**Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics**
**Editorial**

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# Editorial for the Topical Issue "Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics II"

Volume 2 of *Open Philosophy* (published in 2019) contained a special issue entitled "Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics," consisting of thirteen articles on a variety of unresolved issues in Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and its relation to other currents of contemporary philosophy.[1] The number of submissions we received during the year exceeded expectations, and thus we decided to extend this topical issue into the current Volume 3, in what turned out to be the disruptive pandemic year of 2020. Amidst the medical and political chaos unleashed by the virus we somehow received fourteen submissions that were accepted by our referees, slightly more than last year's total. Along with a number of new authors, this issue also features a return appearance from 2019 author Arjen Kleinherenbrink and two new articles from fellow returnee Simon Weir.[2] As a matter of course, in my dual role as both the founder of OOO and Editor-in-Chief of this journal, I also contributed an article this year as well as last. Enough said. Let's get to work with a preview of all the articles in this year's issue, proceeding in alphabetical order by authors' surnames.

We begin with Sean Braune's contribution, "Fetish-Oriented Ontology."[3] There have been a number of misfired Marxist critiques of OOO as falling prey to "commodity fetishism," all of them forgetting that Marx introduced this notion as a social theory of value, not as an anti-realist ontology.[4] For there is nothing "fetishist" about the notion that things can *exist* outside social relations, and Marx himself gives plenty of examples in the first dozen pages of his major work. In any case, Braune comes at the problem from a completely different angle. Building on the work of Columbia University anthropologist Rosalind C. Morris, Braune traces the standard modern conception of a movement from fetish to knowledge, but leading to a surprise ending in which knowledge is cracked in turn by a "sublated" form of the fetish.[5] Since Morris is focused primarily on New Materialism, Braune expands the field to a consideration of OOO and Speculative Realism in the same light. In doing so he expresses a further debt to recent developments in posthumanism, especially the sort found in the work of Rosi Braidotti, New Materialist though she is.[6] Recapitulating the classic account of the fetish by Charles de Brosses, Braune reflects on the varying degrees of sublated fetishization found in OOO, Bill Brown's thing theory, and Quentin Meillassoux's arche-fossil.[7]

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**1** Harman, "Editorial for the Topical Issue 'Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics.'"
**2** Their 2019 articles were Kleinherenbrink, "The Two Times of Objects" and Weir and Dibbs, "The Ontographic Turn."
**3** Braune, "Fetish-Oriented Ontology."
**4** For a response to these repeated charges see Harman, "Object-Oriented Ontology and Commodity Fetishism."
**5** Braune, "Fetish-Oriented Ontology," 299. See also Morris, "After de Brosses."
**6** Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.
**7** de Brosses, "On the Worship of Fetish Gods;" Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*; Brown, "Thing Theory;" Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

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My own article in this issue, "The Battle of Objects and Subjects," is a lengthy review of portions of Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek's anthology *Subject Matters*, which is in part a direct critique of OOO.[8] The review concludes that the strong point of the anthology lies in its positive statement of the Ljubljana School program, which blends Hegelian philosophy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Marxism in an uncompromising idealist framework that the editors misleadingly proclaim to be a "materialism." The critical aspects of the book – directed primarily against me, Meillassoux, Jane Bennett, and Levi R. Bryant – are somewhat less illuminating due to the anthology authors' insufficient degree of intellectual sympathy for these currents.[9]

In "The Essences of Objects," Stanford Howdyshell stages a confrontation between my own theory of essence and Martin Heidegger's discussion of the topic in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*.[10] Through a close reading of OOO's concept of essence as a tension between a real object and its real qualities, Howdyshell notes unresolved difficulties with the notion that essence is only produced when one object relates causally to another: which would seem to place the essence of objects on their outer surface rather than their interior depths. After a brief detour through the Heideggerian notion of *physis*, Howdyshell returns to OOO with a noteworthy idea about how to distinguish between essential and inessential relations.

Arjen Kleinherenbrink of Nijmegen has written some of the most thoughtful pages in print on OOO's relation to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.[11] In his article "Metaphysical Primitives," Kleinherenbrink raises the issue of whether additional primitives are needed beyond individual objects, with reference to the differing Deleuze-inspired ontologies of Bryant and Manuel DeLanda.[12] Refusing DeLanda's introduction of a "cosmic plane" and "virtual diagrams" as ways of accounting for change in the world, Kleinherenbrink casts doubt on the need for any supra-individual principles in ontology.

Next, the authorial trio of Joseph Lindley, Haider Ali Akmal, and Paul Coulton weigh in with their article "Design Research and Object-Oriented Ontology."[13] It considers a number of OOO-inspired research projects at the ImaginationLancaster laboratory in the United Kingdom. Naturally enough, this hands-on approach to OOO brings them into close contact with the work of Ian Bogost, whose theories they deploy to combat the lingering prejudice of human-centered design, blamed partly on Heidegger's Dasein-centric misreading of his own tool-analysis.[14] They walk us through such in-house projects as Polly, Orbit, the Internet of Things Game, a Tarot of Things card deck, the Living Room of the Future, and Talking to Ghosts in the Machine, before closing with some more general reflections on OOO and design. Perhaps no other article in this collection hints at the vast scope attained by object-oriented research.

In "Objects, Relations, Potential, and Change," the veteran Dutch economist Bart Nooteboom meditates on the topic of dynamism in OOO.[15] One of his key tools in doing so is Robert P. Abelson's notion of "scripts," which also happens to play a major role in Bruno Latour's recent exploration of the mode of existence he calls [ORG] (organization), one of three modes resulting from his attempted decomposition of economics as a discipline.[16] Another source for Nooteboom – one coming from an entirely different sector

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**8** Harman, "The Battle of Objects and Subjects;" Sbriglia and Žižek, *Subject Matters*.

**9** See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* and Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*.

**10** Howdyshell, "The Essences of Objects;" Harman, "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos;" Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

**11** See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. Kleinherenbrink's groundbreaking exploration of the OOO side of their joint thinking can be found in Kleinherenbrink, *Against Continuity*.

**12** Kleinherenbrink, *The Two Times of Objects*. See Bryant, *Onto-Cartography* and DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*.

**13** Lindley et al., "Design Research and Object-Oriented Ontology."

**14** Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*; Bogost, *Persuasive Games*; Bogost, *Play Anything*. For the tool-analysis see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, and for an object-oriented reading of Heidegger see Harman, *Tool-Being*.

**15** Nooteboom, "Objects, Relations, Potential, and Change."

**16** Abelson, "Script Processing in Attitude Formation and Decision Making;" Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, 381–411.

of intellectual history – is the German Idealist F. W. J. Schelling's turbulent conception of human freedom.[17] Focusing on the areas of evolution, economics, and linguistics, Nooteboom concludes with a series of fundamental questions about the workings of change in any OOO theoretical framework.

In "Negative Dialectics Before Object-Oriented Ontology," Kenneth Novis makes a pointed challenge to the principle of flat ontology.[18] Although the title of his article accurately suggests the influence of Theodor Adorno, Novis also draws heavily on the thought of Louis Althusser and especially François Laruelle.[19] Although Novis holds that the philosophy of Tristan Garcia offers a "more sophisticated" account of hierarchization than is found in my own work, he still finds fault with Garcia for imitating my own anti-anthropocentric procedures.[20] For this reason Novis takes a detour through Althusser, hoping to re-establish a stronger sense of hierarchy among entities, and in particular to revive the heightened status of human subjects that OOO purposely discards. Novis concludes with an appeal to Laruelle, hoping to overcome what he calls the "dyadic" opposition between OOO and rival theories. Objects cannot take the place of the Laruellian "One;" object-oriented thought is therefore ill-equipped to lay claim to a "theory of everything," and is condemned to a more regional sort of destiny. Although I am often in disagreement with the arguments of Novis, his spirit of fair play as a critic is worthy of admiration, and his argument will certainly hold the reader's interest straight to the end.

The Manhattan musicologist Eric Taxier makes his *Open Philosophy* debut with a challenging article entitled "Two Ambiguities in Object-Oriented Aesthetic Interpretation."[21] By analogy with the OOO concept of "allusion" as pointing to the tension between an object and its qualities, Taxier proposes the term "collusion" to refer to a separate aesthetic tension between the whole and its parts, partly in reference to my anti-holistic arguments in *Art and Objects*.[22] He also highlights some apparent ambiguities in OOO aesthetics itself. For instance, it seems at times as if the RO-SQ tension were regarded as the sole site of aesthetic experience, but then in *Weird Realism* all four object-quality tensions are granted aesthetic status.[23] Taxier tries to resolve this discrepancy by shifting the focus of OOO aesthetics from allusion to collusion, leading him to introduce such novelties as an RO-SP tension – where SP stands for "Sensual Parts," a concept previously unknown in the object-oriented literature. He also makes brief but suggestive use of Noah Roderick's *The Being of Analogy*, one of the most underrated books in the OOO orbit.[24]

In "The Twofold Limit of Objects," architect/philosopher Jordi Vivaldi undertakes a critical reflection on Timothy Morton's notion of "rift" in *Realist Magic*.[25] In doing so he draws on the notion of "limit" in the work of the late Barcelona thinker Eugenio Trías (1942–2013), still little-known in the Anglophone world, though highly regarded among readers of Spanish.[26] As Vivaldi reminds us, Morton treats the object as riven by three paradoxes: "first, an object is at the same time itself and not itself; second, an object is at the same time present and non-present; and third, an object is at the same time part and whole."[27] The first paradox, in particular, tends to make Morton highly sympathetic to the "dialetheism" of the analytic philosopher Graham Priest, an uncompromising champion of the notion – drawn in part from the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna – that the same statement can be both true and untrue at the same time *and* in the same respect.[28] Vivaldi contends that by paying attention to the notion of limit, the dialetheism of Morton's and Priest's position is no longer needed, and their counterintuitive violation of Aristotelian logic

**17** Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Nature of Human Freedom*.

**18** Novis, "Negative Dialectics Before Object-Oriented Philosophy: Negation and Event."

**19** Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*; Althusser, *For Marx*; Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*.

**20** Garcia, *Form and Object*. For an outstanding commentary see Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations*.

**21** Taxier, "Two Ambiguities in Object-Oriented Aesthetic Interpretation."

**22** Harman, *Art and Objects*.

**23** Harman, *Weird Realism*.

**24** Roderick, *The Being of Analogy*.

**25** Vivaldi, "The Twofold Limit of Objects;" Morton, *Realist Magic*.

**26** Trías, *Ciudad sobre ciudad*; Trías, *Los límites del Mundo*; Trías, *La razón fronteriza*.

**27** Vivaldi, "The Twofold Limit of Objects," 495.

**28** Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought*; Nāgārjuna, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*.

is thereby avoided. The contribution of Trías on the theory of limits – counter in spirit to both Hegel and Derrida – is to treat a limit not as a wall but as a habitable *limes*, the Roman conception of a place between the Empire and the barbarians that was organized in its own way and filled with various encampments. Through this reworking of the concept of limit, Trías will attempt to "shift all philosophical problems."[29] As for how this concerns OOO, Vivaldi imaginatively suggests that "objects are not *framed* by limits, but *radiate* limits."[30] Spurred by this dazzling phrase, he undertakes a fusion of Trías's philosophy with the fourfold structure of OOO.[31]

"Living and Nonliving Occasionalism" is the first of Simon Weir's two articles in this issue.[32] Readers of OOO will immediately recognize occasionalism, the historical doctrine that *direct* causation between entities is impossible, as one of the chief historical preoccupations of my work.[33] For OOO, any real object can only encounter *sensual* realities, since other real entities withdraw from direct contact. What makes this hard for some readers to accept is that the same is supposed to be true of interactions between inanimate entities. It is a commonplace of much modern philosophy that a human being can only perceive representations of things rather than the things themselves. But when a wave strikes a beach in the absence of all human observers, how can we say that a mindless object such as a wave encounters a "perception" of the beach, without signing up for the wildest form of panpsychism? Weir's unexpected approach to the problem involves a detour through quantum theory, which is usually evoked to defend *idealist* conceptions of philosophy rather than steadfast realisms like OOO. After giving a brief history of the Copenhagen Interpretation, Weir proceeds to a discussion of virtual particles in quantum space that differs from the idealist treatment of the same theme by Slavoj Žižek.[34] In the process, Weir goes as far into the weeds of technical discussion as one could possibly do in a brief philosophy article, with special attention given to the work of 2004 Nobel Laureate Frank Wilczek.[35]

Following this scientifically minded article, Weir demonstrates his versatility with a second contribution to the issue, "Art and Ontography."[36] The term "ontography" refers in my own work to the study of the various possible tense relations obtaining between real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, and sensual qualities.[37] (Note that Bogost uses the term in a different sense.)[38] Weir explicates the term during a memorable tour of the painting and thinking of surrealist Salvador Dalí, which sets the table for an original interpretation of magic tricks. Weir concludes with the unprecedented theory that there are *four* distinct sensual objects at work in the case of magic.

Niels Wilde's "Everything and Nothing" raises the question of the status of nothingness.[39] For the most part, OOO's concern has been to downplay what it regards as Heidegger's excessive enthusiasm on this topic, which it treats as a symptom of the German philosopher's incorrect view that human beings are able to rise above entities and encounter them against the clarifying background of *das Nichts*.[40] But Wilde takes a more positive approach, arguing that OOO actually makes use of not one but *two* forms of nothingness: (1) that of the withdrawal of all beings and (2) that of the nothingness that exists *between* beings. As he sees it, OOO is actually closer to Kierkegaard than Heidegger when it comes to nothingness, a plausible reading that no one had previously suggested. Amidst a meticulous cataloguing of numerous statements on objects

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**29** Vivaldi, "The Twofold Limit of Objects," 499.

**30** Ibid., 508.

**31** See Harman, "Dwelling With the Fourfold."

**32** Weir, "Living and Nonliving Occasionalism."

**33** See Harman, "On Vicarious Causation;" Harman, "Asymmetrical Causation."

**34** Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*.

**35** Wilczek, *The Lightness of Being*.

**36** Weir, "Art and Ontography."

**37** Harman, *The Quadruple Object*.

**38** Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*.

**39** Wilde, "Everything and Nothing: How do Matters Stand with Nothingness in Object-Oriented Ontology?"

**40** Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?"

from a number of my writings, Wilde takes issue both with Floriana Ferro's phenomenological rejoinder to OOO and with Markus Gabriel's idea that a "field of sense" is sufficient to clarify the being of an object.[41] Working through Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*, Wilde ends up with a non-correlationist reading of the great Danish thinker in which nothingness precedes human existence.[42] Here Wilde expresses a debt to Lee Braver's Kierkegaard-inspired "transgressive realism," though he dislikes the anthropocentric connotations of this phrase, and hence replaces it with "topological realism."[43] The article concludes with a subtle analysis of various possible senses of the nothing. It would be fair to say that Wilde has reawakened my interest in the role of nothingness within an OOO framework.

The Baudelairean-sounding article "A Dream of a Stone" is written by Tsaiyi Wu, a literary scholar thoroughly familiar with recent philosophical currents. Wu now lives and works in the gigantic city of Shanghai, so different from the tiny – though wonderful – Bloomington, Indiana, where her work first caught my attention some years ago. In pursuit of the OOO project of de-anthropocentrization, Wu holds that the following three principles are obligatory: "to abandon the claim to knowledge associated with human reason, to remain in perpetual quest of an object, and to transgress the given perceptual structure through aesthetic experience."[44] To this end, she critiques Meillassoux's strategy of severing the *correlation* between thought and world, and sides more with the OOO alternative of denying that thought and world are the two primary terms in the first place. Wu notes a symptomatic difficulty with Meillassoux's manner of combatting correlationism: he indirectly trivializes human existence by thematizing human experience as a site of secondary qualities that conceal the true properties of things. Thus, the frequent critiques that Speculative Realism despises human beings, as formulated by the likes of Benjamin Boysen, strike home against Meillassoux while landing nowhere near OOO.[45] As for the proper status of beauty in philosophy, Wu points the way with a fine reading of Baudelaire's poem "La Beauté" ("Beauty"), which she carefully reads in the context of its Parnassian forerunners.[46] OOO has traditionally interpreted beauty as the proper means of dealing with the elusiveness of reality. Although Wu generally agrees with this approach, she is also inclined to stress the strictly *ethical* aspects of this predicament. In her own concluding words: "Just as the object is withdrawn, de-anthropocentrism is in the first place ethical – it involves a creation of the self to love and experience the stone."[47]

We reach the end of this issue's alphabet with Niki Young's article "On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access."[48] Young, a native and resident of Malta, emerged from nowhere in 2017 as one of the world's best-read authorities on OOO. His concern in the present article is with Meillassoux's term "correlationism," which at various times I have called either synonymous with and superior to my own wordier term "philosophy of access," or at least as "similar enough" to my own terminology.[49] "Not so fast!" says Young: the two terms are based on different arguments and therefore need to be kept distinct. As Young argues, Meillassoux's "correlationism" is aimed at those who use Kantian finitude to foreclose human *knowledge* of the absolute, while my "philosophy of (human) access" targets those who focus on the human–world relation as the ground for all others. In brief, Meillassoux engages with an epistemological worry while mine is ontological. This leads Young to an interesting discussion of "onto-taxonomy," one of the central concepts of recent OOO, which refers to the ingrained tendency of modern philosophy to treat the world as divided into two and only two basic kinds of realities: (a) human thought and (b) everything else.[50] As he goes about discussing these key differences within Speculative Realism, Young

**41** Ferro, "Object-Oriented Ontology's View of Relations;" Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*.

**42** Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*.

**43** Braver, "A Brief History of Continental Realism."

**44** Wu, "A Dream of a Stone," 413. See also Ibid., 419.

**45** Boysen, "The Embarrassment of Being Human."

**46** Baudelaire, "La Beauté," which is poem number seventeen in *The Flowers of Evil*.

**47** Wu, "A Dream of a Stone," 428.

**48** Young, "On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access: Meillassoux and Harman."

**49** Meillassoux, *After Finitude*; Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*; Harman in Sparrow, "The Horrors of Realism," 230.

**50** The main source on "onto-taxonomy" so far is Harman, "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy." However, the idea featured briefly as early as 2016 in Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer*, 237.

also gives us a glimpse of his own ongoing research on Derrida, whom he reads – against the grain – as a speculative philosopher and not just an idealist or correlationist.[51]

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**51** In the present article, he refers in particular to Derrida's conversation with Kearney in the latter's *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, 35.

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