Object-Oriented Philosophy
The Noumenon's New Clothes

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With a Postscript by
RAY BRASSIER
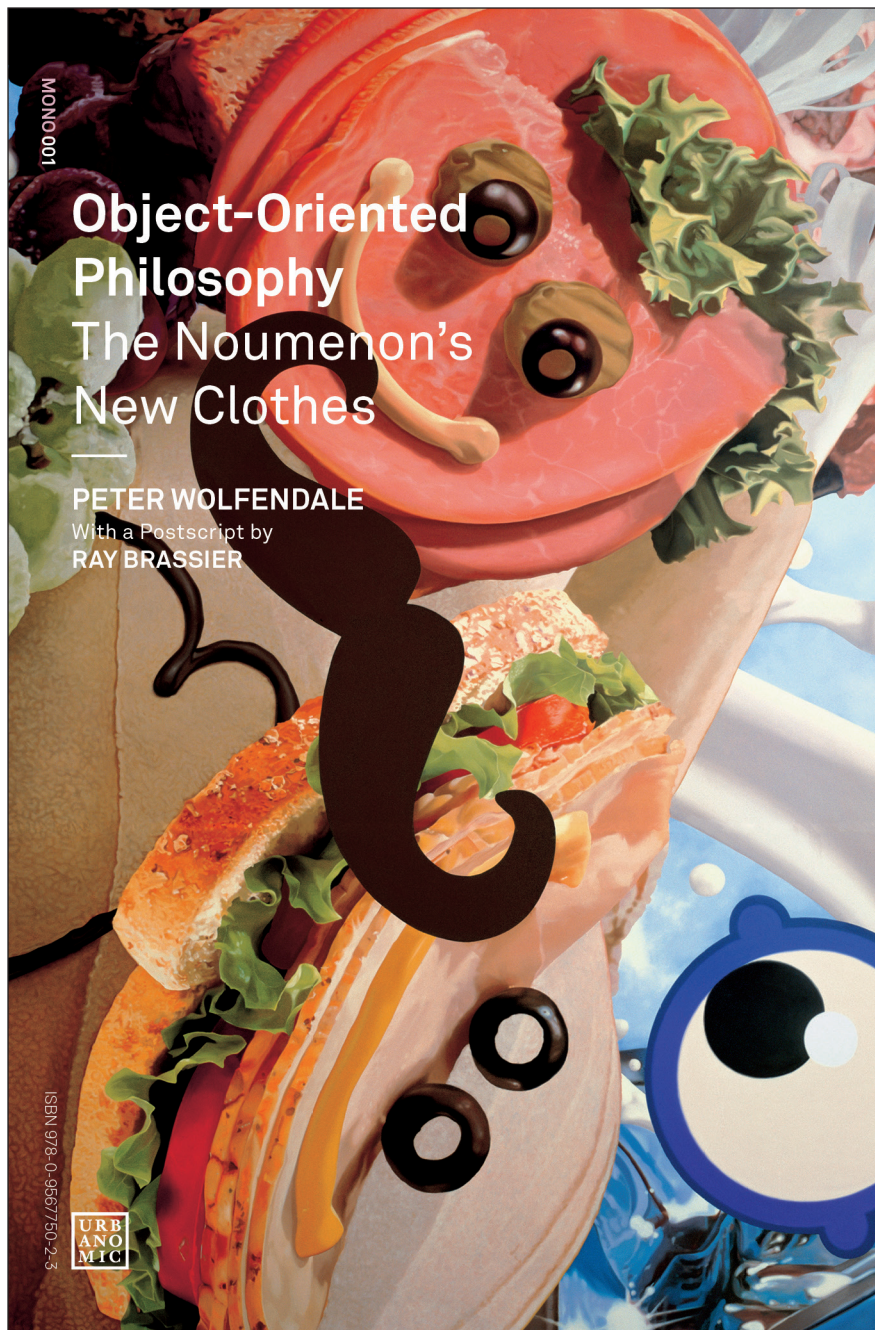
Preface

I have been haunted by a single question for the last two years or so: 'Why are you *still* writing this, Pete?' Echoed by friends, family, and my own conscience, it has been a constant refrain. It seems that I am finally in a position to provide an answer—to retrospectively justify the amount of time and effort that has gone into writing this rather *unusual* book, and to provide some context for those wondering why they should devote their own time and effort to reading it. The fact that this is my first book only exacerbates its eccentricities: it addresses a contemporary and perhaps fleeting philosophical moment, yet it does so by delving deep into the discipline's past; it speaks of recent developments in the world of 'Continental' philosophy, yet it often draws upon 'analytic' ideas that are uncomfortably alien to that world; and above all, it undertakes a long and detailed discussion of a single philosopher's work, and yet it aims to show that his work does not warrant such serious attention. Why read, let alone write, such an odd book? A brief explanation of its origins might shed some light on the matter.

In August 2009, I began a philosophy blog[1] as a way to work through ideas outside the scope of my PhD thesis, which had begun as an exploration of Deleuze's metaphysics and undergone a gradual methodological regression towards Heidegger's question of Being. In doing so, I became involved in a thriving forum for philosophical discussion, in which a number of other graduate students and fellow travellers dissatisfied with the stagnant state of Continental philosophy were experimenting with ways of changing things. It is perhaps unsurprising that this loose network of blogs had crystallised around 'Speculative Realism' (SR)—a new and exciting trend

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1. http://deontologistics.wordpress.com.

which had emerged onto the scene two years earlier. It is hard to convey precisely what it was like to be involved in this online community—if nothing else, it was permeated by a certain enthusiasm, ambition, and intensity that offline academia seemed to lack. Although I never identified as a 'Speculative Realist', I am certain that the extensive online discussion and correspondence that SR inspired was formative for my philosophical development. It is in this context that I first seriously encountered Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Philosophy (OOP), initially in discussion and then through his own blog;[2] and it is as part of this community that I witnessed the genesis and dissemination of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). For our purposes, the most important encounters were a short debate with Harman himself and a series of debates with Levi Bryant,[3] who had begun to develop his own metaphysics under Harman's influence.[4]

It is important to emphasise how much I gained from these debates. It is all too easy in contemporary philosophical discourse to use the mere fact that one seriously disagrees with another's ideas as a reason not to explore the nature of the disagreement any further. But it is worth remembering that doing so can improve our understanding of the relevant issues and stimulate the evolution of our own ideas. This is certainly what I got out of exploring my disagreements with OOP/OOO. However—and this is where things took an unusual turn—these theoretical gains did not come from uncovering useful philosophical insights or novel dialectical distinctions

2.   http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com.

3.   http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com.

4.   These debates are catalogued on my blog: http://deontologistics.word-press.com/commentary/

lingering beneath the surface. Quite the reverse: whenever I began to address seemingly simple ideas that struck me as problematic, their flaws would turn out to run much deeper than was initially apparent. Time and again, I discovered that I couldn't pull on a single loose thread without unravelling the whole fabric. This implied a profound asymmetry between the amount of effort required to articulate the relevant ideas and that required to effectively criticise them. If nothing else, this asymmetry was productive: it forced me to sharpen my understanding of foundational concepts (e.g., existence, relation, causation, etc.) and to address the methodological issues underlying metaphysical debates involving them (e.g., what it means to talk about 'reality'); but it also consumed time and resources that could perhaps have been better spent elsewhere. Why then, did I persist? If I am honest, it is largely because I find it difficult to turn down a challenge.

After our blog exchange had become somewhat one-sided, Harman made me an offer: either (a) summarise my objections in a single blog post that he could address more easily, or, better yet, (b) summarise my objections in an article in a formal publication (e.g., in *Speculations*, a journal specialising in the nascent ideas of SR). At the time I replied that, despite having expended considerable effort addressing our differences online, I could not commit to writing an article for publication, which I considered would take far longer and would demand far higher standards of thoroughness. At the time, I had not read all of Harman's published books. Thus, without ruling out a more extensive engagement in print, I demurred from making any promises for the near future.[5]

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5.   Private correspondence with Harman (June, 2010).

Harman's response to this was to withdraw offer (a), on the basis that he had less to gain (and more to lose) from a blog exchange than I did. Admittedly, this irked me a little, not least given Harman's enthusiastic advocacy of the blogosphere as an appropriate venue for philosophical debate;[6] but no one is obliged to respond to anyone else on the Internet. That's just how it goes. I resolved to write an article when I had the time to do it properly. However, a short time later Levi Bryant referenced this exchange between Harman and myself in public, in a less than flattering way:

> At the risk of breaching blog etiquette, Pete was recently asked if he wouldn't care to carry out this debate in a formal setting. He responded by claiming that he holds his published writing to a higher standard than his blog writing and that we just don't have enough in common to have a debate. This raises the question of why Pete has obsessively and endlessly written lengthy posts on OOO, striving to undermine our positions, while withdrawing from any sort of serious debate with us. Perhaps Pete should take the time to determine what our arguments are, rather than treating us as fodder or matter to run through the machine of his Brandomian-Habermasian mill from afar.[7]

Now, it is almost certainly the case that his misrepresentation of my response to Harman was down to a miscommunication between Harman and Bryant, but this did little to assuage my irritation. As far as I was concerned, this transformed the

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6.   Cf. The introduction to *The Speculative Turn*, ed. G. Harman, L. Bryant, and N. Srnicek, (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011)

7.   http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/06/22/knowledge-represen-tation-and-construction-a-response-to-pete-part-2/.

offer to engage in a formal setting into a *challenge* to do so. I resolved not merely to write the article, but to be as 'serious' as possible. In short order, I bought the rest of Harman's books and began to sketch an outline of the essay.

Of course, nothing ever quite goes to plan. I set out to expand the outline by presenting Harman's system and the arguments for it as clearly and thoroughly as possible, before moving on to a discussion of its deeper significance. This proved to be much more difficult than I had anticipated: I spent an exasperating six months reading through all of Harman's published books and as many papers as seemed relevant, only to realise that there was no core argument, but rather a patchwork of argumentative fragments, rhetorical devices, and literary allusions. It gradually became apparent that a thorough engagement was going to require a great deal more reconstruction than I had originally thought. When it finally appeared in *Speculations* the next year, the article clocked in at seventy-six pages and did not get any further than reconstructing and criticising Harman's arguments.[8] I promised that a second half would be published in the next issue, but this too turned out to be overly optimistic. It took another two years of exegetical tangents and ramifying chapter headings before the original outline was completely filled in, and along the way the project expanded beyond the scope of an article and became a full-length book. If nothing else, it is by far the most exhaustive engagement with Harman's work to date.

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8.   P. Wolfendale, 'The Noumenon's New Clothes (Part I)' in *Speculations* IV (2012), 290–366. This forms the basis of chapters 1 and 2 of the present book. It is worth noting that it has yet to receive a response, though I believe that Harman plans to address it alongside other criticisms in a forthcoming book.

So, why didn't I stop at the article? I could simply have abandoned the project at this stage, and moved on to other things —there are plenty of other unfinished essays in my drafts folder that would have kept it company. There were a number of reasons—not least my own stubbornness—but the most obvious was OOP's increasing popularity: not only were Harman's books now being read and referenced throughout the humanities, but the phrase 'object-oriented' began to appear in calls for papers both in and outside of philosophy, while 'objects' became a new and supposedly exciting theme for art exhibitions. This ascendancy demanded thorough examination and criticism: a philosophy that attracts followers on the basis of grandiose promises, theoretical or otherwise, should have its ability to deliver on those promises carefully scrutinised. Moreover, as OOP's popularity increased, it began to dominate online discussion, gradually narrowing discursive parameters and alienating many who had been actively involved in the online SR community. The SR *trend* slowly transmuted into the SR/OOO *brand* as Harman asserted himself as its spokesman, and the community's unique dynamic dissolved as a result. This gradual collapse demanded a proper explanation and remonstration: a philosophy that prospers by hijacking discussion and stifling dissenting viewpoints, more or less deliberately, deserves to have its approach analysed and its strategies exposed. It thus seemed obvious that someone should address OOP and its influence directly, but the amount of effort required to do so properly remained highly asymmetric and thus highly prohibitive. Ultimately, the amount of time I had already devoted to understanding OOP put me in the best position to do what needed to be done.

As such, this book is essential reading for anyone already familiar with OOP/OOO—whether they're tempted by its

tenets or suspicious of its spread—but why should anyone else read it? The two remaining reasons I persisted in writing this critique provide the best motivations for reading it: (a) that, though more difficult, a deeper exploration of OOP's flaws yielded deeper theoretical insights that can be applied elsewhere, and (b) that, though seemingly idiosyncratic, a more synoptic analysis of OOP revealed that it condenses and exemplifies a number of important conceptual and sociological dynamics distinctive of contemporary anglophone Continental philosophy, giving us a unique opportunity to address the latter's problems in microcosm. Taken together, these transform the book from a simple exercise in philosophical critique into a more rounded pedagogical project.

This pedagogical bent is reflected in the overall trajectory traced by the various chapters: I begin by bracketing as many of my own substantial philosophical commitments as possible so as to focus on reconstructing Harman's metaphysics and its justification (chapters 1 and 2), but this bracketing gradually recedes as I turn to the underlying conceptual themes motivating Harman's position (chapter 3). However, rather than imposing a complete alternative metaphysics, my aim is to allow a series of constraints on any adequate alternative to emerge naturally—I exploit OOP's flaws to clarify the concepts of *representation* (3.1), *quality* (3.2), and *relation* (3.3) and progressively elaborate some substantive claims about *objects* (3.4), *metaphysics* (3.5), and *meaning* (3.6). The section on objects (3.4) provides the best demonstration of the above mentioned asymmetry between articulation and criticism, being by far the largest and most technically demanding part of the book. In it I locate OOP at the centre of a wider contemporary trend towards *ontological liberalism*, a proper examination of which requires detailed discussion of

both the history of ontology and the logic of quantification. Overall, the purpose of these clarifications, elaborations, and examinations is to enable the reader to learn from the various substantial and methodological mistakes instructively united in Harman's system.

After this, the book turns to the historical and sociological significance of OOP (chapter 4): I integrate the insights uncovered earlier into a synoptic picture of the rise of *correlationism* after Kant (4.1), in order to describe the genesis of OOP/OOO in the present (4.2), and then provide a 'hyperbolic reading' of a future in which its influence is unopposed (4.3). This is the culmination of a historical story that slowly develops over the second half of the book (3.4, 3.5, and 4.1), and which encompasses the overarching dialectic of metaphysics, its split and parallel development in the analytic and Continental traditions, and the evolution of the Kantian **noumenon** within the latter tradition. This story forms the background for a sociological account of the development of the Continental tradition from the middle of the twentieth century to the present day (4.1), which explains the influence of correlationism, its imbrication with the project of *critique*, and the emergence of an opposing *constructive* orientation. Taken together, these analyses do more than let us understand where OOP/OOO has come from and where it is going—they give us a chance to take stock of where we are as a discipline, and what must be done if we want to divest ourselves of the pathological dynamics typified by Harman's work. The conclusion (chapter 5) connects this overall trajectory with my concerns regarding SR and its sublimation into SR/OOO, and attempts to distil a moral from the book as a whole. This is perfectly complemented by Ray Brassier's generous and insightful postscript ('Speculative Autopsy'), which as far as I am concerned presents the last

word on Speculative Realism. To summarise, this book *is* a critique of Object-Oriented Philosophy and what it stands for, but it is also far more than *just* a critique.

During its long gestation, this book has benefitted immeasurably from my discussions with Ray Brassier, Damian Veal, Jon Cogburn, Daniel Sacilotto, Dustin McWherter, Nick Srnicek, Alex Williams, Benedict Singleton, and Reza Negarestani, some of whom were gracious enough to provide comments on early drafts of the material that has come to compose it. It has also benefitted from the comments of numerous more or less anonymous individuals who have read and responded to the informal engagements already mentioned. My parents, Chris and Dave Wolfendale, deserve a special mention for supporting me both emotionally and financially throughout the writing process, with only my word that it has been worthwhile, as does my partner Tanya Osborne, without whom I might never have finished. Finally, I owe an immense debt to Fabio Gironi (editor of the original *Speculations* article) and Robin Mackay (editor of the completed book), without whose incredible patience and careful encouragement it never would have appeared.