, applying a hyperbolic method, this conflation can be accepted along with Nancy's assertion that there is a metaphysical interiority common to panpsychism and animism. The question then is how to think the quantum discreteness of things without resorting to panpsychist/animist notions of interiority.

To be clear, Nancy has a problem with theories that posit an interiority to things. He does, however, attribute alterity to things. In this sense he is diametrically opposed to philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead and Bruno Latour, who posit an experience or agency in all actual entities (Whitehead) or actors (Latour), but fail to account for the withdrawal of entities from all relations. Nancy does account for the withdrawal of the body from relations. Consider his following description of the thing in itself.

The thing in itself is nothing other than the thing itself, but withdrawn from any relation with a subject of its perception or with an agent of its manipulation. The thing, isolated from all manifestation, from all phenomenality, the sleeping thing at rest, sheltered from knowledge, techniques, and arts of all kinds, exempt from judgments and prospects. The thing not measured, not measurable, the thing concentrated in its indeterminate and non-appearing thingness.<sup>34</sup>

Nancy's sleeping entity is indeterminate. When it comes to differentiating how one alterity differs from

<sup>29</sup> Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 126. This is the opposite of Harman's method of "ruination," which discovers the quality of philosophical or literary statements by showing how many ways you can ruin them. For instance, you can tell a joke is worded perfectly when every other formulation ruins the joke (i.e., makes it not funny). For Harman, "the statement is of higher quality the more ways it can be ruined." Harman, *Weird Realism*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Harman, "On Interface," 96.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 62.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> James, "The Touch of Things," 226n8.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, 14.

another, e.g., how the alterity of a banana is different than the alterity of a city like San Francisco, he cannot describe it.

While each body is an irreducible singularity, Nancy is left with no way to think the difference between the body of a banana, the body of a goat, the body of Saturn, and a body of water. As he puts it: “a ‘quantum philosophy of nature’ (or an ‘atomistic’ or ‘discrete’ one) remains to be thought.”<sup>35</sup> Imagining the complete triumph of Nancy, what is still missing? By Nancy’s admission, a quantum philosophy of nature is still missing, a philosophy that accounts for the discrete difference between real objects. This is exactly what object-oriented ontology addresses.

Nancy’s admission that a quantum, atomistic, or discrete philosophy of nature remains to be thought expresses the main point for which Harman criticizes Nancy’s “Corpus” essay. While Nancy affirms the existence of a plurality of bodies as real entities (i.e., “real objects” in Harman’s terms), the differences between them get reduced to “matter forming itself, form making itself firm.”<sup>36</sup> Harman sums up Nancy this way in dialogue with DeLanda: “individual entities are part of a broader continuum,” and they are only individuated insofar as they make contact with one another.<sup>37</sup> Their intactness is undifferentiated, an indiscrete “whatever.” As Nancy himself puts it in ‘The Heart of Things,’ there is ‘the same heart for all things, for every thing...’<sup>38</sup>

While Nancy seems to affirm that real bodies have discrete differences, he ends up undermining those differences, such that a galaxy, a bear, an oil pipeline, a mouse (for your computer), and a mouse (the animal) are all, at core, at heart, the same. Discrete differences are thus leveled off, dissolved in some underlying matter or an elemental rustling like the *apeiron* of Anaximander or the *il y a* of Levinas. A hyperbolic reading would suggest that Nancy only posits that broader continuum of matter forming itself because as a compromise, since he cannot find a way to think a quantum philosophy of nature without succumbing to animism and panpsychism. However, maybe that still is not hyperbolic enough. Perhaps Nancy is not undermining the specific of things by positing a continuum. James, for instance, arguing that Harman is being unfair on this point, indicates that the “whatever” of things is not an underlying continuum or vague mass but is a differentiated plurality.<sup>39</sup> The singular heart of being is a singular plurality.

“The singular is primarily *each* one and, therefore, also *with* and *among* all the others. The singular is a plural.”<sup>40</sup> Nancy’s is a democratic ontology that allows for an irreducible plurality of intact beings, which interact through vicarious contact and not through the sovereign power of an underlying or overarching monarch of being (e.g., human, *Dasein*, nature, God, *apeiron*, etc.). Along those lines, Peter Gratton suggests that Nancy’s post-deconstructive realism is in line with speculative realism and, more specifically, that it accounts for touch in much the same way as Harman, who describes vicarious causation as a “*more democratic solution*” to the problem of touch, a solution that dethrones any sovereign being whose intervention would be necessary for touch to happen.<sup>41</sup>

In sum, giving a more hyperbolic reading than does Harman, it is easy to say that Nancy is able to think quantum discreteness after all, notwithstanding Nancy’s own admission that a quantum philosophy of nature is still to be thought. Nonetheless, even with this hyperbolic reading, Nancy’s emphasis on the indeterminate whatever at the heart of things still fails to account for the specific qualities that are characteristic of real beings. For Nancy, determinate qualities emerge only in contact, whereas Harman argues that objects have specific qualities regardless of whether they are encountered by other objects. At its core, a banana is not just this differentiated whatever. It is this differentiated banana, harboring differentiated banana qualities, which are different than apple qualities or orangutan qualities. These are not Locke’s primary or secondary qualities, but deeper eidetic patterns that are only accessible indirectly

<sup>35</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 62.

<sup>36</sup> Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 63.

<sup>37</sup> DeLanda and Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Harman, “On Interface,” 100. Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, 167.

<sup>39</sup> James, “The Touch of Things,” 214-216.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 32.

<sup>41</sup> Gratton, “The Speculative Challenge,” 109, 119, 122.

through allure and allusion. Harman calls them “real qualities.”<sup>42</sup> Does talk of such qualities posit the kind of interiority that Nancy associated with panpsychism and animism? No. Harman is explicit that object-oriented philosophy is not panpsychism. Entities can open up to relations, and that openness could be described as agential, intentional, or experiential, “interiority” for short, but it is not panpsychist interiority. Consider the following three reasons.

1. Much panpsychism revolves around Cartesian or neo-Aristotelian models of psyche. Object-oriented philosophy does not posit a Cartesian sense of interiority, as it does not involve a dichotomy between two kinds of things (*res cogitans* and *res extensa*), and it does not privilege cognition as the primary mode of interiority. It is more like a neo-Aristotelian interiority, for which agency is the basic mode of interiority, with cognition being one special way in which agency is configured. However, object-oriented philosophy does not posit a vertical arrangement of agency that climbs from inorganic things to plants to animals to humans to God. Plants are not simply more or less than animals. It depends on the specific relationships. Sometimes a piece of gold can have greater agency in some respect relative to a goldfish (e.g., more capacities for melting without being destroyed). For a cynical example, you might notice that some iPhones have more agency than their users. In any case, the point is that interiority is irreducibly diverse. Object-oriented philosophy is more of a “polypsychism” than panpsychism.<sup>43</sup> There is not one kind of interiority to rule them all, neither a human cogito nor a cosmic psyche.

2. Panpsychism typically considers interiority to be primary, like a basic feature of existence, whereas Harman considers alterity or withdrawal to be the real core feature of existence. “*Objects act because they exist, rather than existing because they act.*”<sup>44</sup> Like Nancy’s sleeping thing, Harman posits the existence of “a *sleeping* entity: or a *dormant* object,” which is completely withdrawn, intact, “untouched by external relations.”<sup>45</sup> Interiority or intentionality comes about in mediation through sensual relations, that is, through contact with other objects. Object-oriented philosophy accounts for the discrete differences between entities both in their *intact* core (withdrawal, real objects) and in their *contact* (relationality, sensual objects). A crucial part of how Harman accounts for these differences is to distinguish not just non-relational and relational aspects of entities but also to distinguish entities from their qualities, including the accidental qualities that emerge in contact and the real features of the intact thing. Altogether, this means that a body is a “quadruple object”: real (withdrawn) object, real qualities, sensual (relational) object, sensual qualities.<sup>46</sup>

3. This notion of interiority does not map onto a subject/object distinction. Object-oriented philosophy works with a relational/non-relational distinction: contact and withdrawal, which are not two kinds of entities but two sides of each entity. Whitehead’s prehending occasions, Latour’s actors, and the agential matter of new materialists all indicate ways of thinking nonhuman agency without an interior/exterior or subject/object bifurcation. Harman’s conception of interiority is not unlike theirs, although his entities also harbor a primordial alterity withdrawn from agency, experience, intentionality, or any relation at all. That withdrawal is crucial for post-deconstructive realism but seems missing from process-relational or new materialist accounts.

In the interest of articulating a quantum philosophy of nature without resorting to panpsychist notions of interiority, Harman’s object-oriented philosophy seems complementary to Nancy’s post-deconstructive realism, providing some solution to the impasse at which Nancy’s philosophy arrives with regard to the discrete differences of things. Nancy’s thought is pointed in the same direction as Harman’s, toward a non-anthropocentric conception of the plurality of real objects, which have relational and non-relational

<sup>42</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 157-160.

<sup>43</sup> Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 206.

<sup>44</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 260.

<sup>45</sup> Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 207.

<sup>46</sup> Harman, *The Quadruple Object*.

faces, each of which is characterized by discrete differences. Of course, their writing styles couldn't be much further apart. While some people adore the ornate poetizing of Nancy, others (like Harman) find it "overly mannered."<sup>47</sup> Harman's style seems much more informal by comparison, which to some acolytes of the continental tradition of philosophy might sound downright rude, or it might seem like a breath of fresh air in the otherwise stuffy room of professional philosophical discourse. In any case, leaving stylistic judgments aside, the real breath of fresh air comes from the great outdoors, beyond the anthropocentric tendencies of philosophy. It is the air itself, and the rain, soil, sand, cities, corn, clocks, cars, cats, canteens, and countless others—real nonhuman objects—that are finding their way into philosophy.

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<sup>47</sup> Harman, "On Interface," 97.