

## Research Article

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# On Truth and Lie in the Object-Oriented Sense

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**Abstract:** This article begins with a treatment of Friedrich Nietzsche’s early essay “On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense.” The essay is often read, in the deconstructive tradition, as a showcase example of the impossibility of making a literal philosophical claim: is Nietzsche’s claim that all truth is merely metaphorical itself a true statement, or merely a metaphorical one? The present article claims that this supposed paradox relies on the groundless assumption that all philosophy must ultimately be grounded in some unshakeable literal truth. From here, we turn to Edmund Gettier’s famous critique of the widespread notion of knowledge as “justified true belief.” Expanding on Gettier’s point, it is argued that there can only be “justified untrue belief” or “unjustified true belief,” never a belief that is both justified and true at once.

**Keywords:** Friedrich Nietzsche, J. Hillis Miller, Edmund Husserl, Edmund Gettier, truth, lying

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote his essay “On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense” (hereafter, “Truth and Lie”) in early career, though it remained unpublished until the final years of his insanity.<sup>1</sup> Famous for its claim that all perceptions, statements, and concepts are metaphors and thus cannot directly communicate truths about reality, it has been treated by critics as one of the early inspirations for an empty postmodernist relativism. One might wonder whether Nietzsche’s sweeping vision has anything to do with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), which also places strong emphasis on metaphor, as in Chapter 2 of my book *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Mulhall wrote a critical review of that work in the *London Review of Books* which, among other things, raised the question of whether Nietzsche’s essay was the inspiration for my treatment of the topic.<sup>3</sup> It was not. The OOO theory of metaphor was inspired instead by José Ortega y Gasset’s own early-career treatment of metaphor in “An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface,” which I first discussed in print in 2005 in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*.<sup>4</sup> But while Mulhall’s guess at the backstory of my theory was incorrect, he does raise a question of considerable interest: what are the points of overlap and conflict between the respective theories of metaphor in OOO and “Truth and Lie”? This article aims to settle that question.

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne*. All translations from this work are my own, and all page numbers in parentheses in this article refer to Kindle locations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*.

<sup>3</sup> Mulhall, “How Complex is a Lemon?” For a full response to Mulhall’s review, see Harman, *Skirmishes*, 333–51.

<sup>4</sup> Ortega y Gasset, “An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface;” Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 102–10.

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## 1 The central theses of “Truth and Lie”

Whatever one thinks of his philosophy *per se*, Nietzsche is generally – and rightly – regarded as one of the greatest literary talents in the history of Western philosophy. Perhaps only Plato has a comparable reputation for excellence as a writer. Cicero’s reference to Aristotle’s “golden” dialogues is certainly impressive, given the scale of that ancient Roman’s own stylistic gifts. But unless these lost Aristotelian works resurface someday from a monastery or the dry sands of Egypt, we have no independent basis for placing him on the same literary plane as his teacher. Giordano Bruno was another immensely talented writer, though somewhat limited in his repetitive comic formula: a Latin-spouting pedant repeatedly smacked down by a clever buffoon, as two serious thinkers debate in the foreground. Henri Bergson was another great philosophical stylist – indeed, the recipient of a Nobel Prize for Literature that was denied to his relative by marriage Marcel Proust – but one would hesitate to place his smoothly flowing prose on the same plane as Nietzsche and Plato. There is also one of Nietzsche’s own favorites, Arthur Schopenhauer, a sophisticated and cosmopolitan essayist and heckling sage, but one dogged too frequently by his resentments and outbursts of temper. In any case, Nietzsche’s power as a writer is so profound that we can imagine him being just as influential if he had been a mainstream Christian or socialist rather than the eternal Dionysian hero of rebellious youth.

That said, “Truth and Lie” is not his most organized piece of work. This might help explain why Nietzsche did not choose to publish it in his own lifetime, so that its release was left to the dubious era of his sister’s curatorship. The central theses of the essay do not appear in logical order, but are intermixed from beginning to end. For this reason, we should begin by trying to bring the separate thoughts of “Truth and Lie” into some sort of coherent order. I would propose that the following seven theses count jointly as the heart of Nietzsche’s argument:

1. We should affirm the nullity of all human things.
2. The human account of the world is naively anthropomorphic.
3. Our entire lived world is merely a translation.
4. Humans are fundamentally liars at every level of existence.
5. Our sense of truth is dominated by power struggles and social factors.
6. Science is just a derivative form of metaphor.
7. Human experience is basically aesthetic and therefore untrue.

In a sense, these seven points also summarize the whole of Nietzsche’s philosophy, meaning that the present article might be expanded beyond “Truth and Lie” into a judgment on his entire written corpus. Nonetheless, it is not the case that all seven points necessarily come as a package: one could easily affirm some of them – at least partially – while denying one or more of the others. Beyond this, there are internal cracks in each of the points taken individually. Let’s begin by covering them one by one before proceeding, in the next section, to reflect on their various strengths and weaknesses.

1. *We should affirm the nullity of all human things.* Although the futility of all human effort is not the primary claim of “Truth and Lie,” it is certainly the keynote of the article from its earliest lines: “In some remote corner of the cosmos, dispersed into countless flickering solar systems, there was once a star where clever animals invented knowledge... After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star froze, and the clever beasts had to die.” (2) And again: “There were eternities during which [the human intellect] did not exist; and when it comes to an end, nothing will have happened.” (7) The main influence on this passage was no doubt the pessimistic Schopenhauer, who still cast a long shadow over the early Nietzsche.<sup>5</sup> In present-day philosophy it is Nietzsche’s fellow Schopenhauer admirer, Ray Brassier, who expresses this sense of the worthlessness of all human endeavor most passionately.<sup>6</sup> The difference is that while Brassier has a profound respect for science as our means of grasping this worthlessness, Nietzsche takes science to be

<sup>5</sup> See Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 125–94.

<sup>6</sup> Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*.

just one more piece of illusion. In any case, “Truth and Lie” is pitched from the start as a “critical” approach to the human condition, despite Nietzsche’s firm awareness of the respective drawbacks of the critical mode of writing history along with its two alternatives: the antiquarian and the monumental.<sup>7</sup>

2. *The human account of the world is naively anthropomorphic.* For all our pretensions to knowledge, we remain forever trapped in a human bubble, encountering nothing but ourselves. Whereas empirical approaches in philosophy and elsewhere like to pride themselves on superior parsimony and greater honesty than other intellectual strategies, for Nietzsche, “the entire empirical world... [is] the anthropomorphic world.” (162) Knowledge claims to go beyond the interior of our experience, but in the end human thought “has no additional mission leading beyond human life.” (7) It is not even that “man is the measure of all things,” as Protagoras held, since for Nietzsche we are the measure of all things only for ourselves. After all, animals probably consider themselves to sit at the center of the universe as well, and our only difference from them is our “ability to volatilize visible perception in a schema, and thus to dissolve an image into a concept,” (91–97) though image and concept turn out to be nothing more than two different stages of metaphor. The notion that humans are trapped in a human conception of things is, of course, the core of Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy. And while Nietzsche’s contempt for Kant is proverbial, they agree on at least this much. The probable indirect source of this affinity is once again Schopenhauer, who admired Kant as deeply as Nietzsche despised him. Although Kant has come under a great deal of fire from various quarters for more than two centuries, he made a permanent addition to our intellectual vocabulary that remains in full force today: as in the systems theory idea that any system is closed off from its environment, whether in the ecological theories of Jakob von Uexküll, the autopoietic biology of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, or the social systems theory of Niklas Luhmann that borrowed so much from their work.<sup>8</sup> OOO itself seems to confine humans to the “sensual” in comparable fashion, although there are complications to this view to be considered below.

3. *Our entire world is merely a translation.* Whatever we humans encounter in the world can only be what the empiricists called “secondary” rather than “primary” qualities, and we cannot even be sure that primary qualities exist in the first place. For “how could we possibly say ‘the stone is hard,’ as if ‘hard’ were somehow otherwise known than through a purely subjective irritation!” (48–54) It is even worse when we pass from the purported “hardness” of a particular stone and reflect on the concept “hardness” more generally, divorced from any specific case. For then we are yet another step further from the concrete and the immediate, as in Plato’s doctrine of perfect forms. In British Empiricism, John Locke deduces the existence of a substance (“I know not what”) that supports all secondary qualities, George Berkeley rejects primary qualities outright with the idea that everything other than minds is merely an image, and David Hume takes a skeptical distance toward the question of whether substances or minds are real things behind their tangible qualities.<sup>9</sup> The Nietzsche of “Truth and Lie” is certainly no Lockean, and he also seems closer to Hume than to Berkeley: Nietzsche’s theory of metaphors leaves open the *possibility* of an inaccessible world apart from the human one. That is to say that unlike German Idealism, he takes the position that saying either that a world outside perception exists or that it does not exist are two equally groundless claims: much like Quentin Meillassoux’s “correlationist.”<sup>10</sup> For to say that such a world exists “would be a dogmatic assertion, and to this extent just as unprovable as its opposite.” (78) We can now replace the three British Empiricists with the names of German philosophers so as to obtain a helpful analogy. Kant is like Locke, deducing the existence of the thing-in-itself from that of the phenomena; German Idealism is like Berkeley, denying that an inaccessible thing-in-itself can possibly exist; Nietzsche is more like Hume, asserting that the question is unanswerable, and that one must remain agnostic about the thing-in-itself just as about primary qualities.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 57–124.

<sup>8</sup> Uexküll, *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*; Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition*; Luhmann, *Social Systems*.

<sup>9</sup> Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*; Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*.

<sup>10</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

4. *Humans are fundamentally liars at every level of existence.* One of the most memorable sentences in “Truth and Lie” runs as follows:

In human life... deception, flattery, lying and deceiving, backstabbing, posturing, stolen glory, the wearing of masks, hiding behind convention, acting before others and before oneself – in short, a continuous fluttering to and fro around the single flame called vanity – is so much the rule and the law that nearly nothing is harder to grasp than how a pure and honest drive for truth could ever have arisen. (19)

Lying and pretense, then, are at the heart of the human vocation. Not only do we merely glide over the surface of things and grasp nothing but their superficial aspects, but for a third of our lives we are lost in dreams, cut off even from the actual state of our bodies. But aside from this ubiquitous character of illusion, the real difference between truth and lie arises for the first time in language: “a designation for things is invented that is both valid and binding, and the legislation of language also gives the first laws of truth: here, for the first time, there arises a contrast between truth and lie.” (37) In language, says Nietzsche, there are only two kinds of statements: sheer tautology and mere illusion. Here we are reminded of Kant’s distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, where the former are simply tautologous and the latter bring two different terms together. While Kant is confident in our ability to make *a priori* synthetic judgments that contain necessary truth, synthetic judgments for Nietzsche are always loaded with falsity.

5. *Our sense of truth is dominated by power struggles and social factors.* There are lies, and then there are lies. Along with the symphony of deceptions served up by our senses and intellect alike, we also need social stability. For this reason, a distinction is drawn between socially acceptable lies and those aggravated falsehoods that are deemed unacceptable: “The liar uses these valid designations, words, in order to make the unreal appear real. He says for example ‘I am rich,’ though ‘poor’ would be the proper designation for his state.” (37) The social use of “truth” is to distinguish the good citizen from the liar, and what we call truth is really just a matter of “caste order and class rank.” (103) Yet even this holds good only on the interior of any given society, not between different societies. For in Nietzsche’s words:

Just as the Romans and Etruscans carved up the sky with rigid mathematical lines and bound a god in each demarcated space as if in a temple, so too does every people have such a mathematically apportioned conceptual heaven above it. What such a people understands by “the requirements of truth” is simply that each conceptual god should remain in its own sphere. (103–108)

Here, Nietzsche allies himself with an extreme form of ontologized cultural relativism, as seen today in Philippe Descola’s anthropological thesis that all human societies must take one of four incommensurable forms: rationalism, animism, totemism, or analogism.<sup>11</sup> Although our rationalism thinks itself superior to the other three “primitive” forms, we have simply made one of the four possible choices as to the question of whether humans and nonhumans share the same kinds of minds and bodies. Our particular rationalist choice is that all things are made of the same physical material but that only humans have minds in the strict sense of the term. But for Descola – and Nietzsche would no doubt go along with him – the other three permutations are equally possible and equally valid.

6. *Science is just a derivative form of metaphor.* What we call “science” purports to be a form of access to reality different in kind from all myth, religion, and poetry. Bruno Latour argues that this attitude stems from the uniquely modern claim that nature and society should be mutually purified from each other, with the former speaking only of causally independent events unaffected by human thought, and the latter referring solely to a realm of arbitrary power struggles.<sup>12</sup> The tendency of Latour’s career is to argue that such purified realms do not really exist, since science assembles heterogeneous actors to reach powerful results and society takes account of reality in establishing and modifying its institutions. “Truth and Lie” adopts a far more extreme position than Latour’s, treating both science and politics as differing forms of illusion. Science proclaims its interest solely in truth, but for Nietzsche, truth is nothing more than “a

<sup>11</sup> Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*.

<sup>12</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; see also Harman, “The Importance of Bruno Latour for Philosophy.”

mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in brief, a sum of human relations that are poetically and rhetorically amplified, transmitted, and decorated, and which after long use seem to a people to be steady, canonical, and binding.” (78–85) As we have seen, rationality merely takes the already metaphorical character of perceptual images and places them at a second remove by turning them into abstract concepts. Above all, science is a mathematizing operation, and combined with our already vague sense of space and time, it gives rise to the so-called “laws of nature,” an impossible notion given that everything that happens is individual, such that no event is quite like any other. Science is thus “the burial ground of perceptions.” (162) Stated differently, “the fact that a metaphor hardens and becomes rigid guarantees nothing at all concerning the necessity and exclusive justification of this metaphor.” (139) We only know things relationally, not as they are in themselves. Scientific truth is thus “a truth of limited value... [for] it is thoroughly anthropomorphic and contains not a single point that would be ‘true in itself’ or really and generally valid apart from man.” (114) There is simply no way to mirror an object in a subject accurately. And perhaps most alarming of all, “he who is guided by concepts and abstractions only succeeds in defending against misfortune, without gaining any happiness from these abstractions.” (210)

7. *Human experience is basically aesthetic and therefore untrue.* All of the previous sections have led up to this one. Everything is metaphor; all is aesthetic and hence untrue. “For between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression, but at most an aesthetic relation: I mean an allusive transfer, a stuttering translation into an entirely foreign tongue[...].” (127–133). This might seem not to go much further than the thoughts of Descartes or Spinoza on the incommensurability of different substances or attributes, if not for our awareness of Nietzsche’s later view that the will to power introduces translation or distortion even between distinct physical things.<sup>13</sup> Nothing happens directly, since everything is mediated through some sort of translation of forces. Hegel holds too that everything is mediated, but his confidence in the nonexistence of the thing-in-itself makes him correspondingly confident in reason’s ability to attain absolute knowing through the course of history.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, translation for Nietzsche means that something is always left out, and thus he remains secure in his aesthetic skepticism. After all, “the very relationship of a nerve stimulus to the generated image is itself not necessary.” (133) For this reason, “the drive to form metaphors [is the] basic human drive, which we cannot for an instant explain away, for that would mean explaining away human being itself.” (168) All perceptions, conceptualizations, and actions are equally metaphorical whether they be undertaken by artists, scientists, or craftspeople. The devotion of early civilizations to myth and art expresses nothing more than a fundamental human metaphorical drive. The pleasure of the creative thinker is simply that of “blending metaphors together and displacing the boundary stones of abstraction.” (186) And furthermore, when intellectual talent “smashes [the existing] framework to pieces, mixes it into confusion, and ironically reassembles it, pairing itself with the strangest things and repelling the most familiar, it is revealed that it... will now be guided not by concepts but by intuitions.” (192–198) It is easy to see why Mulhall and others recognize OOO in this portrait, given the well-known slogan of our philosophical school that “aesthetics is first philosophy.”<sup>15</sup>

## 2 How the theses fit together

The first thesis of “Truth and Lie,” the one concerning the pitifulness of human existence, can easily be detached from its other principal ideas. For even if we were to agree that humans cannot grasp the in-itself, that we are limited to translations and metaphorical displacements internal to the human sphere, a pessimistic result would not necessarily follow. Kant does not give us much more of a foothold than Nietzsche in

<sup>13</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*; Spinoza, *Ethics*; and Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.

<sup>14</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*.

<sup>15</sup> Harman, “Aesthetics as First Philosophy.”

grasping the thing-in-itself, and yet, the Kantian critical philosophy is suffused with hope. Kant even engages in a certain amount of self-congratulation for having spared humans any further effort on metaphysical questions that cannot be answered even in principle. There is the additional problem, in Nietzsche's case, that his view on the inevitable extinction of the human race itself draws on fairly recent cosmological hypotheses. In Brassier's contemporary hymn to extinction, we find the same difficulty in even more pronounced form: humans are not only destined to die, but are "already dead," since none of our thoughts or actions can leave any symbolic trace following the ultimate evaporation of the universe itself.<sup>16</sup> Yet the specter of our individual deaths, already well established through millennia of human history and reinforced by ongoing experience of accident and illness, is already sufficiently forlorn that we need not jump to the hypothetical end of the universe to frighten ourselves. It is perhaps depressing enough to imagine five or ten thousand years into the future, when any existing human race will probably differ so greatly from the current one in cultural and perhaps physical reality that our present-day actions might seem futile on that basis alone. But even this is a different issue from the more immediate challenge raised by Nietzsche: the inherently metaphorical character of all human thought and action. Compared to this pressing question, raising the specter of the end of the universe is like interrupting a chess match between grand masters by knocking the board off the table. To stand up at a wedding and call it a pointless ceremony, given the inevitable heat-death of the universe, puts one in a superior position only in the crassest possible sense.

We turn now to the second thesis, to the effect that we are trapped in a human bubble and therefore cannot reach truth. This is simply the thesis of Kant, to whom Nietzsche is here indebted despite his lack of respect for the great German master.<sup>17</sup> Kant's primary interest, as Heidegger emphasizes, is human finitude.<sup>18</sup> The world is experienced according to our pure intuitions of time and space and the twelve categories of the understanding, which need not apply elsewhere than the phenomenal realm of appearance. Meillassoux's related starting point – his *admiration* for the correlationism he opposes is still missed by most commentators – is the thesis that "correlationism rests on an argument as simple as it is powerful, and which can be formulated in the following way: No X without givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X."<sup>19</sup> While there have been many attempts to get beyond Kant's outlook, they boil down to a few basic types, most of them arguing that the thing-in-itself is not inaccessible as Kant assumes. There is the approach of German Idealism, which holds that the purportedly transcendent in-itself is actually immanent, since we are at least able to think it; therefore, the supposed absolute transcendence of the noumena is really just a relative inaccessibility to be overcome by the movement of thought, as in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>20</sup> There are the differing phenomenological efforts of Husserl and Heidegger, the former arguing that we are already outside ourselves in intending objects, with the latter countering that our unconscious practical use of tools is enough to place us outside the mind.<sup>21</sup> Meillassoux critiques these approaches as remaining confined with a "transparent cage," and his own technique is to establish a mathematical means of access to the in-itself, which he redefines as that which can preexist or outlast the human species, rather than as something inaccessible here and now as Kant holds. There are also the various forms of scientific realism, which rely ultimately on the claim that modern science is more successful than the discourses of uncivilized tribes.<sup>22</sup> OOO is one of the few contemporary schools that *embraces* Kant's thing-in-itself, objecting only to his view that this *Ding an sich* is a problem limited to human cognition rather than applicable to every relation between any two things. In this respect, OOO is closer to the Nietzsche of "Truth and Lie" than the other standpoints just mentioned.

The third thesis of "Truth and Lie" was that the world we experience is merely a translation, not the direct presence of reality. This is obviously rejected by German Idealism, Husserl, Meillassoux, and

16 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 229. For a critical treatment of this idea, see Harman, *Speculative Realism*, 32–4.

17 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

18 Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.

19 Meillassoux in Brassier et al., "Speculative Realism," 409.

20 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

21 Husserl, *Logical Investigations*; and Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

22 Devitt, *Realism and Truth*; and Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge*.



scientific realism, all of them holding either that the thing-in-itself is already immanent (the first two) or that it is transcendent but accessible by various rational means (the latter two). But perhaps the most powerful recent assertion of Kant's basic point comes in the differing critiques of "onto-theology" or "presence" by Heidegger and Derrida. In Heidegger's case, the basic idea is that we do not have direct access to the being of beings. Being is that which hides, withdraws, or remains partially veiled and is never directly present-at-hand for consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, I have argued that this amounts to a critique of relationism, against Nietzsche's thesis that everything we encounter is relational.<sup>24</sup> In any case, Heidegger holds that being is able to poke through the circle of presence and give us a glimpse of something deeper than our world of representations. Derrida gives a more "secularized" version of the critique, doing away with any Heideggerian notion of depth.<sup>25</sup> Beings are always contextual in a sense more sweeping than their present actual contexts; for this reason, there is no identity to things at all, which is surely closer to Nietzsche's own position than Heidegger is. But it is safe to say that the other standpoints just mentioned (German Idealism, Husserl, Meillassoux, scientific realism) do not pass the test of the Heideggero-Derridean critiques of presence.

The fourth and fifth theses can be handled together. We have seen that since everything is a translation rather than direct evidence of a reality external to humans, everything is to be considered a lie. Yet Nietzsche distinguishes further between socially acceptable and socially unacceptable lies. It is a matter of caste and class rank, for which each culture possesses its own criteria. But this is essentially just the modern distinction between rational truth and political power that Latour challenged so forcefully in *We Have Never Been Modern*. Nietzsche's assumption, in other words, is that "power" is a self-contained and arbitrary sovereign force ungrounded in anything we might be able to call real. In the dispute over an air-pump between Robert Boyle and Thomas Hobbes, covered in classic fashion by the historians Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, Nietzsche could be linked with Hobbes and thus with Shapin and Schaffer as well. Social power trumps scientific knowledge because it is society that determines the definition of good science.<sup>26</sup> Latour's answer to this position is – or ought to be – legendary: "No, Hobbes was wrong." Latour continues:

[Shapin and Schaffer] offer a masterful deconstruction of the evolution, diffusion and popularization of the air pump. Why, then, do they not deconstruct the evolution, diffusion and popularization of "power" or "force"? Is "force" less problematic than the air's spring [in Boyle's air-pump]? If nature and epistemology are not made up of transhistoric entities, then neither are history and sociology[...]<sup>27</sup>

The same critique strikes Nietzsche as well. He assumes that "power" is something immediately intelligible, without making as searching an analysis of this notion as he does of truth. Granted, Nietzsche has already given reasons for discarding truth: we only have translations, never reality itself. Yet it remains to be seen whether translation actually has no contact with a reality apart from perception.

Before moving on to Nietzsche's final two theses, it will be useful to dwell a bit longer on Latour, so as to avoid any possible misunderstandings. When the latter intones that "Hobbes was wrong," he takes a principled and overlooked stand against a thesis that is often wrongly imputed to his actor-network theory, to the effect that everything in the cosmos is simply a power struggle among various actors. We should first note that this is a different sort of challenge to the reign of power than we find in the response of Socrates to Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*, or in the objection that Leo Strauss levies against Carl Schmitt: power is worthless unless it is guided by knowledge.<sup>28</sup> These classical responses to the proclaimed supremacy of power have much in their favor, yet they accept the very opposition between truth and power that Latour

<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

<sup>24</sup> Harman, *Tool-Being*.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

<sup>26</sup> Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*.

<sup>27</sup> Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book 1; Strauss, "Notes on Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*;" Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*. On the disagreement between Strauss and Schmitt, see Harman, *Bruno Latour*, 148–53.

assaults in *We Have Never Been Modern*. This is not because Latour is more enamored of power than of truth – his sudden 1991 conversation to an anti-Hobbesian position testifies to the contrary – but because he wishes to derive both science and society from a unified underlying conception: the assemblage of human and nonhuman actors in networks, with some of the networks successful in extending further than others.<sup>29</sup> This must not be caricatured as just another power struggle, since for Latour both experiments and bona fide physical entities are actors capable of *overturning* any amount of social power, as long as they can be made to form a solid and stable network.

We return to Nietzsche's "Truth and Lie," whose sixth and seventh theses can also be treated jointly. The sixth was that scientific knowledge is just another metaphor, even if one more distant than everyday language from the reality it describes. Here again, the assumption is that there is no means of access to anything transcending our ever-present sphere of translations, mediations, and other lies. Yet this does not follow even if we accept the idea of ubiquitous translation, which OOO does no less than Latour. The difference between the latter two positions, we saw, is that for Latour there is no original thing behind the actions of an actor, though for OOO there is. And while for OOO – which accepts the Heideggerian version of the critique of presence – there is no way for the thing to manifest itself directly, it can do so indirectly by highlighting a gap in presence itself. This is not meant in the sense of Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the real appears as a breakdown in the symbolic order and the *objet a* of desire is retroactively projected by the one who desires; instead, for OOO, there is a *bona fide* real that does not just traumatize humans and is not just a formless unity but deploys itself in cases where real meets real, though of course in mediated fashion.<sup>30</sup> Stated differently, there is still hope for science to provide more than "lies," even if it can never provide us with reality directly in the flesh. While the latter point is enough for some to accuse OOO of an "anti-science" stance, it really places Object-Oriented Ontology among many other fallibilist positions in the philosophy of science (those of Karl Popper or Imre Lakatos) and even among certain realist ones (that of Roy Bhaskar).<sup>31</sup> A similar situation holds with respect to Nietzsche's claim that everything is aesthetic: after all, he views science as simply a more pallid and anemic genre of art. Just as science has no hope of reaching anything that transcends our usual mass of lying metaphors, the same holds for aesthetics, which can lead us to nothing but a pleasurable play of illusions, and perhaps the even more pleasurable sensation of destroying all existing metaphorical coordinates and setting up new ones. "Power" would be the only criterion for what makes one metaphor better than another. But here again, Nietzsche simply assumes that there is no way for metaphor to do anything more than transmute already existing lies into new ones. He allows for no way to produce suggestive gaps or signs of absence that might be something different in kind from our usual template of illusions.

Here we should speak briefly of one of the most frequent critiques of "Truth and Lie," since it bears on more than Nietzsche's brief early essay. The critique in question pertains to the apparent self-reflexivity of the central claim of "Truth and Lie." Namely, is Nietzsche's essay itself to be taken as "true" or as a "lie"? If we believe what he writes in the essay, then it – like everything else, Nietzsche argues – can only be a lie. But if it is a lie, then it refutes itself and need not be taken seriously in the first place. This is simply a version of the old Cretan Liar's Paradox: "I am lying" can neither be true nor a lie, since both options entail contradiction. This same logic governs many other paradoxes and can also be deployed against more philosophers than Nietzsche, if sometimes in milder form. For example, Heidegger holds that "truth" always appears to human beings against a specific historical background or "thrownness" and is therefore not "true" in the sense of correspondence. Yet Heidegger is writing from a specific historically thrown standpoint and therefore what he says about the historicity of truth is every bit as suspect as other historically grounded statements, including those historically grounded statements which claim that truth is absolute and trans-historical. Attempts have been made to apply the same critique to OOO: if we claim

<sup>29</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

<sup>30</sup> Lacan, *Écrits*.

<sup>31</sup> Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*; Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*; and Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*.



that all statements belong merely to the “sensual” realm rather than the “real,” it follows that OOO itself is merely a sensual exercise and hence no better than any other theory that produces mere appearance.

Such an argument about Nietzsche was made by the recently deceased J. Hillis Miller, one of America’s most venerable literary critics.<sup>32</sup> As Miller writes: “In Nietzsche’s case the binary oppositions, on which [‘On Truth and Lie’] is built, ultimately collapse in such a way that the essay turns back on itself and no longer makes consistent sense.”<sup>33</sup> In the final paragraph of his article, Miller even turns his guns against the reader: “This dangerous incoherence is repeated by the reader of Nietzsche’s essay. An interpretation of it can never be clear or complete... Insofar as [the reader] thinks he has a clear, distinct, and coherent reading of the essay, he has forgotten some important part of it.”<sup>34</sup> The argument concludes with a textbook example of deconstructive reading: “This impotence of both author and reader is the primary evidence of the presence as non-presence, everywhere in the text, of the unknown X which it wrestles, unsuccessfully, to locate and name.”<sup>35</sup> In short, Nietzsche has purportedly been tamed by the Cretan Liar’s Paradox, and rather than an impossible attempt to force a reading of “Truth and Lie” as either truthful or lying, we – and not just Nietzsche himself – are led into an undecidable oscillation between both options.

Let it be said that I am no admirer of such attempts to break down texts by inscribing them in their own stated rules of discourse. My objection is not merely stylistic, but philosophical in character. Miller’s claim that Nietzsche’s essay “collapses” amounts to the view that the philosopher is actually a Cretan Liar. The essay “Truth and Lie” is read as equivalent to the statement “I am lying” and is thus interpreted as a bundle of rhetorical figures masking a logical paradox. Yet this claim is itself strikingly similar to another famous conundrum: Meno’s Paradox. In Plato’s *Meno*, the title character ventures the complaint that we cannot look for something if we already have it, and cannot look for it if we *do not*, since in the latter case we would be unable to recognize it when we find it.<sup>36</sup> Socrates gives the classic response – which is in fact the very core of *philosophia* – that we neither have nor do not have what we seek in any unambiguous sense, but always have partial possession of it. For instance, we have some idea of what justice is, and this vague preliminary conception at least enables us to make a closer approach to justice in its own right. Any theory which accepts Meno’s view that we either simply have or simply do not have the truth is *ipso facto* unphilosophical, however well-intentioned or however illuminating in other respects. Few are willing to stand up for Meno in this connection, simply because he is outmatched by our disciplinary hero Socrates. Yet philosophers do creep back to Meno’s defense in other, more respectable contexts. A fine example concerns the fabled debate over the thing-in-itself. Expressed in terms of the *Meno*, one position is essentially that “we can’t look for the thing-in-itself because we don’t have it” while another is “we can’t look for the thing-in-itself because we already have it.”

Stated differently, there is either a gap between reality and appearance that cannot be bridged, or there is no gap at all and therefore no bridge needs to be built in the first place. Socrates would ask instead for a bridge that *can* be built without illegally relocating the further shore to where we stand: in all the Dialogues of Plato, Socrates never achieves an adequate definition of anything. We are not forced to choose between the two Sophistical formulae “nothing is true” or “everything is true.” What we seek, as Socrates sought, is some way of inscribing the real into appearance without making the impossible claim that it can be *directly* present. If this sounds hopeless, it is enough to realize – contra Wittgenstein in the final words of the *Tractatus* – that language itself is not split between clear propositional speech on the one hand and brooding silence on the other.<sup>37</sup> In OOO terms, we are not forced to choose between the “undermining” or “overmining” approach to any topic, since we have indirect ways of getting at it.<sup>38</sup> The attempt to

<sup>32</sup> Miller, “Dismembering and Disremembering in Nietzsche’s ‘On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.’”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, “Meno.”

<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

<sup>38</sup> See Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects;” Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duomining;” and Harman, *The Third Table/Der dritte Tisch*.

produce a deadlock between the claims that truth is either inaccessible or accessible rests, in the end, on the unjustified view that truth must be supported by some final literal statement on which all the others are based. Yet there is nothing actually wrong with making the historically situated claim that all truth is historical (Heidegger) or the metaphorical claim that presence is impossible (OOO). Language is filled in advance with insinuation, innuendo, implications, hints, and proper names that merely point without making their bearer directly present.<sup>39</sup> It also has at its disposal the powerful tools of metaphor and metonymy, and we will see that Nietzsche is wrong to assume that these tools only have traffic with the realm of illusion.

### 3 The new position of the literal

The words “literal” and “literally” do not occur in “Truth and Lie,” though throughout the essay they are tacitly present as the impossible counterpart to the metaphorical. Hence it is not surprising that Miller uses these words no fewer than eight times in his commentary. Literal truth, it seems, would mean that reality itself is made directly present in perception, speech, or concept, and this is something that Nietzsche regards as beyond the scope of possibility. The same sentiment can be found in Derrida’s argument that literalism is impossible, and hence that there is no difference between literal and metaphorical statement: everywhere there is nothing but metaphor.<sup>40</sup> The main difference between Derrida’s position and that of “Truth and Lie” is – we have seen – that Nietzsche takes an agnostic stance on the existence of an independent reality and merely denies that we would be able to say anything about it, while Derrida denies the existence of any autonomous “self-present” reality at all. Heidegger’s position is distinct from both, since – contra Derrida’s misinterpretation in *Of Grammatology* – there is no Heideggerian philosophy without a real and never fully accessible depth. This allows Heidegger to reverse the terms of Nietzsche’s and Derrida’s positions: if there is anything literal, it is merely *at the surface* in the form of present-at-hand experience, ignorant of the concealed depths from which it emerges. This is why metaphorical language *does* have a special status for Heidegger by contrast with the literal, since it is aware of the concealment of that about which it speaks.

Nonetheless, all three authors – Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida – see the relation between the literal and the metaphorical as playing out along a single dualism between an autonomous reality (whether affirmed or denied) on the one hand and the accessibility of appearance on the other. This gives us another version of the recurring triad encountered above: Heidegger deduces the existence of the real (Locke, Kant), Derrida denies it (Berkeley, Hegel), and Nietzsche remains unsure while denying its importance either way (Hume, Nietzsche himself in another context). What all of them miss, and what OOO endorses, is an additional axis of division that turns out to be the genuine position of the literal. It finds this in a little-noticed aspect of Husserl’s phenomenology. Husserl is justly celebrated as the critic *par excellence* of “psychologism,” the view that logical laws have no transcendent validity but are really just laws of human psychology: it is “psychologically impossible” to think that A is both A and not-A, for instance. What is less well understood is that Husserl was even more importantly the critic *par excellence* of British Empiricism. Phenomenology is based on the notion of “intentionality,” a term handed down from the medieval writings of Avicenna and famously revived in the work of Husserl’s teacher, Franz Brentano.<sup>41</sup> But Husserl adds an important new dimension to Brentano’s version of the concept. For Brentano, all forms of intentionality are grounded in its primordial form: representation. I cannot make judgments about something, or feel positively or negatively toward it, unless it is first present before my mind. At first this sounds no different from Husserl’s own approach, which is equally rooted in the idea that philosophy can study only that which is

<sup>39</sup> Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.

<sup>40</sup> Derrida, “White Mythology.”

<sup>41</sup> Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*.

given to the mind, rather than hypothetical scientific objects or some “absurd” thing-in-itself. Husserl is well aware of his difference from his teacher. Namely, for Brentano, intentionality aims at “experienced contents.” By contrast, Husserl tells us that intentionality consists primarily in “object-giving acts.” Although Husserl does not put it quite this way, the distinction hinges ultimately on their respective relations to British Empiricism. As concerns the central question, Brentano and Hume basically occupy the same terrain: to say that I experience an apple means that I experience all the qualities of that apple. Brentano is disappointingly vague as to whether there is an apple “behind” all its encountered qualities or whether it consists in nothing more than those very qualities. But within the phenomenal sphere, at least, Brentano leaves no room for the apple to be anything other than a Humean bundle: all content is on the same footing, which means that the red of the apple, its stem, and the glistening light on its surface are all on precisely the same level as the apple in its own right, assuming there even is such a thing.

What distinguishes Husserl from this position is his clear conviction that the apple is something distinct from its various sensual qualities; otherwise, the phenomenological method of eidetic reduction would make no sense. What the phenomenologist asks us to do is vary our numerous perceptions of the apple, noticing that it appears in each moment according to a specific “adumbration”: in every instant, the apple appears in precisely one way and not others. We can move the apple around the room, view it from different angles and distances, and catalog the various subtleties of its appearance in the shifting light of afternoon and evening. If the apple were really nothing more than a “bundle of qualities,” it would follow that it is not the same apple in the wake of even the tiniest shift in its qualities. This is a crucial Empiricist trope that would later seep into the rather different philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, and through him into Latour, who declares explicitly that a thing happens once only rather than enduring unaltered across any span of time: “everything happens only once, and at one place.”<sup>42</sup>

But for Husserl, it is beyond question that the apple remains the same apple despite countless variations in its visual and tactile properties. If we ask who can judge this, Husserl’s answer would be that we ourselves are the judges: since we are dealing only with the sphere of the given, it is we who grasp that we continue to regard the apple as the same thing across a series of perceptual adventures. There is no external criterion, since by definition we are speaking only of what each of us takes to be one and the same object across multiple changes. Since Husserl not only “brackets” the question of whether the apple is a real object existing independently of us, but also denies as absurd the very notion of a Kantian thing-in-itself, we are confined to a purely sensual level. But this level is not made of simple bundles of qualities compressed together by “habit” or “customary conjunction” (in Hume’s famous terminology). Instead, there is always a rift in play between sensual objects and their sensual qualities. We are fully aware that an apple is something different from any “bundle” of apple-appearances in a given instant. One of the first tasks of phenomenology is to become aware of that rift so as to distinguish between the essential and accidental qualities of the apple. In OOO terminology, the first rift noticed by Husserl is that between sensual objects and their sensual qualities, or SO-SQ.

But what about the “essential” qualities of the apple? It cannot be the case that all of the apple’s features are dispensible or accidental, because then the apple itself would merely be what analytic philosophers call a “bare particular”: a featureless pole of unity interchangeable with any other bare object in the room.<sup>43</sup> The only difference between the apple and the lamp would be that they currently bear different accidental surface properties, which for Husserl would be insufficient. Yet it is here that he makes his great rationalist mistake, even if a fruitful one that enables us to grasp what he himself missed. As Husserl sees it, there is no way for the *senses* to capture anything more than fleeting accidental adumbrations of a thing. This task must be assigned instead to the *intellect*, which by varying all the appearances of the apple can finally capture the essential features that it truly needs in order to be this very apple.<sup>44</sup> The problem, as Heidegger saw straightaway, is that the difference between the senses and the intellect is not as great as

<sup>42</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. The citation is from Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, 162.

<sup>43</sup> The phrase “bare particular” seems to have been coined in 1967 in Bergmann, *Realism*.

<sup>44</sup> In this mistake, he was prefigured by Ibn Sina (Avicenna), “Ibn Sina,” 153 ff.

Husserl thinks: both the senses and the mind convert the thing into something present-at-hand for consciousness, lying directly before us and cut off from the deeper root from which it emerges. Stated differently, Heidegger would not accept that Husserl's procedure is able to give us any genuine distinction between the essential and accidental qualities of a thing. Essence can only lie in the depths, beyond all human access. The first hundred or so pages of Heidegger's Marburg Lecture Course *History of the Concept of Time* criticizes Husserlian intentionality on precisely this basis, making it one of Heidegger's most valuable works (though a relatively neglected one).<sup>45</sup>

What Heidegger's critique shows, among other things, is that it cannot be the case that the senses give us the *sensual* qualities of things while the intellect gives us the *real* ones. The real ones, by Heideggerian standards, would be the qualities linked with the *being* of the apple, meaning that the apple's real qualities would have to be withdrawn from all direct access. Husserl tries to deny such a possibility with his thesis that the thing-in-itself is a philosophically ridiculous notion, which also happens to be his key point of similarity with Hegel. Today, many Husserlians continue to argue that their hero was a "realist" nonetheless, but this succeeds only if we adulterate the definition of "realism" to such an extent that to agree that we encounter intentional objects is all it takes to be a realist, even if we deny that they have any existential status outside their encounter with us. This, however, bears no resemblance to any plausible definition of realism. And we can easily see that there is no thing-in-itself in Husserl: in OOO terminology, phenomenology acknowledges no *real object*. Nonetheless, Husserl unwittingly backs into two parallel forms of realism that have not been generally noticed:

1. First, even if the apple were to exist only in its encounter with us, that apple still has qualities that are necessary for it to exist, and not just the swirling surface patterns encountered by the senses *and* – according to Heidegger's critique – by the intellect. Stated differently, even a sensual object must have *real* qualities, SO-RQ. That is to say, even a purely illusory thing must generate its own real background, a private *je ne sais quoi* that makes it that very thing despite our inability to put a finger on exactly what it is. A sensual object cannot be paraphrased; nor can it be reduced to the sum total of experiences we have of it, despite Merleau-Ponty's incorrect notion that to view a house from everywhere would give us the house itself.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, despite Husserl's failed attempt to intellectualize the essence of the apple, he makes room for "submarine" essential qualities of the apple that can never be reached. This does not yet imply any existence of a *real* apple – we could be hallucinating, after all – but only of inscrutable real qualities that belong to the *sensual* apple.

2. But second, Husserl also produces a further reality from above. For even if my living room is filled with nothing but phantasms, if I am an outright psychotic of the order of Judge Schreber, it is nonetheless true that I myself am actually experiencing these things.<sup>47</sup> This is similar to Descartes's discovery of "I think, therefore I am," with the difference that Descartes artificially separated the immediate certainty of the ego side from the derivative uncertainty of the object side.<sup>48</sup> But we need not do the same: after all, I can be just as uncertain of my own identity as I am about the identity of an apple. Descartes's ego is not just an ego, but also a correlated ego that encounters certain things rather than others, even if all of them turn out to be delusions. It makes a great difference in Schreber's life, after all, whether he thinks that God is trying to impregnate him with sunbeams or that the chattering birds are doing so instead. One of Brentano's major inconsistencies was to claim that intentionality happens *in the mind* while also claiming that intentionality involves the *meeting* of the mind with its objects. The mind cannot simultaneously be one pole in opposition to the object and also the encompassing whole in which mind and object are counterposed.<sup>49</sup> In short, every intentional relation must itself be a new object, different from either the mind or the object in isolation. This becomes clear from the fact that such relations are units that can be commented upon by others ("You really seem fascinated by that apple!") or by ourselves in retrospect ("What, precisely, was going on in my mind when was I observing that apple yesterday?") Just as there are submarine qualities in the heart of the sensual apple, there is a hybrid "supermarine" real object composed of me as the real observer and the sensual apple as the target of my awareness.

<sup>45</sup> Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*.

<sup>46</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 79.

<sup>47</sup> Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. Illuminating commentaries on Schreber can be found in Freud, *The Schreber Case*, as well as in Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Psychoses* (Book 3).

<sup>48</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

<sup>49</sup> I owe this formulation of the problem to Niki Young.

Restated differently, despite Husserl's efforts to confine himself rigorously to the phenomenal realm (OOO's "sensual"), he unknowingly backs into two separate forms of the in-itself. Sensual objects generate their own real background beneath the experience, while the very act of intending the apple generates a new real object above it. These same points would apply to the positions of both Derrida and "Truth and Lie" if only they were to accept Husserl's unforeseen horizontal split – which I hold he was the first to notice – between objects and qualities, rather than just the familiar vertical difference between truth and lie.

Best of all, this gives OOO a new place to locate literalism. Since object-oriented thought accepts the critique of presence, of the idea that the real could ever be dragged kicking and screaming (by science or some other means) into the sensual realm, it also agrees that the concept of literalism as a direct presence of the real must be rejected. On this point we side with Heidegger, Derrida, and "Truth and Lie." Yet there remains the option of *indirect* presence, and this is the method not only of art, but even of *philosophia* in the Socratic sense. First, let me say a word about why I think presence must be rejected. It boils down to a question of whether the form of a thing can be brought directly and unscathed into the mind without information loss. No one thinks that when we know an apple, the apple itself comes into our minds. The "physical" apple is one thing, and our idea of it quite another; all are in agreement on this point. The problem is that those who uphold this apparently obvious truth still need to explain in what the difference consists. The usual answer, generally left unstated, is that the apple itself is a physical thing made of atoms and molecules, and that for this reason, it is able to nourish animals or even – through its seeds – to create another apple tree. The apple can also fall from a tree and damage objects lying beneath it. Obviously, none of these things is true of our idea or knowledge of an apple. The standard implicit theory is that the apple is a concrete thing, and that our mind somehow "extracts" various important features from that thing and brings them into the mind while leaving its physical "matter" behind. One problem here is that such matter is simply an unverified commonsensical notion; in fact, the main reason it exists is to prop up the weak theory of knowledge just described. After all, no one has ever encountered something called formless matter. Another problem is that no reason is given why the form of the apple should be able to change places in this way when it is admitted that its matter cannot. Nietzsche is surely right that the human sensory and conceptual apparatus is just one type of animal cognition among many others, and there is no reason to think that humans alone can capture the form of the world without deformation. In fact, the form of the apple and the form of my knowledge of it are two different things. Kant may have been right that there is nothing in my "concept" of 100 imaginary crowns that is not also there in my "concept" of 100 real ones, but this teaches us only that our concepts of both are inadequate. For in fact, the *form* of 100 imaginary crowns is very different from the *form* of 100 real ones, which is precisely why one can be spent and the other cannot.

On that note, we return to the notion of literalism. Both Derrida and "Truth and Lie" must of course call literalism impossible, since both take presence to be so. But our introduction of the second axis in reality, by way of Husserl, opens up another place for literalism to be located. Namely, I define literalism as any experience, perception, or concept that reduces a thing to a bundle of qualities. This happens in normal experience when we simply observe an apple and take no phenomenological notice of the difference between the object and its qualities. It happens with concepts when we lazily assume that our definition of a thing suffices to exhaust that thing, forgetting the inadequacy of all such definitions. Most of our lives involves literalism (not metaphor, contra Nietzsche and Derrida) and most of the time it suffices for the purposes of human survival and development. But the way to overcome literalism is to become aware of the gap between objects and their qualities: the idea that a thing both *has* and *does not have* its qualities, the very distinction that allows Socrates to subvert every definition that is offered to him. Although Aristotle is often wrongly portrayed as a boring old literalist, the very opposite is the case. His strange sense of humor is one recurring index of this. But more importantly, it was Aristotle who formulated the notion that a substance can have different qualities at different times: Socrates happy and Socrates sad are both Socrates, in an early version of Husserl's inquiry into adumbrations. It was Aristotle too who pointed to an unbridgeable crevice between things and whatever we might say about them: substances are always concrete and specific, while definitions must employ universals. And again, it was Aristotle who said – for the same



reason – that there is no way to *define* a thing.<sup>50</sup> And if he is right – as I hold – that the world is composed primarily of concrete individual substances, while this would certainly place thought and language in a difficult position, it would hardly be the same difficulty that faces “Truth and Lie.”

## 4 On knowledge

The previous section contended that Husserl tacitly discovered not one but *two* forms of literalism in human experience, precisely by discovering two separate tensions completely missed by Hume. Namely, Hume’s theory of objects as “bundles of qualities” treats entities – including the human mind – as sum totals of perceptual experience, and this fails in two separate ways. First, the apple is a unit that remains what it is for us despite a constantly shifting patina of qualities. The objection sometimes made to these “intentional objects” is that we cannot have such trust in our powers of introspection: how do we *know* that I am seeing the apple as one and the same thing beneath its multiple adumbrations? Perhaps we should study the matter scientifically, measuring brain patterns in order to determine whether one and the same object is actually being perceived. The problem with this objection should be clear. Any attempt to trump Husserlian introspection with science faces the immediate difficulty that scientific measurements are just as reliant on introspective identity as a simple phenomenological statement like this one: “I see the same apple as before, but the room has become darker.” The validity of any experiment attempting to judge this statement relies on its own presupposed identities: those of the experimental apparatus, the graphs and other output it generates, or even the stability of one’s memories from one moment to the next. Introspection leads to the discovery that the apple is one and the same, and this is an unsurpassable horizon, even if certain memory lapses or confusions might occasionally interfere with our perceptions and recollections. Whether or not Hume might have discovered this himself, the fact is that he did not. Husserl showed that the bundle of qualities theory is false, and thus phenomenology works on a plane that Hume – and even Brentano – never managed to inhabit. Husserl discovers that there are two terms rather than one (in the tension we have called SO-SQ) and that they can easily be split by recognizing the rift in our minds between the object and its various swirling qualities. This is already a step beyond literalism.

Hume’s second failure consists in his equivalent inability to distinguish the given perceptual qualities of an object at any given moment from the essential qualities that it needs in order for us to continue to acknowledge the apple as one and the same thing over time. Or rather, let’s call these the *eidetic* qualities of the apple, due both to Husserl’s own use of the term “*eidos*” for these deeper and necessary qualities, and to our own need to preserve the term “essence” for a different segment of the object–quality schema. Literalism fails here again: to experience a unified apple that differs from its shifting qualities is not yet to realize that the apple has other, more necessary qualities buried in its breast. If we are in an especially dark room, or have serious vision problems, we might suddenly realize that we have a Macintosh apple before us rather than the red delicious we had thought was there; perhaps it is even a peach or an orange instead, so that better illumination helps us to realize that we can no longer recognize this object as an apple at all. But as long as nothing leads us to think we were wrong about it being a red delicious, its tacit eidetic qualities have not changed, and we are dealing with the same sensual object as we were all along. But in a sense, Husserl himself also fails in a literal direction here, since he proceeds to identify the sensual qualities of the apple with those apprehended by the senses, and the eidetic qualities as those grasped by the intellect, a distinction that Heidegger unmasked as insufficient: both senses and the mind, after all, reduce the apple to something present-at-hand for consciousness, neglecting that deeper and darker being on which both perception and theory are equally dependent. Stated differently, Husserl might be inclined to agree with us that phenomenological description splits the perception of an object into SO-SQ, and that eidetic reduction (capturing the essence of the apple) splits the object into SO-RQ. Yet his view that the

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<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 148.

intellect is enough to grasp RQ does not pass the Heideggerian test for reality: for it misses the *being* of those qualities, and whatever Heidegger might mean by such a phrase, the real in his conception is accessible only to indirect allusion.

This leads to a certain ambiguity concerning literalism. Can we overcome it simply by splitting the sensual object from its two kinds of qualities, or does the absence of an inaccessible real object leave us stranded in the literal domain? Stated differently: does Husserl remain a literalist despite his discovery of two separate rifts between objects and qualities? Peter Wolfendale's polemical critique of OOO argues, among other things, that there need not be a "qualitative" excess in the properties of things but only a "quantitative" one.<sup>51</sup> What this would mean in practice is that our inability to know the eidetic qualities of a thing means simply that we may not know all of these qualities at any given moment but in principle we *could*. Husserl surely recognizes that his view of the essence of an apple could be improved by further analysis, and any honest scientist would admit that we can still learn something about neutrons and even more so about obscurer objects such as neutron stars. But is this sort of helpful scientific hesitation in proclaiming that the work is never finished, that we might turn out to be so wrong about neutrons that a sweeping new theory of them is possible and necessary – is this sort of hesitation enough to overcome literalism as defined above, as the ultimately Humean notion that an object is really nothing more than a bundle of qualities? The question is important because it amounts to a decision about whether both phenomenological and scientific knowledge are always literal in character.

My provisional answer is that both remain literal, and I would like to give some reasons for this claim. Both Husserlian phenomenology and modern science regard themselves as forms of knowledge. Although Husserl is fully aware that any of his phenomenological descriptions and eidetic reductions may be lacking in certain respects, and might always be improved, he continues to see his entire enterprise in the form of "philosophy as rigorous science." If Husserl were to try to categorize what he is still missing, he would clearly place it in Wolfendale's "quantitative" basket: given the labor of thousands of phenomenologists, we could eventually master the true *eidos* of the apple. Our failure is temporary at best. The same would hold for a typical natural scientist, who would not consider anything still unknown as *a priori* "mysterious," despite the lingering mysteries of quantum theory. In principle, all questions might be settled in terms of accurate equations or clear propositional prose. Knowledge is essentially a form of "paraphrase," accurately explaining a thing in words or numbers that mirror it more or less adequately. Elsewhere I have argued that there are really only two kinds of knowledge, which consist either of asking what a thing is made of or asking what it does.<sup>52</sup> Husserl gives us both kinds of answers. He tells us what the apple is "made of" through his intellectual efforts to grasp its *eidos*, those qualities that it needs to go on being what it is. Along this path, the apple is explained in the form of what I call "undermining." The defect of all undermining is that it cannot explain what is emergent in things beyond a proper paraphrastic account of their underlying properties or causal backstories. Insofar as Husserl claims to bring the eidetic properties of an apple to the surface of the world, in the form of a clear propositional statement of those properties, he loses sight of the tension between those qualities and the specific way they combine in the sensual apple. If he tries instead to stay on the surface and account for the difference between the sensual object as an unvarying core and the multitude of appearances it has – which means the various effects that it has on our mind – he ends up with an "overmining" knowledge of the apple. Stated differently, he loses all sense of the tension between a sensual object that is always less than its manifestations, since the latter can and should be scraped away in the name of getting at the object itself. Like all overmining gestures, it leaves us with no sense of surplus beneath or above the givenness of things to perception; hence, we lose the root of what enables things to change: the fact that the sensual object is never fully expressed in any specific adumbration.

But we need to ask if there is not an important difference between the two cases SO-RQ and SO-SQ. Husserl himself is responsible for suppressing the first of these tensions. If he had followed Heidegger's implicit critique and recognized that the eidetic qualities of the apple are not intellectual but *real*, he would

<sup>51</sup> Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 70.

<sup>52</sup> Harman, *The Third Table/Der dritte Tisch*.

have seen that the critique of literalism requires the positing of occult qualities (scorned by Nietzsche) that can only be alluded to rather than made directly present. This would have taken him beyond his usual intellectualist prejudice, and hence beyond any claim to “paraphrase” the apple’s eidos in clear propositional statements. Now, it might seem that SO-SQ is a different case, one in which there is no way to deliteralize either of the terms. Both terms are directly given to the mind, after all, and thus neither contains the tiniest degree of haunting residue. However, it is easy to imagine an artist or architect achieving a split between them that is much more tense than Husserl’s remarking that the apple remains the same despite numerous variations in surface qualities. Certain sculptures intrigue us with their highly different aspects when viewed from different angles, as if they were stringing together a number of essentially unlike appearances. The same holds for many architectural objects, which create different perceptual experiences on an even vaster scale while nonetheless remaining one and the same edifice all along. My response is that these are examples of *aesthetic* experiences, the exact opposite of literal ones, and we will see that aesthetics must traffic in some way with the real and not just the sensual.

One of the most frequently encountered philosophical definitions of knowledge is “justified true belief.” The meaning of “true” in this case is that the content in our mind is adequate to what exists in the world. The word “justified” is added to ensure that one does not have true beliefs by mere luck, as if I were to randomly (and correctly) answer a stranger’s question that the road to Larissa is the left fork at the crossroads, despite my having no idea of the correct route.<sup>53</sup> In this account, a person “knows” when they give the correct answer *and* has good reasons for giving it. The problem in Husserl’s case, given his truncation of reality to “whatever thought is able to encounter,” is that knowledge is effectively all justification and no truth. Phenomenology makes no contact with the real except through arbitrarily dismissing the possibility that it is anything different from what appears in what OOO calls sensual experience (which is not limited to the senses, but includes intellectual experience as well). With suitable Husserlian training, Judge Schreber might give us an excellent phenomenology of the strange voices speaking incomplete sentences to him in the “root-language” (as he calls it), and of the sun rays with which God attempts to impregnate him. But Schreber is a delusional paranoid psychotic, and hence it is obvious that none of these fine phenomenologies would have the slightest contact with anything we would want to call real. Now, Husserl was certainly no psychotic, but under the influence of certain drugs, he might well have found himself in a living room filled with nothing but hallucinations of apples, lemons, and blackbirds. Under this hallucinatory scenario, he would still be perfectly *justified* in his phenomenologies, assuming they were properly carried out, while still producing nothing but untrue statements insofar as the objects of his analysis would – *ex hypothesi* – not even exist.

In 1963, Edmund Gettier published a famous three-page article to the effect that justified true belief is not always knowledge.<sup>54</sup> He offered a far-fetched but intriguing scenario in which a man named Smith is informed that his rival applicant Jones will be offered the job. For some unknown reason, Smith had previously counted the coins in Jones’ pocket and found that they number exactly ten. On this basis, he makes the perfectly justified assertion – in light of what he knows – that “the man who will be hired has ten coins in his pocket.” But something mysterious happens, and at the last minute, the company decides to hire Smith himself rather than Jones. Smith now finds, to his surprise, that *he too* has exactly ten coins in his pocket. Therefore, the statement “the man who will be hired has ten coins in his pocket” turned out to be not only justified, but even true, although the hiring outcome was the opposite of what Smith expected. Gettier rightly notes that this is a case where we have “justified true belief” without anything that could convincingly be called knowledge. He therefore concludes that there is a gap between justified true belief and knowledge; something more is needed for what is called “knowledge” to occur.

For my part, I am not so sure that anything more is needed for knowledge to occur. It seems to me that knowledge ought to be defined simply as “justified belief,” or perhaps even as “justified *untrue* belief.” Seekers of knowledge are essentially seekers of justification, not of truth. For example, working natural

<sup>53</sup> Plato, “Meno.”

<sup>54</sup> Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” For a longer account of this article, see Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 178–81.

scientists typically scorn such notions as ghosts and even God, although it is perfectly conceivable that future breakthroughs might be able to detect or even measure paranormal or outright supernatural influences on the sphere of nature. Given this possibility, we can only describe the contemporary scientist's scorn for ghosts and God as "justified" by the available physical evidence, but still not as "true." If this seems too implausible for many of my readers to swallow, consider the following historical example. Today, thanks to Einstein, we take it to be both "justified" and "true" that gravity is essentially a powerful curvature of space–time. But of course, any scientist in the 1700s who proposed in advance such an Einsteinian theory may well have been dismissed as a crackpot: not because such a thing is *a priori* impossible – it is the currently reigning theory of gravity, after all – but because at the time there seemed to be no sufficient evidence for such an extravagant hypothesis. Newton's theory of gravity was basically doing very well and was certainly not yet in need of being revolutionized out of existence. The history of science is enough to show that what sounds preposterous in one decade or century can often become conventional wisdom in the next. The serial endosymbiosis theory (SET) of Lynn Margulis, which is now found in biology textbooks, was the object of some mockery during her graduate student years in the 1960s.<sup>55</sup>

We would certainly not call Newton a crackpot for not being an Einsteinian during his lifetime, for there was simply no *evidence* for such a theory in his day, despite G.W. Leibniz's suggestive argument for the relational character of space and time.<sup>56</sup> In Imre Lakatos, we have a formidable theorist who thinks that the same falsifying process holds even for mathematics, though this is a more controversial view.<sup>57</sup> In short, scientists of the present day might turn out to be terribly wrong about the universe while some lucky dime store crank might be "right" with his guesses once quantum theory and relativity are eventually unified with theories of dark matter and dark energy by the next great physical theory. But no future historian would call that crank a "great scientist" simply because he turned out to have stumbled upon scientifically correct content in the eyes of a later stage of scientific history. Scientists are supposed to be those who provide *justifications* according to the available evidence, and the same is true of phenomenologists. Knowledge must be justified, but it can never be true, since there is no direct access to the real. To say this we need not be Kantian believers in the thing-in-itself, but need only believe in the ongoing advent of scientific and philosophical revolutions, which have already occurred often enough. This is the respect in which the scientific mainstream of any given era can be said to have knowledge, despite the eventual overthrow of most or all of what it thinks it currently knows. Knowledge is justified untrue belief and therefore belongs to the realm of what Nietzsche calls "lies."

## 5 On aesthetics

In recent continental thought, there has been a new tendency to couple "truth" not with knowledge, but with a heightened form of subjective relation to the world. This holds for instance of Alain Badiou's theory of events, in which a truth is not a truth except insofar as a subject remains performatively faithful to it: a revolution has not really happened except in the heart of the one who harks back to it while anticipating the next revolution.<sup>58</sup> Badiou's ally Slavoj Žižek has a similar conception: "the truth that articulates itself is the truth about the failures, gaps, and inconsistencies of the big other," where "big other" is Lacan's *terme d'art* for the existing symbolic order, which includes – among other things – all that we call knowledge.<sup>59</sup> String theory in physics sat around mostly unused for decades, until it became the topic of a collective movement that eventually grew to dominate its field. The first exhibition of fauvist painting was heckled almost to death by the public, yet Matisse and his circle remained faithful believers in the deliriously bright-colored palette they had discovered. The reader will easily think of innumerable further examples of this sort.

<sup>55</sup> Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*.

<sup>56</sup> Leibniz and Clarke, *Correspondence*.

<sup>57</sup> Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations*.

<sup>58</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*; and Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*.

<sup>59</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 518.

The word “truth” is usually employed to refer to a “submarine” state of affairs in the world that is accurately mirrored in the mind, although the story of new truths always involves an initially small group of ardent defenders of a new idea, or even one person defending it alone. Kierkegaard’s major objection to Hegel is that his system ignores the “leap of faith” required to embrace a new outlook.<sup>60</sup> What all this means is that the emergence of a truth requires that someone adhere to a new idea that is considered entirely *unjustified* in terms of the current order of knowledge. New theories are often dismissed as crackpot productions, and this is why: existing mainstream theories have always had plenty of time to amass giant machineries and institutions of justification, staffed by figures of competent mediocrity, while new theories have difficulty competing in such an environment unless they present themselves in understated fashion as harmless modifications of existing orthodoxy. If knowledge works by way of convincing justifications, what I have called truth (using the term in a Badiouan sense) often proceeds in the opposite direction, employing fake justifications to defend strange breakthroughs. As the literary critic Harold Bloom puts it:

What intimately allies... [Ernest] Hemingway, [F. Scott] Fitzgerald, and [William] Faulkner... is that all of them emerge from Joseph Conrad’s influence but temper it cunningly by mingling Conrad with an American precursor – Mark Twain for Hemingway, Henry James for Fitzgerald, Herman Melville for Faulkner... [S]trong writers have the wit to transform [their] forerunners into composite and therefore partly imaginary beings.<sup>61</sup>

That is to say, it is initially better for a new novelist – or new figure in any field – to justify innovations by inscribing them in a circle of already recognized achievements. If a writer entirely without forerunners were even possible, they would undoubtedly fail for lack of an audience. The subjective component in philosophical truth is what Badiou calls “anti-philosophy,” and he holds that philosophy must work as close to anti-philosophy as possible.<sup>62</sup>

If there is a truth in opposition to knowledge, it consists in discovering a hole or gap in existing theories, and of discovering something there that cannot be paraphrased, or at least not yet. A new theory initially does nothing more than *allude* to that which escapes easy definition. Heidegger’s notion of “being” as that which has always been forgotten in Western philosophy is one such case, and the same holds for the essentially negative Socratic method of undercutting every attempted definition of a thing. Let’s stay with the case of Heidegger for a moment. We have seen that he rejects both the senses and the intellect as delivering nothing but present-at-hand caricatures of the being of a thing. We do not grasp the apple by looking at it, analyzing its eidetic qualities, or physicalizing it as a mass located at a distinct point in space–time. These are all what Nietzsche would call “relational” conceptions of the thing, but Heidegger thinks we can gain access to something more. The Heidegger of *Being and Time* thinks we can do this, initially, by focusing on the apple insofar as it is *not* directly present to us. The apple or hammer or floor in a room are, for the most part, taken for granted and therefore not present to the mind at all. Instead, they combine into a vast environmental background that enables our more explicit perceptions or thoughts in any given moment. “Taken strictly,” Heidegger writes, “there ‘is’ no such thing as *an* equipment. To the Being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is.”<sup>63</sup> That is to say, Heidegger tries to undercut the literal presence of individual things by arguing that they emerge not only from a background that is non-present, but from one that is holistically unified.

As argued extensively in my first book, this analysis fails even on Heidegger’s own terms.<sup>64</sup> The problem is that Heidegger is not only the philosopher of unconsciously used tools, but of *broken* tools as well. When something goes wrong – and not only in this case – we are able to become aware of *individual* items of equipment. And even if this awareness unfolds in the sphere of what is given to us, it requires a prior being of the things that is in no way given. For instance, Heidegger thinks that a hammer can become directly visible to us in such experiences as “this hammer is too heavy.” What this means is that individual items of equipment

<sup>60</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 340.

<sup>61</sup> Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Badiou, *Lacan*.

<sup>63</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 97.

<sup>64</sup> Harman, *Tool-Being*.



are never sleekly inscribed in the “totality of equipment” in which they participate silently before something goes wrong. What contains the inconvenient quality “too heavy” is not the system of equipment as a whole, but the hammer alone. As a result, the fact that the tool-system is unconsciously taken for granted is not yet enough to escape presence-at-hand, any more than perception or the intellect were in Husserl’s case. Just as the difference between perception and theory turned out to be not all that great, the same holds for the difference between our conscious relations with things and the unconsciously relied-upon ones encountered in our practical dealings with the world. Individual items like hammers, in their non-relational being that can never be fully integrated into a system, precede any of the relational aspects of things. Here, Heidegger allows us to catch sight of something that – contra Nietzsche – is not purely relational. While it is true that we see this by the grace of advanced philosophical theory, these withdrawn individual things are not paraphrasable, and to that extent they go beyond any literalist conception.

Furthermore, this allows us to grasp that individual entities are an unactualized surplus in relation to *each other* as well, even when no humans are anywhere near the scene. The key difference is neither between theory and perception (Husserl) nor between praxis on the one side and both theory and perception on the other (Heidegger). Instead, the key difference is that between objects and their relations. Kantian philosophy has ruled it impossible to speak about object–object relations apart from any observer, insofar as to speak about objects colliding with objects is already to bring them into the sphere of the human observer. The argument is not as strong as it looks. Note that in Kantian philosophy we do not encounter even our own finitude *directly*. We simply experience what we experience, while a further *deduction* is needed to argue that there is something behind this experience: a deduction Kant hides with the facile-sounding assertion that there cannot be appearances without something that appears. But if we can deduce human finitude this way – and I think we can – then we can also deduce the finitude of nonhuman entities. A red billiard ball need not be “conscious” of a blue one in order to be in a finite relation with it. All that is needed is the deduction that any interaction between two billiard balls (or two of anything else) fails to exhaust their full reality, since each turns the other into a caricature just as human experience does whenever it makes contact with something.

It is in such cases, where the surplus of the in-itself hints at its existence when something goes askew on the surface, that we can speak of “truth” in opposition to knowledge. As Žižek put it in the passage cited earlier: “the truth that articulates itself is the truth about the failures, gaps, and inconsistencies of the big other.”<sup>65</sup> Badiou would say that certain elements *belong* to a situation without being *included* in it, and that truth occurs through an “event” in which these non-included yet still belonging elements rise up and demand to be counted: such as when a political underclass demands recognition, when a new artistic movement speaks a new truth that is not yet allowed by the current situation, or when an amorous event shatters our existing world. In this respect, both Badiou and Žižek speak of the retroactive constitution of reality: that which is only counted later *will have been there all along*. The problem with this retroactive conception is that it verges on idealism. Badiou claims that individual things (which he terms “consistent multiplicities”) retroactively generate their own surplus (“inconsistent multiplicity”) rather than this surplus having been there beforehand. Likewise, Žižek gives an arch-retroactive interpretation of Hegel in which each new dialectical figure emerges *ex nihilo* from a free choice at each stage, rather than having been implicitly contained in the dialectic’s starting point. Among other difficulties, this encourages an ultra-voluntarist politics that thinks itself entirely free of prior historical or geographical determinations.<sup>66</sup> “Submarine” reality, as we have called it, is thus defined out of existence, and the subject’s own positing of gaps and fissures in the big other is deemed sufficient to generate all the details of history. Events require a subject and cannot occur in pre-subjective nature itself, whose very existence is vaguely conceded by the retroactivists mostly as a device for not sounding crazy.<sup>67</sup> Latour takes a similar risk when he says that the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses cannot have died of tuberculosis as present-day medical experts claim: since

<sup>65</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 518.

<sup>66</sup> On this topic see Harman, “Malabou’s Political Critique of Speculative Realism.”

<sup>67</sup> Even Meillassoux sees this problem in the thought of his mentor Badiou. Meillassoux, “Decision and Undecidability of the Event in *Being and Event* I and II.”

tuberculosis was clinically unknown in those ancient times, it can only be posited retroactively as what killed Ramses “all along.”<sup>68</sup>

The positive side of the paradox of truth and justification can be expressed as follows. If knowledge is to be defined as “justified untrue belief,” then what we have called truth must be defined in the opposite way as “unjustified true belief.” The reason is that truth – in the sort of conception for which Badiou has so interestingly argued, following Kierkegaard – has now been separated from any search for step-by-step justification and takes the form of an immediate personal contact with some hole, gap, or fissure in the current state of knowledge. If we call such contact “surprise,” then surprise becomes “that which does not deceive,” as Lacan says of anxiety, and as Badiou thinks is the case for every form of “anti-philosophy.”<sup>69</sup> Truth needs no justification, and hence is not a form of knowledge, but needs only a personal anchor in the experience of something astonishing that does not fit the current situation. I have often written that metaphor provides such a case as well. If we experience a sea that is not simply the sea of perception, theory, or practice, but a sea – reading Homer – that is “wine-dark,” we are immediately carried beyond the level of SO-SQ, assuming that the metaphor is effective for a given reader. Instead of a literal wine with wine-dark qualities, we are asked to think a *sea* with such qualities. This proves impossible, and the sea withdraws as something inherently ungraspable, leaving us with nothing but wine-dark qualities. But there is no such thing as either objects or qualities existing without the other term, and thus some real object is needed as the support for the wine-dark qualities that would otherwise be left floating in empty space. That real object cannot be the sea, which has already been repelled into outer darkness by the impossibility of literally combining it with wine-qualities. Thus it is I myself, the reader of the poem, who must function as the substrate for wine-dark qualities, and the difficulty of doing this is what makes the aesthetic experience occur: the real I *performs* the sensual wine-qualities, which is precisely the perverse form of crossing that we needed. The term “perform” is no accident: speech act theory has long distinguished between “constative” statements that convey literal content and “performative” ones that commit our very being to what is said, whether in promises or (in my view) outright aesthetic experience.<sup>70</sup>

This brings us back to the following comparison. What we call knowledge is what Nietzsche calls “lies,” since knowledge entails phenomena grounded in more basic phenomena, though without any contact with the real ever occurring along this path. But the truth that Nietzsche calls impossible is possible indeed, with the strange implication that aesthetics is one of the primary seats of truth rather than lies. The movable army of metaphors and metonymies does not distance us from any presence of the thing-in-itself, but it does give us a direct experience of truth. Granted, such “truth” can only be supermarine; there is no guarantee that a “wine-dark sea” really exists, or that this an accurate description of the Mediterranean. The submarine reality that Nietzsche regards as inaccessible is truly inaccessible, since reality itself is not isomorphic with any trace of it that can be brought into the mind. Instead of such impossible presence, we are left with truth, which deforms the space of a given situation by alluding to that which lies outside it.

## Appendix: In response to some criticisms

Both of the anonymous reviewers of this article made valuable critical comments that have been incorporated into the preceding pages. But Reviewer #2 in particular made a number of more general objections that struck at a level too basic to address in passing above. Thus I will briefly respond here, in this newly appended section of the article, and will take the liberty of sometimes paraphrasing their critiques rather than quoting directly. The criticisms fall into three basic categories: (a) those concerning my remarks about

<sup>68</sup> Latour, “On the Partial Existence of Existing *and* Non-Existing Objects.”

<sup>69</sup> Badiou, *Lacan, Anxiety*.

<sup>70</sup> Austin, *How to do Things With Words*.

science, (b) those that pertain to the difference between real and sensual, and (c) those bearing on the distinction between justification and truth.

## A1 Concerning science

Reviewer #2 first remarks that while they are persuaded that scientists seek justification, they are “less persuaded that [scientists] do not seek truth” or thinks that “perhaps [they] have a different sense of justification than the very minimally defined justification of Gettier.” This is certainly true, and of course there are many philosophers of science who insist that justification is never enough. However, the many nuances of this issue are not germane to this level of my argument. I claim that the only two basic avenues open to such philosophers would be either to insist that truth can be present to the mind in some sort of “direct realist” fashion, or to supplement science with some further mechanism of awareness that justification is never sufficient. The first path is rendered impossible by OOO’s metaphysical position, which does not permit the forms of things to be extracted from them and brought into the mind without alteration; hence, no model of knowledge as *adaequatio* is possible. But if the second path is adopted instead, then the central point of OOO – its affirmation of a gap between reality and our knowledge of it – is already conceded. One such case is posed by Ray Brassier, whose visceral denunciations of OOO in the name of science too often overshadow our crucial point of agreement: the severe asymmetry between reality and any knowledge we can have of it. This axiom of Brassier complicates his triumphalistic scientism, especially when we add his general misanthropy concerning the ultimate worthlessness of all human effort.<sup>71</sup> Examples of a more *simpatico* variety would include scientific fallibilisms such as Popper’s falsificationism, and Lakatos’s modified version of Popper in which research programs can survive numerous piecemeal falsifications before they are abandoned at some point in favor of a more progressive program.<sup>72</sup> Needless to say, such fallibilisms are not counterexamples to my claims, but fully match the OOO view that science is not a matter of producing true content: every scientific theory or research program is subject to challenge. More than this, there is no hint in these authors that the process might eventually come to a stop in some final true content after an unspecified number of scientific breakthroughs. If there is any valid conception of “truth” in Popper, for instance, it is a truth surprisingly close to the sort described by Badiou: truth in a performative or existential sense that pertains to a researcher’s level of commitment, rather than to the accurate or inaccurate character of their statements. See, for example, Popper’s eye-opening insistence that attempts to falsify a scientific theory must be “sincere.”<sup>73</sup>

Second, Reviewer #2 wonders whether the OOO notion of translation is really as threatening to the accurate replication of forms as the present article suggests. They give the example of pouring plaster into a cube-shaped mold, removing the finished cube, grinding it into powder, then liquifying the powder and pouring it into the mold again, thereby yielding essentially the same cube as the first one. They might also have added that one could do the same thing with completely different powder, thereby producing the “same” cube with an entirely new batch of matter. Note that these examples basically put us in the same position as the two usual stances on the Ship of Theseus of paradox. Namely, if we gradually replace each piece of wood of the ship with a new one, at the end of the process is it really still the same ship? And what if the old pieces, after being removed, are used to assemble a new Ship of Theseus with the old wood? Doesn’t this second ship have an even better case to be considered the “real” Ship of Theseus than the first one? Alternatively, one might adopt the position of Peter Simons and argue that both ships are equally legitimate

<sup>71</sup> See Brassier, “Deleveling.”

<sup>72</sup> Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*; Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programs*. See also Harman, “On Progressive and Degenerating Research Programs With Respect to Philosophy.”

<sup>73</sup> Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 418.

successors, so that there are in fact now two distinct Ships of Theseus.<sup>74</sup> But there are at least two complementary problems with the cube-from-the-mold example, which is what inspired our turn to the Ship of Theseus. First, all this example proves is that we can use the mold to produce a second cube that is *more or less* the same as the first: a cube that could fool pretty much anyone into thinking it was the same. It would be a sort of “Turing Test” for plaster cubes. Yet this sort of practical trickery will never come close to guaranteeing the identity of the two cubes, and despite the gross physical similarity of these cubes to the naked eye, they would no doubt be as distinct for a researcher as two different bullets would be for a skilled ballistics technician. The second problem is the assumption, a central dogma of nearly all approaches to the Ship of Theseus, that it is more likely for two things to be the “same” if we preserve as much *detail* of the first in the second as possible. Here the “formalist” simply prefers the ship that preserves a continuous physical structure with the original, while the “materialist” prefers the one that is made of the same pieces of wood. Against these assumptions, I have recently argued that the real Ship of Theseus would instead be a shipwrecked version on the ocean floor, one in which many needless details and operations of the ship have been stripped away in favor of something more skeletally suggestive.<sup>75</sup> In short, translation in the OOO sense is not just a matter of *loss* from the original, but is just as much a way of securing the original by refusing to identify it with the excessive data found in any physical instantiation of it.

Reviewer #2 also wished there had been more elaboration on what a OOO philosophy of science would look like. I will content myself with sketching three basic features of such a theory. First, OOO is a realism and hence requires that science be realist in character rather than empiricist, for example.<sup>76</sup> Second, and as already discussed, the object-oriented insistence on the gap between reality and our knowledge of it requires a committed fallibilism. Third and finally, the OOO version of the fourfold structure entails that insofar as science concerns reality, it is a matter of real *qualities* rather than real objects: that is to say, science is a matter of *eidos* rather than *essence*.<sup>77</sup> But on this note we must turn to Reviewer #2’s questions about the real and the sensual.

## A2 Concerning the real and the sensual

The reviewer first wants to know how we can distinguish between real and sensual qualities in the first place. To offer an example of my own, what are the criteria enabling us to distinguish between a person’s merely “sensual” friendliness and the “real” sneakiness that eventually turns out to be more characteristic of them? The question is one I frequently receive, and it reflects a misconception of the difference between real and sensual. The difference, namely, is not equivalent to that between genuine and fake. Instead, it is an ontological distinction between the qualities we directly encounter in a thing and those that it has without our being able to access them in the flesh. Stated by analogy with Kantian terms, real qualities can be considered as qualities-in-themselves, while sensual qualities are qualities as appearance. And the fact is that *anything* we experience of something is an appearance, not a quality-in-itself. Even if we find the aforementioned person sneaky from the moment we first lay eyes on them, and with long experience they do in fact turn out to be irredeemably sneaky, that does not make the sneakiness we encounter in them “real” any more than the person we encounter as a whole is “real.” That is to say, just as the real object (the thing-in-itself) is something to which we gain access only through indirect or allusive means, the same holds for real qualities: hence, my criticism in this article of Husserl’s (and not just Husserl’s) ontologically fruitless distinction between the senses and the intellect. To perceive something *and* to think it are both cases of dealing with the sensual. The existence of real qualities in things can be deduced, but they cannot

<sup>74</sup> Simons, *Parts*.

<sup>75</sup> Harman, “The Shipwreck of Theseus.”

<sup>76</sup> Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*.

<sup>77</sup> See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*.

be made directly present. This is why the best prose descriptions of anything usually partake of a bit of poetic allusiveness, as in the work of wine tasters or theater critics.

The reviewer now asks why “a purely illusory thing must generate its own background,” as I put it in the article. And furthermore, do the supposed eidetic (i.e., real) qualities of a sensual object belong to the object itself, to the observer, or to some combination of the two? The answer to the first question is as follows. A sensual object is an object because it is a unit capable of bearing different qualities at different times. It is sensual (rather than real) because it does not exist autonomously, but disappears as soon as I stop paying attention to it. This is obvious in the case of private fantasies, since perhaps no one else is even aware of my imaginary friends who are extinguished once I am distracted for even a moment. It is still true of collectively shared fantasies, such as the characters on the popular television series *The Lincoln Lawyer*, which my wife and I were watching during dinner a few hours ago. Even if millions of Netflix subscribers around the world are watching this show at any given moment, qua *sensual* objects the characters are slightly different objects for every viewer of the series, and therefore my own version of the lead defense attorney is not there even for the many others now watching the show. But finally, the same holds true even of entities that definitely exist. No sane person doubts the *existence* of President Joe Biden, even if many are crazily convinced that he achieved his office through electoral fraud. But the sensual objects called “Biden” that exist for each of us are simply not the same thing as the real Biden, which may harbor mysterious depths that will never be deployed. For instance, perhaps Biden’s temperament is ideally suited for world-historic heroism in the face of some possible catastrophe that simply never occurs during his time in office, and thus we never become familiar with that possible side of him. Perhaps Bill Clinton was uniquely suited to address the 9/11 attacks in a responsible manner, though we will never know the answer to that since he had been replaced as President eight months earlier. Likewise, without the Russian invasion of Ukraine, perhaps President Zelensky would have been remembered as just another short-term figurehead rather than as a Churchillian stalwart of democracy.

But the reviewer’s question was why a *sensual* object must generate a real background, not why a *real* object has such a background. All right, then. Consider the case of an object that nearly everyone would agree is merely sensual and without a real counterpart: a centaur, not a rare example in Husserl’s writings. We can imagine or outright hallucinate such a beast, perhaps even experiencing the centaur from numerous different angles and under many varying circumstances as we do so, imagining different stories in which this mythical creature participates. In one respect, this sensual object has shifting sensual qualities that alter in the manner of Husserlian adumbrations. But it also has certain vaguely defined qualities that it needs in order for us to continue regarding it as this very centaur. If certain ill-defined limits are transgressed, we declare the centaur to be something else altogether. The point of eidetic analysis in phenomenology is to determine what those limits are: what are the integral features that any given intentional object requires in order to be what it is? I hold that those features are real rather than sensual, simply because no bundle of sensual data can account for the objecthood of an object: not even if that object is purely sensual. If an apple is real, we cannot define it in Humean fashion as a bundle of qualities; if an apple is sensual, then the same holds and for the same reasons. This is why even a sensual object has real qualities, and Husserl is simply wrong to think that the intellect is capable of accessing those qualities in a way that the senses cannot. For even the intellect gets at the eidos of things only by way of allusion.

As for where the real qualities of an object are found, the answer is that they belong to the sensual object itself. Once a sensual object exists for me, I have limited ability to modify its real qualities, though I can easily modify its sensual ones through bodily movements or mental reflections that put that object in a new light. It is easy to see different sides of a lemon, but it would take immense mental effort to shift my tacit criteria for when it has crossed the borderlands so as no longer to be this lemon. An object, even a sensual one, proposes its own standards for how it is to be judged. The complicating factor here is that although the real qualities of a sensual object belong to that object itself, I the observer am partly responsible for generating that object in the first place. The sensual lemon is not something “emitted” by the real lemon, as the reviewer’s comments wrongly suppose, but instead is produced by the mediated interaction between the real lemon and the real me with my specific neurological constitution. But all this means is that I am one of the ingredients (along with the real lemon) that produces the sensual lemon; it does not follow



that the sensual lemon is merely my puppet and can be made to do whatever I please. This is the case with all objects in the human world: although two members of a married couple are both crucial ingredients of the marriage, it does not follow that either of them truly understands the dynamics of the marriage, or that they can change its rules freely without experiencing pushback either from their partner or from other aspects of reality that bear upon the relationship. I am as much a part of the United States as any other American living or dead, yet my personal impact on the customs, usages, and laws of this country are limited in the extreme, and I disobey them at my peril.

A final question raised by Reviewer #2 here concerns the OOO notion that aesthetic experience involves a split between objects and their qualities. Which object is being split, and from which qualities? The best way to answer this is to note where we reside *before* any such splitting occurs: within literal experience. I have defined such experience as the sort in which objects are not encountered as distinct from their bundles of qualities. In other words, literalism is a question of undifferentiated sensual experience in which there is no awareness even of a difference between sensual objects and sensual qualities, let alone of the pertinence of anything real stationed outside the sensual realm altogether. For an aesthetic split to occur, it is not necessary for the real to intervene: any object–quality split is sufficient, including SO–SQ. Consider the special fascination of children for objects that are especially multifarious, or for buildings or landscapes of sufficient complexity that they can be explored as hideouts. This is already a form of aesthetic experience, in which an object seems to have a certain magic or charisma above and beyond its known (and even unknown) catalog of properties.

### A3 Concerning justification and truth

We turn in closing to Reviewer #2's remarks on the conceptions of justification and truth. They first want to know if it is fair when I speak of justification as if it were a binary yes/no question. Is it not the case that we can be more or less confident in the justifying evidence supporting this or that belief? Of course. We could even develop an asymptotic model of truth, as Heidegger does with his model of truth as *aletheia* or gradual uncovering rather than a yes/no judgment about the factual accuracy of statements. However, such gradations are irrelevant to my main point, which concerned the absolute difference between truth and any form of justification. Since no amount of justifying evidence can ever put us in direct contact with reality, there will always be an insurmountable gap between truth and any amount of evidence. This is the very intuition that lies at the basis of fallibilist conceptions of science. It is also Kierkegaard's intuition when he argues for the necessity of leaps of faith, and Badiou's when he speaks of truth as always being a kind of *wager*, a term obviously borrowed in turn from Pascal.<sup>78</sup> This is not to say that all leaps of faith are equally prudent, wise, or respectable, only that such assessments cannot be made with the benefit of a reliably existing corpus of truth. In fact, I prefer the word "reality" to "truth" simply because experience has taught me that those who speak most quickly of truth are usually those who think they already have it at their disposal, and who have summarily moved on to the enforcement phase of the operation. To speak instead of reality is to take the side of events, falsifications, gaps, ruptures, and other instances that emphasize genuinely gripping problems over hastily forced solutions.

In Section 4 of this article, I imagined a drugged Edmund Husserl hallucinating nonexistent apples, lemons, and blackbirds and proposed that it would be possible for such a Husserl to perform perfectly *justified* phenomenologies of these objects even if they could not possibly be *true* ones. Reviewer #2 asks whether it is possible to say such a thing, for "it seems a stretch to state that a perfect justification would not include [the] requirement [of] any external validation or verification." Here I disagree. It is clearly possible to give better and worse descriptions or interpretations of things that do not exist, despite their nonexistence. Indeed, from a OOO standpoint, all knowledge is in this same predicament, since knowledge is about trying to determine the real qualities of *sensual* objects, which by definition are not real even though some

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78 Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*.

may correspond more closely than others to real objects. Einsteinian gravity will surely turn out to be a false model, but there is good reason to hold that it has more purchase on reality than Newtonian gravity does. Human beings (and not only humans) do not have the luxury of comparing our models of reality directly with reality itself, and this is why justification plays out on what I have called the sensual level. By contrast, the intermittent disruptions of justification by ill-defined resistance from the outside is part of the very different process I have called “truth.”

When I say above that “there is never a belief that is both justified and true at once,” Reviewer #2 counters that it “does not seem clear why a truth is dissipated or destroyed by its justification.” Indeed, there is no reason that it should be dissipated or destroyed. Someone can experience a religious conversion and then try to explain that conversion in terms of “arguments,” but no number of convincing arguments is sufficient to produce a conversion. The works of St. Thomas Aquinas have presumably never “dissipated or destroyed” the faith of any Roman Catholic, but neither are they sufficient in their own right to bring about such faith, although they have often paved the way for it. The same is true of science. *The Double Helix* is one of the classic works in this respect, showing us how the discovery of the structure of DNA came from a mixture of rational formulations, improvised hunches, and outright lucky accidents.<sup>79</sup> Much of the “rational argumentation” made by Watson and Francis Crick in their famous *Nature* article had nothing to do with their own reasons for confidence in their discovery.<sup>80</sup> The point, in short, is not that justification and truth are inimical to one another with respect to the same belief, but that they live parallel lives that can never fully intersect: thousands of people can think that Derrida was a genius while thousands more think he was a fraud. However rock solid the arguments for a belief might seem to you, such conviction is an additional step distinct from the steps of the arguments themselves.

A final point raised by Reviewer #2 suggests that the priority granted by OOO to aesthetics is inconsistent with its general hostility toward anthropocentrism. If human perception and thought are to be treated as no longer central to the cosmos – as OOO proposes – then how can the human experience of the gap between objects and qualities be something special nonetheless? I would make several points in response. First, OOO does not think that human experience is needed for aesthetic phenomena to occur; it seems clear that many animals and plants are involved in aesthetic production or appreciation, and for the object-oriented ontologist, causation itself has an aesthetic structure.<sup>81</sup> Second, what is important even in human aesthetic experience is not our awareness of the object–quality gap, but our productive role as an ingredient of it. That is to say, in the case of Homer’s “wine-dark sea,” there is the sea as object forcibly fused with qualities drawn from the wine. But that gap only functions insofar as the reader of Homer steps in for the withdrawn real sea and performs in its stead the union with the wine-qualities. That is why there is no aesthetic experience without some level of emotional or personal involvement, though this need not occur in literalist cases such as knowledge.

I thank Reviewer #2 for their comments and ask for indulgence in those cases where their remarks had to be truncated or simplified so as to keep my responses to a reasonable length.

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<sup>79</sup> Watson, *The Double Helix*.

<sup>80</sup> Watson and Crick, “Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids.”

<sup>81</sup> See for instance Morton, *Realist Magic*.

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