



## Editorial

Graham Harman\*

# Editorial for the Topical Issue “Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics III”

<https://doi.org/10.1515/oppphil-2020-0191>

received November 7, 2021

For the third consecutive year, there were a sufficient number of submissions for *Open Philosophy* to assemble a special issue on the theme of “Object-Oriented Ontology and its Critics.” My editorials for the first and second such issues, in 2019 and 2020, can be consulted by anyone interested in seeing what themes were covered there.<sup>1</sup> Among the six articles newly published in the present issue, two (by Tim Flohr Sørensen and Russell Sbriglia) are responses to previous articles of mine in past volumes of *Open Philosophy*, one gives my response to Catherine Malabou’s recent political critique of Speculative Realism, another (by Jordi Vivaldi) gives an object-oriented response to our occasional critic Rosi Braidotti, and two (by Gonzalo Vaillo and Niki Young) propose technical developments in Object-Oriented Ontology itself. I will cover the articles briefly in that order.

The prolific archaeologist Tim Flohr Sørensen makes a welcome first visit to *Open Philosophy* in his piece “That Raw and Ancient Cold: On Graham Harman’s Recasting of Archaeology.”<sup>2</sup> It is the latest installment in an exchange triggered in 2018 by his fellow archaeologists Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen in “Theory Adrift: The Matter of Archaeological Theorizing,” which found fault with what the authors regarded as the excessively textual and insufficiently material approach to the Dutch East India Company in my 2016 book *Immaterialism*.<sup>3</sup> My response, in a 2019 article in the pages of this journal entitled “The Coldness of Forgetting,” was to contest the claim of Pétursdóttir and Olsen that the specific feature of archaeology is its focus on material remains rather than texts. It would be better, I proposed, to view archaeology as focused especially on situation of low information, with history being the proper field to process situations in which relevant information is either ample or downright excessive. I linked this idea to Marshall McLuhan’s famous though sometimes embattled distinction between “hot” and “cold” media, with the former possessing a high density of information and the latter possessing fainter traces of data, and therefore in need of more participation by the viewer.<sup>4</sup> In response, Sørensen contests my claim that archaeology is a low-data field, pointing to what amounts in fact to an information overload in the profession.<sup>5</sup> To miss this, he holds, is to conflate archaeology as a “trope” with what it really is as an “ecology of practices,” a phrase beloved among New Materialists.<sup>6</sup> Sørensen’s article marks another important engagement by an archaeologist with philosophy, and will be read with interest by the audience of this journal. Rather than respond to Sørensen in the pages of *Open Philosophy*, I have done so in a portion of a book

<sup>1</sup> Harman, “Editorial for the Topical Issue ‘Object-Oriented Ontology and its Critics’;” and Harman, “Editorial for the Topical Issue ‘Object-Oriented Ontology and its Critics II’.”

<sup>2</sup> Sørensen, “That Raw and Ancient Cold.”

<sup>3</sup> Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Theory Adrift;” and Harman, *Immaterialism*.

<sup>4</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

<sup>5</sup> Sørensen, “That Raw and Ancient Cold,” 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

\* Corresponding author: Graham Harman, Department of Liberal Arts, Southern California Institute of Architecture, Los Angeles, CA 90013, United States, e-mail: cairoharman2@gmail.com

chapter entitled “The Shipwreck of Theseus,” which can be found in a collection edited by Peter Campbell and Sara Rich, *Contemporary Philosophy for Maritime Archaeology*.<sup>7</sup>

The second response piece in this year’s issue is “Notes Toward an Extimate Materialism” by Russell Sbriglia of Seton Hall University, an emerging figure in the Ljubljana School which by now is quite famous for its fusion of Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>8</sup> In 2020, Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek were co-editors of a much anticipated volume entitled *Subject Lessons*, which featured numerous articles by Ljubljana School members old and young, defending the intellectual contributions of Hegel and Lacan while criticizing recent schools that depart from the priority of the subject, such as New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology.<sup>9</sup> I read this book with great interest immediately following publication, and quickly penned a response: “The Battle of Objects and Subjects,” which appeared in this journal a few months later.<sup>10</sup> Sbriglia’s strategy in “Notes Toward an Extimate Materialism” is twofold. First, he responds to my complaint that the authors in *Subject Lessons* are too quick to conflate New Materialism with Object-Oriented Ontology. While conceding that there are numerous differences between these two schools, Sbriglia counters that such distinctions are of less importance than the shared move in both groups toward a “flat ontology,” which he takes to be the real bone of contention between New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology on one side and the Ljubljana School on the other. Second, Sbriglia rejects my claim that Ljubljana calls itself “materialist” solely in order to wrap itself in the mantle of Enlightenment prestige. Instead, the Ljubljana species of materialism is characterized by its rejection of any totality or whole. For those who doubt that this is what materialism has ever meant, Sbriglia points to Adrian Johnston’s historical argument published recently in *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume 2, A Weak Nature Alone*.<sup>11</sup> This pair of articles eventually led to a fruitful online discussion between me and Sbriglia on October 29, 2021 (just one week before this writing) at the Psychoanalytic Practices Seminar of the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University. Video of the debate should be available online shortly.

My own article in this year’s issue is “Malabou’s Political Critique of Speculative Realism.” In a recent article in French, “Le vide politique du réalisme contemporain” (“The Political Void of Contemporary Realism”), the prominent philosopher Catherine Malabou critiques the Speculative Realism movement (founded in 2007 by Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Quentin Meillassoux, and me) for turning too much force over to reality itself and leaving too little for the human subject.<sup>12</sup> In a political context, Malabou holds, this suppresses the radical creative impulses she sees at work in the emerging politics of recent years. She argues the point by focusing on two pieces by Brassier (his doctoral dissertation at the University of Warwick, and his well-known article “Concepts and Objects”) and two by me (“The Future of Continental Realism” and the book chapter “The Four Most Typical Objections to OOO”).<sup>13</sup> Whereas Speculative Realism strongly emphasizes a real that exists independently of human thought, Malabou charts an opposite course, invoking Louis Althusser’s idea of a materialism that would not be determined by anything pre-existing: one in which matter would only be summoned into its existence by its relations, and be marked by an entirely unpredictable contingency freed from the bonds to autonomous matter found in the rather different model of contingency in Meillassoux.<sup>14</sup> In response, I point to some problems that emerge when non-human reality is left out of consideration in politics and society, citing as evidence the joint work of Shirley Strum and Bruno Latour.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Harman, “The Shipwreck of Theseus”; and Campbell and Rich, *Contemporary Philosophy for Maritime Archaeology*.

<sup>8</sup> Sbriglia, “Notes Toward an Extimate Materialism.”

<sup>9</sup> Sbriglia and Žižek, *Subject Lessons*.

<sup>10</sup> Harman, “The Battle of Objects and Subjects.”

<sup>11</sup> Johnston, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume 2, A Weak Nature Alone*.

<sup>12</sup> Malabou, “Le Vide Politique du Réalisme Contemporain;” and Brassier et al., “Speculative Realism.”

<sup>13</sup> Brassier, *Alien Theory*; Brassier, “Concepts and Objects;” Harman, “The Future of Continental Realism;” and Harman, “The Four Most Typical Objections to OOO.”

<sup>14</sup> Althusser, “Le Courant Souterrain du Matérialisme de la Recontre;” and Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

<sup>15</sup> Harman, *Bruno Latour*; and Strum and Latour, “Redefining the Social Link.”

Readers of this journal are already familiar with Jordi Vivaldi, who in 2020 published a thoroughly fresh article called “The Twofold Limit of Objects,” which applied concepts from the Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías to interpret Timothy Morton’s concept of “rift.”<sup>16</sup> Now, in a detailed piece entitled “Xenological Subjectivity,” Vivaldi considers the work of Rosi Braidotti, charismatic intellectual leader of one of the major sub-schools of New Materialism, and a prolific author of influential philosophical works.<sup>17</sup> As Vivaldi tells us, he thinks Braidotti succeeds in accounting for the self as a “transversal multiplicity” and the world as “non-hierarchized by nature-culture distinctions.”<sup>18</sup> Like many other Deleuzeans, however, Braidotti invests too heavily in a neo-Spinozistic monism, and thereby “blurs the notions of finitude, agency, and change, obscuring the possibility of critical dissent while decreasing the overall theory’s consistency.”<sup>19</sup> Vivaldi’s proposal is that Braidotti can avoid these difficulties by opening up to the object-oriented notion of “withdrawal,” reflecting the influence on OOO of Martin Heidegger.<sup>20</sup>

Gonzalo Vaillo’s “Superficiality and Representation” marks his debut in *Open Philosophy*, though he is already well-known in object-oriented circles.<sup>21</sup> As Vaillo aptly remarks, there are two basic positions when it comes to the relation between appearance and reality, which he calls “reality as appearance” and “reality beyond appearance.”<sup>22</sup> While OOO clearly belongs to the second of these families, Vaillo also notes that it distinguishes between ontologies of continuity and ontologies of discreteness: Deleuze is mentioned as a good example of the first, and Kant and OOO as models of the second. On the basis of these distinctions, Vaillo makes several intriguing claims. He first considers the direct realisms of Thomas Reid and James J. Gibson, the “bundle” theory of David Hume, and the refutation of the latter by Edmund Husserl’s introduction of the intentional object (Franz Brentano’s earlier intentional object is too close to the Humean bundle to match Husserl’s significant breakthrough).<sup>23</sup> At least in the cases of Reid, Gibson, and Hume, it turns out that communication between different observers of the world will be difficult, given that they are excessively locked into private viewpoints without possibility of unification. In an especially clever twist, Vaillo even interprets Husserl’s Polish rival Kasimir Twardowski as a “superficialist” despite his distinction between deep objects and superficial qualities, since his notion of depth is merely projected retroactively as the result of some specific perception.<sup>24</sup> Turning next to theories of reality beyond appearance, Vaillo shows more sympathy for OOO’s discrete ontology than for the continuisms of Deleuze and Henri Bergson, though he also identifies multiple problems facing both my version of OOO and Levi Bryant’s (“ontology”), including their inability to do justice to what Morton calls “hyperobjects.”<sup>25</sup> Vaillo expresses the additional concern that my claim that “knowledge” and “truth” have nothing to do with each other runs the risk of an epistemological idealism that grants too much weight to the position of the observer and too little to the object of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Vaillo’s original solution consists, in part, in denying the view of Kant and Clement Greenberg that aesthetics is an end in itself.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the experience of allure generates a number of side-effects that also contribute to our knowledge of objects, rather than knowledge being walled off from aesthetics as a dangerous threat to its autonomy. After many readings, I am not yet sure that I have exhausted the complexity of Vaillo’s theory.

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16 Trías, *Los límites del Mundo*; Trías, *La Razón Fronteriza*; Trías, *Ciudad Sobre Ciudad*; and Morton, *Realist Magic*.

17 Vivaldi, “Xenological Subjectivity;” Braidotti, *The Nomadic Subject*; Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*; and Braidotti, *The Posthuman*.

18 Vivaldi, “Xenological Subjectivity,” abstract.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Harman, *Tool-Being*.

21 Vaillo, “Superficiality and Representation.”

22 *Ibid.*, 36.

23 Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*; Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. 1979; Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*; Husserl, *Logical Investigations*; and Brentano, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint*.

24 Twardowski, *On the Content and Objects of Presentations*.

25 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*; Morton, *Hyperobjects*.

26 Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 167–93.

27 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*; Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics*.

The final article in this year's OOO issue, "Object, Reduction, and Emergence" is written by Niki Young, another *Open Philosophy* veteran.<sup>28</sup> Our issue of last year features Young's already influential "On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access," with its insistence on drawing a distinction between Meillassoux's famous term "correlationism" and my own closely related "philosophy of access."<sup>29</sup> In the same general timeframe, though elsewhere, he published "Only Two Peas in a Pod," a powerful piece on the increasingly important OOO topic of "onto-taxonomy."<sup>30</sup> The premise of "Object, Reduction, and Emergence" is that OOO so far has relied heavily on the concept of emergence without providing any centralized discussion of the topic: a lacuna that Young aims to fill. This claim rings true, to the extent that most OOO discussions of emergence so far have simply adopted Manuel DeLanda's discussion of it as their starting point.<sup>31</sup> Even Morton's interesting discussion of emergence in *Realist Magic* treats it as a "sensual" phenomenon, rather than as the emergence of a "real" object as my own position would seem to require.<sup>32</sup> While there is a negative sense of emergence throughout OOO in the context of the unreachable withdrawal of objects, Young identifies a positive sense of the term in my 2010 article "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos," and from here he pushes further, showing along the way how the OOO conception of emergence must depart from David Chalmers' distinction between "strong" and "weak" versions of the concept.<sup>33</sup> After reminding the reader that my 2005 book *Guerrilla Metaphysics* argued that causation is always vicarious, asymmetrical, and buffered, Young goes on to expand this trio of terms to six: adding that it must also be binary, alluring, and aesthetic.<sup>34</sup> The rapid influence of Young's article can be seen in the fact that it is already cited in Vivaldi's "Xenological Subjectivity," discussed earlier.

It perhaps goes without saying that I have learned a great deal about Object-Oriented Ontology from each of these articles; otherwise, they could never have survived the review process for this issue.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank Katarzyna Tempczyk, Managing Editor of *Open Philosophy*, whose silent labor behind the scenes is the wall protecting this journal from non-existence.

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<sup>28</sup> Young, "Object, Reduction, and Emergence."

<sup>29</sup> Young, "On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access."

<sup>30</sup> Young, "Only Two Peas in a Pod."

<sup>31</sup> DeLanda, "Emergence, Causality and Realism."

<sup>32</sup> Morton, *Realist Magic*.

<sup>33</sup> Harman, "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos;" Chalmers, "Strong and Weak Emergence."

<sup>34</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*.

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