



DOCUMENT

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Objects and Objections

At the launch of his Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes, Peter Wolfendale discussed the rise and fall of Speculative Realism, objects, arguments, the analytic/continental divide, and the importance of methodology in metaphysics

ROBIN MACKAY: As Pete himself says in the preface to *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, it may seem a bit strange as a first book, because undeniably it's written *against* something: it's a critique, a long and detailed critique, of what's become known as Object-Oriented Ontology [OOO], and specifically the Object-Oriented Philosophy [OOP] of Graham Harman. Over the last five years or so this movement has cut an impressive swathe not only in the relatively rarefied and small world of philosophy, but in other disciplines in the humanities where its philosophical tenets have been taken up, and in the art world as well. It's difficult to say in a few words what OOP is, and in fact in the book Pete gives an extremely good account of it. But would you like to say a few initial words about what OOP is, Pete?

PETER WOLFENDALE: I suppose there are two things to be said about it, fundamentally. One is what it positions itself *against*. To understand OOP, you have to understand that it positions itself against what Quentin Meillassoux called 'correlationism' or what Graham Harman himself calls the 'philosophy of access', which is a rough consensus within European philosophy that spread to other parts of academia in the twentieth century and that says, fundamentally, that our knowledge of the world is limited by *the way in which we know*. This is articulated in various different ways, whether in the idea that fundamentally we can't think outside of the bounds of the languages we know or the particular cultures we're a part of, or even the particular kinds of biological capacities we have as human beings. There

are various different ways of articulating this idea that we're somehow constrained by the modes of access we have to things. So initially OOP opposes itself as a critique of and an alternative to these philosophies of access; it's meant to give a metaphysical account of the nature of reality itself, outside of our access to it. However, the way in which it does this is actually by turning correlationism or the philosophy of access into a metaphysics. Harman's essential idea is that it's not simply that we, in our interactions with the world, are constrained by a particular mode of access, but that this is a feature of all relations between all objects. The idea is that there's a certain sense in which my laptop here and the table can never know each other, just as I can never know the laptop in itself.

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This is why the book's subtitled *The Noumenon's New Clothes*, in so far as this idea of the thing-in-itself beyond our access to it was called the noumenon in Kant's philosophy. Essentially, what Harman's work does is to generalise this, but to claim that, in generalising it, it has actually told us something about the world as it is in itself. There are various other aspects to it, but that's the core thing.

RM: One of the major claims of OOP that seems to have a great appeal to a certain generation of philosophers, certainly in continental philosophy, and in the humanities in general—a generation who grew up within that consensus you mentioned—is the idea that the subject would no longer be the centre of philosophy, the relation between the subject and the object would no longer be the focus, and that in fact we ought to also speak about the relation between objects and objects. The claim is that the relation between the human subject and the objects of its apprehension is only one type of relation, and one that is nothing special. And to then build a metaphysics around this claim turns out to be a rather creative project because counterintuitive conclusions arise, such as the idea that, as you said, objects can never really know each other, or that there's no direct causality acting between objects. And you do a good job, I think, of laying out these intriguing, and certainly on the surface very compelling arguments that come out of OOP.

But I think of this also as a book about what it means to do philosophy; about how ideas gain momentum in the world; and about the fact that those two aren't necessarily the same thing. It seems to me that throughout the book you're trying to work out a puzzle that involves a delicate balance between the demands that doing philosophy places upon us, and the various demands that people make of philosophy, what we want to get out of philosophy—that seems to be the central struggle here, which is dramatized through the figure of OOP.

PW: The book starts off trying to articulate just what Harman's picture of the world is, the arguments for it. Then I dig a bit deeper into the conceptual underpinnings of those arguments. And then at the end, I try and answer the question: If it is as flawed as I think it is, why has OOP become so popular? And to answer that question it's important to start talking about how philosophy works historically and sociologically, and the ways in which people want to use it, and how Harman's work fits into that. And I think the two crucial aspects of this are, on the one hand, recognising that what fundamentally lies behind the popularity of Harman's work, I think, isn't any of the particular arguments he gives for his picture of the world, but the fact that it combines and makes seemingly consistent certain philosophical prejudices that

are already shared by a lot of people working within continental philosophy or downstream from it. One of them is the correlationist idea that we can't really know anything in and of itself, that we're always going to have to qualify our knowledge in terms of its relation to our particular social, textual, biological, etc. position. And the other, which Robin alluded, is that nevertheless, we are merely one thing in the world amongst others, that actually our picture of the world shouldn't place so much importance on ourselves as subjects, but should try to treat us as equal to everything else. What Harman tries to do is to bring these two independently but often coincidentally popular ideas and to synthesize them.

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Now, the other side of this is how this synthesis gets deployed, and how it is useful outside of philosophy. And here what's important is the way in which philosophies that articulate one or the other of these intuitions have been resources within other disciplines, be it literary theory, architecture, geography, or whatever, in order to provide a base vocabulary to talk about other things.

RM: As a critique, it's already caused a certain amount of controversy, and I think one of the questions that's asked, and it's quite a valid one, is: Isn't it okay for other disciplines to use philosophy in a way that they find useful? I think a lot of people may prima facie see your arguments as being a sort of disciplinary injunction. You're insisting that one can't simply pick up and ontology and use it; that we need an epistemology in order to have an ontology; that we need to go deeply into the question of *how* we know things in order to talk about *what there is* in the world. So you're being quite stringent in your definition of what philosophy is. Why do you place such importance on the question of the discipline of philosophy, on what you think philosophy demands of us, and why can't it simply be a matter of what we find useful?

PW: First of all, there's obviously a sense in which any of us can put forward some type of philosophical viewpoint, particularly when it comes to something that has applications outside of just philosophy. And when we put forward a viewpoint, we think that other people should think what we think. What I'm saying, yes, of course, is that I want you to in some sense abide by the constraints I'm placing on you. But I don't think that's a particularly authoritarian move. The question is to what extent I'm dragging you into my position as a philosopher. As someone who doesn't have philosophical training, who comes from a different background, and wants to use philosophy, to what extent am I trying to use that difference in position to say how people should deal with philosophy. Well, yes, I am trying to say that certain uses of philosophy are problematic. But again, I don't think there's anything authoritarian about that. I'm not trying to stop people doing whatever

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they want to do, but rather provide a certain kind of counsel. And the question is, what kind of counsel is there? And I talk about this at length in the book, but what's happening with Harman's work, but also with other work in philosophy that claims to provide a metaphysical account of the nature of reality that's supposedly useful to other disciplines, is that they're claiming to provide explanatory toolkits, ways of engaging with and explaining whatever phenomena you're concerned with in your area of work. And the claim I'd make is that these explanatory toolkits, these sets of explanatory concepts provided by metaphysics, are only worthwhile if they place constraints on you. It's the constraints they place on what you're able to do in your discipline that make them valuable. And if what a metaphysical perspective is giving you is just another way to talk about what you're already talking about—if it's not actually causing you to question or rearticulate things—then it's just cosmetic. The only value that can be had from any kind of metaphysical method is through its really changing our conception of what it means to explain things within various other disciplines. And I don't think that's what OOP does: it pretends to

give us explanatory power, but when you look at it, it's just cosmetic.

RM: So that gives us a thread that guides us through the polemical vector of the book, I guess. But it also engages in various lengthy and patient engagements with the history of the discipline and the contemporary state of philosophy. It seems ultimately that you try to orient OOP within that history, and perhaps to claim that it represents a singular betrayal of that history—which may strike us as somewhat cruel or unfair. Is there something very particularly problematic about OOP? And is it to strictly to do with its content, or is it to do with the contemporary scene and philosophy within it?

PW: I don't want to say that OOP is some kind of world historical event. I don't want to present it as some kind of necessary stage we had to pass through.

RM: It's more like an occasion for you to make a deeper foray into these questions?

PW: Absolutely. What I do think is that it typifies certain problems. I think in the history of philosophy there are great mistakes, there are mistakes that had to be made, I always use Hegel as an example: a philosophical giant, hugely interesting, I think he's completely wrong about many things, but it's a brilliant mistake, and learning what's wrong about it drives us forward philosophically. I don't think Harman's mistake is of the same kind. His mistakes, rather than being necessary steps on the road, rather exemplify certain problems that are rife in contemporary philosophy, problems which I think it's important that we address and deal with, for our current moment in philosophy. And in that sense, Graham Harman is just a very convenient illustration that brings things together.

RM: How much do those crucial problems have to do with the longstanding separation between so-called continental and analytic philosophy? I think most people coming to this book will come to it from the perspective of continental philosophy, and may be wary of the fact that you use a lot of analytic philosophy. But how does the work you're doing here relate to that divide, about which, I think, over the last decade, there is a growing consensus that it

simply doesn't stand, that it simply stops us from working? There's a real problem with this distinction, but somehow it's very difficult to overcome.

PW: I'm on record previously as refusing to identify myself either as a continental or as an analytic philosopher. I come from a continental philosophy background, but I read a lot of analytical philosophy, and basically I think when it comes to philosophy we should use whatever thinkers and tools are relevant to the problems at hand.

RM: Do you think the distinction even has any substance apart from its history?

PW: Well, it has historical and sociological import. For anybody who has some background in philosophy or is engaged with the philosophy community, you can't not recognise the split as corresponding to something sociologically. And in reading Graham Harman's work, you can't help but see it as being a certain *assertion* of a 'new wave' of continental philosophy against analytic philosophy. I mean, Harman's work is quite explicitly anti-analytic, when he talks about certain analytic figures this is clear.

RM: And is there a strategic advantage in positioning yourself against analytic philosophy? What benefits does that kind of negative relation bring, in terms of what you're then able to do as a self-defined continental philosopher?

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PW: It does give you a certain amount of social traction, because there is a certain kind of war mentality, or a bunker mentality, in continental philosophy: since they are in a genuinely more precarious institutional position, continental philosophers tend to feel put upon by analytic philosophy, challenged by it. And anything that taps into that kind of anxiety and angst by challenging analytic philosophy is obviously going to get some kind of traction. Many people have made careers out of attempting to bridge the divide, or from attacking the other side or in some way articulating the relation between the two. My approach to it in the book is perhaps less sexy really,

because I'm just quite happy to deal with the discipline of both traditions, to do the actual work of going through and seeing how the concepts work.

RM: That's one of the remarkable things in the book: the way you trace, I'm not sure I'd say parallel, but converging concerns in the two traditions and articulate them together. That's very rare to see, I think: you show how we can see these two apparently very different traditions as often looking for answers to the same fundamental problems. And yet this sociological fact has somehow turned them in very different directions and entailed a set of stylistic and thematic choices which then we have become unable to escape from.

PW: One of the things I was most proud of in writing the book, in particular the latter half of it, was also one of the things I was most worried about: taking this less sexy approach to the analytic/continental divide: not talking about it as a divide, but just talking about the philosophy, means that there's the possibility of alienating both sides. There's one chapter in the book in particular where on the one hand I talk about Heidegger and his relation to the history of metaphysics, which is notoriously difficult, and which many people on the analytic side will just think of as being nonsense; and then a few pages later I'm talking about the nature of quantifier theory and I have lots of logical symbols and variables and things, which people from a continental background might find quite alarming. So there's the danger of alienating both sides, but I genuinely believe that, actually, these two things aren't incompatible or even talking about completely separate things. There are genuine conceptual connections between the work that's been done in the two traditions, and the way in which that work has been built on subsequently.

RM: To your credit, you do a good job of explaining both sides. And I think one of the things people will recognise reading your work is that you believe that explanation is a virtue—which is not necessarily a slogan we always associate with continental philosophy! And perhaps that's one of its greatest failings in recent years.

But let's come back to the specifics: perhaps you could tell us briefly the story about how you became so tangled up in the question of OOP that you

ended up working on a book which you open by admitting that you've often been asked why you are still writing it.

PW: I think it was 2009 that I decided to write an article on Graham Harman's OOP because I'd stumbled into it a bit and I started actually reading it, and it seemed very problematic to me. The thing is, for a lot of people, Harman's work is the first exposure they've had to explicit metaphysics, to something that is avowedly metaphysics; because, particularly in the continental tradition, metaphysics has been a dirty word throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. And for someone who has more of a background in the history of metaphysics, a lot of the stuff that Harman talks about just seems overly simplistic or a little bit problematic on the face of it.

So I thought, right, I'll write a paper and I'll just lay out the basics of this. And I wrote an essay plan, and a year later I'd written the first half of the essay and it was 25,000 words! And it took another two years to write the other half, and it's now this big! So it turned into a book. And the question is, why bother, why not stop at any point. There are various answers that I give, but what genuinely happened—and a lot of people find this odd as an idea, but I'll defend that this is how it worked—is that what initially seemed a *little bit* problematic turned out to be *a lot more* problematic than I thought it was, and to be problematic in a much more complicated and intricate way than I'd expected. It's very easy—and I think it's the way most people go about things these days—when you run into something that you disagree with, but explaining and articulating that disagreement takes a hell of a lot more work than it took the person to even articulate the point you disagree with in the first place, it's very easy to just say, there's not enough time. The problem is that, given the increasing ubiquity of Harman's work and how much effort I could see it took to *really* understand what was wrong with it, I just thought it was necessary that someone do it.

And in the course of doing it, I did get a lot from it. Putting it in simple terms, working out why you think this *isn't* how you go about doing metaphysics is a really good way to work out how you think you *should* go about doing metaphysics. So one of the things you get out of the book is not just, what's

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wrong with this or that Harman book, but also a certain positive: if this isn't how things should be done, then how *should* we think about these things?

RM: That's true for the reader, I think, but it's also ultimately the question of what *you* got out of it. In the preface, where you're talking about this whole narrative, it reminded me of this thing Deleuze says about how all the questions that unfold into great philosophies are always like a sort of anguished cry! But what comes out clearly in the book is that there's this transmutation where the frustration and the apparently thankless hard work actually yields a great many insights in regard to the methodology of philosophy, how do we do philosophy. So while in a sense it reads like a cautionary tale, it's also interesting to see what comes out of it that's positive for you; I think it's probably right to say you're not the same philosopher you were when you began this process?

PW: Oh, it's forced me to be a lot more precise about a number of things. Many of the views I had before I wrote the book are still there, but precisely the lack of justification and explanation for those views that I attribute to Harman, was precisely what I had to develop myself in order to articulate what I think.

RM: I think one of the other virtues of it is the generosity that you had to show in order to do the job. And part of that comes with this your adoption of what Harman calls the 'hyperbolic reading'. Could you explain what that is and how you use it?

PW: Part of the reason I had to write the second half was that I'd promised that I was going to do this thing called a 'hyperbolic reading', which is one of Harman's own ideas. Harman has written several papers and books about other philosophers and he says the best way to disagree with a philosopher is to imagine that they've won all the arguments; imagine if, say, fifty years from now, everybody just basically

agrees that they're right, that they're the next big figure in philosophy, and there are only a few people disagreeing with them. And then what you're supposed to do is to ask what would be missing, in this world in which they've 'won'. What are the things that wouldn't be properly articulated, what are the questions that would remain unanswered. And I was drawn to this idea: if I was going to engage with Harman, then let's turn this hyperbolic reading on him. But in order to do that properly, you've got to be as charitable as possible. And this has been one of the controversies online: at least one person has accused me of not being charitable, because the hyperbolic reading of Harman that I give is really bleak. I think that a world a few years from now in which OOP has completely won would be dystopian, ideologically apocalyptic. But to get there I had to spend 300 pages or more showing as charitably as possible the nature of Harman's ideas and what's wrong with them and why they would lead to such a bleak situation.

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RM: So that dystopian scenario is the last part of the book—which gives the book a really interesting structure, because you begin by promising it, and then both you and the reader have to do some really detailed work to get to the end and reach the payoff: okay, having done this, now we're allowed to look at this hyperbolic reading and we've earned the right to evaluate OOP in that way.

PW: Part of the reason it's such a long book is that I wanted to write the hyperbolic reading. I wanted to say, genuinely, that I thought the world in which we had nothing but OOP would be dystopian, would be pretty horrible. But I don't think I'm entitled to make claims like that unless I've done this kind of work. And I think that's what maybe differentiates me from some other people—I don't like to make such bold claims unless I've done the due diligence.

RM: I'd like to talk about a couple of the insights that stood out for me. One of them is that you acknowledge early on in the book something which, I guess, is obvious from its length: you acknowledge that

you're not going to give any knock-down criticism of OOP. And that, although enumerating all the theses of OOP and picking through them very carefully may seem over the top, one of the reasons for that is that there is no one argument that will knock down the whole edifice.

You identify something quite interesting here in terms of argumentation, which is that ideas often prevail because there is more than one problem with them, and because those problems are intertwined in a complex way. So, because there is no one-time knock-down criticism, the work isn't done.

PW: It's something I imagine has been explored in rhetoric; it's a rhetorical problem that I've encountered before, I think in political debates as much as anything else. Often, it's much easier to refute a position if you've got just one thing that's really wrong with it, if there's just one particular central flaw. Because then you can condense down the information, you can make the point really rhetorically sharp. But if a position is wrong in a complicated way, if there are various different aspects to it and they're intertwined in such a way that, if you knock one down, three others kind of support what remains...then the amount of effort that has to be put into rejecting or refuting it is, well, it's messy, that's the thing—it's aesthetically not very palatable. And so people are not as likely to take it on.

RM: Another aspect of this is to do with writing: one of the structuring principles of the book is that you identify different modes of writing that go on in Harman's work: a type of historical narrative, a phenomenological analysis, and metaphysics itself. You spend a lot of time disentangling them and examining them from a methodological perspective, since they're used often in an overlapping way, within the same argument.

But right at the core of OOP you uncover some fundamental philosophical problems proper. Not the least of these problems seems to be that no one can explain what an object is, and how we might distinguish the concept of 'object' from any other concept. So could we try to weave our way through this question by examining the core OOP claims that everything's an object, that all objects withdraw, and that humans are only one object among many;

and understanding where this question of the object breaks down, even if, apparently, it continues to be a very compelling trope.

PW: The first thing to say is that it's not just Harman's work that's interested in this idea of thinking about all objects, or thinking about everything as an object. There's a bunch of different philosophers, in the book I've grouped them under the name of 'ontological liberalism', who are interested in trying to account for the reality or nature of everything that we can possibly think about. Harman's quite famous for introducing this idea using what he calls 'Latour litanies': in philosophy you've got to be able to account for tables, chairs, stock markets, numbers, tins of spam, Popeye, the bad feeling I get reading Graham Harman books...everything we can possibly talk about. But, as I explain, it turns out to be a lot harder to cash out the initial intuition that (a) you can do this and (b) it's informative in any useful way.

The reason is that essentially you end up having to give an account of what objects are as if this was a type of object, as if this was a *type* of thing. And any way in which you do this has a tendency to give you the resources to then think about things that don't fit under that type. So you can then think about, well, what about the things that *don't* or can't belong, that we can define as not belonging to that. And there are actually various logical paradoxes in the tradition that deal with this. But just to show how this goes a little bit awry in Harman's philosophy: the way in which he characterises all objects is in terms of what he calls the 'fourfold' structure. There's a distinction between objects and their qualities—so objects are unitary, qualities are many: there's the bottle and then there's the green of the bottle, the fact that it's covered in paper, or its particular shape. And there's also a distinction between the sensual and the real, the things that we have access to, and the things that we can never know. And this gives you a fourfold distinction between sensual objects and real objects, and sensual qualities and real qualities. And this is supposed to provide a structure of our encounter with everything in the world, from things we can directly experience to things like numbers, or fictional characters. And of objects' encounters with each other, because we're just one more object amongst others.

But the weird thing about the way this is articulated is that there's an ambivalence between two ways of understanding that difference between sensual objects and real objects. On the one hand, you could say that, when we're talking about this difference between sensual objects and real objects – the object as I encounter it and the object in itself – what we're doing is talking about two sides of the same object, we're talking about two aspects: so we're saying that every object we encounter has this fourfold structure; this is what's suggested by the title of one of his books, *The Quadruple Object*. But the other way of reading this is to say that what we have here are two distinct objects, the sensual object and the real object, that are somehow connected. In which case, every object is in one category or the other, and is split between its qualities and its unity.

What you realise when you dig deeper into Harman's philosophy is that this ambiguity is not resolved. In fact, the ambiguity between the idea of these being two aspects, with the fourfold giving us an account of every object, and the idea that in fact what we have is a world populated by two different kinds of objects, that ambiguity actually constitutes the sort of supposed novelty and interest of his characterisation of objects in general.

RM: And in trying to resolve this, you end up saying that one can't simply have a philosophy of objects without tackling some rather thorny questions of how we *know* objects and how we *talk about* objects, i.e. language, logic, and epistemology—there's no ontology without epistemology. And here of course you are breaking with what's popularly become known as Speculative Realism [SR], of which OOP is the 'leading brand'. SR, in its popular form, centres around the claim that we need to get away from twentieth-century philosophy's obsession with language and with questions of epistemology, of how we know, how we articulate knowledge and claims about the world. But ultimately you seem to suggest that what's vaunted in SR as being a leap forward or a leap out of this mess is actually a dangerous stumble backwards.

PW: Yes, I think so. I mean, if you wanted to oppose my view and Harman's, one way of putting it would be like this: earlier I said that there's a certain sense

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in which Harman's work is presented as a critique of correlationism, or what he calls the philosophy of access. But actually it's really a metaphysical recouping of it. It's taking all of those claims about our inability to access things in themselves that come from this obsession with the possibility of knowledge and the way that language works in relation to that, and making them into metaphysical claims. I'm almost the other way around. I think we can know things in themselves, because I think when we understand what it is to know, it turns out that the very idea of this kind of restriction of access doesn't make sense. But what that means, I think, is that metaphysics as the knowledge of what there is in itself, is made possible by epistemology, by this study of knowledge. We try to understand what knowledge is, and what we realise is that actually yes, we can know things in themselves, and on that basis we can begin to do metaphysics. It's almost topsy-turvy. I begin with epistemology and the philosophy of language, but use it to fight correlationism, rather than the other way around.

RM: One of the things that's been claimed for SR, particularly in its object-oriented variants, is that it's the first philosophical movement to emerge online. It's emerged within a new kind of community. Which I think we all find exciting and interesting. Apart from your philosophical critique, though, some of your most trenchant critiques of OOP relate to how it has developed as a social phenomenon, and developed almost into a kind of gang. I guess we can agree that we think that philosophy is a collective practice. We no longer have an idea of the philosopher as being an individual hermit. But practically speaking, how do you draw the dividing lines between philosophy as a social practice, and this situation in which I feel the worst aspects of human nature start to creep in, and it becomes more about protecting territory, dividing yourself off and fending off attack, than about examining and revising philosophical claims?

There's also the sheer weirdness of SR being featured in art magazines and being talked about everywhere: no one's really sure what it is, but everyone wants to belong to it.

PW: I suppose the first thing I've got to say is anything to do with this sociological aspect of the online history of SR. SR was a trend that emerged in about 2008 because of a conference, and OOP was supposed to be a species of SR. Really, SR was only ever a placeholder name for something where people thought there might be some commonality between four different thinkers, and that this might lead to some new kind of philosophical movement. And really, it hasn't. But OOP has remained as the most visible side of what was SR.

Now, as a part of that process of discovering that there was really no theoretical unity there was this interesting period of a few years where lots of people, myself included, talked around these philosophers and their ideas online. And I have to say that this was really formative for me. I still have my blog and I still have a couple of hundred thousand words sitting on it, which I can probably never publish now! But it was incredibly useful, and the kinds of conversations, the kinds of interesting philosophical interactions, the ideas that were developed there, were quite unique, different to anything going on in any institutional academic context. There was a real ambition and a real willingness to explore ideas.

The question is, why didn't SR lead to any kind of more interesting philosophical unity, and why did it fall apart, and why are we here now?

Now, the question is, why didn't that lead to any kind of more interesting philosophical unity, and why did it fall apart, and why are we here now? One reason is that with these four thinkers who were grouped under SR, there genuinely wasn't enough in common. In particular, the way I see it, and the way I describe it in the book, Harman is really the odd one out here. But the other thing was that a certain kind of bad social dynamics crept into what was originally a very interesting space of discourse. So what originally felt a lot more like the modern equivalent of the public correspondence of philosophers—if you've

ever studied anyone like Leibniz, almost all of his work is just letters sent back and forth—blogging felt like that, it felt like sending interesting thoughts and critiquing and responding in this free and open area, turned into something that became factionalised, and much more concerned with trends and fashion. And that coincided with SR itself becoming a fashion, becoming something that was talked about, particularly in the art world. In fact, if you look at the most recent copy of ArtReview magazine, you'll see that SR rates at #68 in the 'Power 100'—up 13 places since last year! And so the actual drive to turn this into a trend independently of any kind of actual unity of theoretical concerns is, in my view, what actually killed the theoretical discussions that I was interested in.

RM: As people will probably know, there's a post-script in *Object-Oriented Philosophy* by Ray Brassier where he conducts an 'autopsy' on SR's corpse. Let's not dwell on SR too much, though. I'd like to ask what are the major lessons to be drawn from the 'misadventure' of OOP. And then one other point, where I'll play devil's advocate: Some readers will be concerned—especially given the position you've already been painted into by the controversy about the book online—about your advocacy of explicitness and your call for a renewed commitment to philosophical argument and logic; some will see that as a rejection of anything apart from what tends to group together vaguely under the banner of oppressive, linear, rationalist, logic, mathematical, operational, and even colonial thinking. In other words: Are you a spoilsport? Or in other words again, and to put it more positively, can we draw the lessons of this misadventure while preserving the virtues of a kind of pluralistic, open, generous range of styles of philosophical argument and discourse—which, I think, is something that we all want.

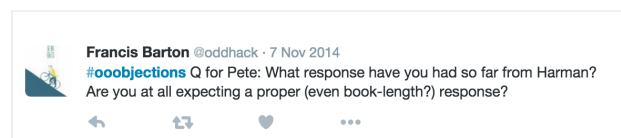
PW: I just think we should reject the idea that upholding the virtue of philosophical argument is somehow inherently anti-pluralistic. I see the opposite as being the case. That makes me sound a bit like Jürgen Habermas, which some people would take as an insult, but in this particular case, I think it's fine! What we want in all of our intellectual endeavours is *better disagreement*. It's not about getting rid of disagreement, it's about having *high quality* disagreement, disagreement that's as productive and interesting

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as possible. And when people arbitrarily claim that they can suspend certain principles of explanation or justification because these principles are somehow oppressing them...I just think that it's special pleading. If you want to say what the takeaway of the book is, this is what comes out of it: metaphysics has been deeply unpopular, at least in the continental tradition, for the latter half of the twentieth century. And in the analytic tradition, since the early half of the twentieth century. We're still only just finding our feet as a discipline. But in doing so, we're rediscovering a whole wealth of arguments and issues that have already been gone over. And it's important that when people are brought back into the fold of metaphysics and develop the kind of enthusiasm for metaphysics that Harman's work and SR has created, that that enthusiasm gets reined in a bit, and that people can explain to them that, you know, actually a lot of these issues *have* been thought about before, that there is a history of debate here, a history of arguments in these areas that are worth looking at; and that it's worth not trying to reinvent the wheel too much.

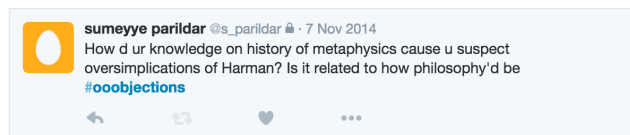
So that's what I try to do in the book, to reconnect people who have been convinced by Harman's work that metaphysics is a good thing that, yes, metaphysics still can be a good thing; it's just that this particular metaphysics isn't the greatest example of it.

RM: We have some questions from Twitter:



PW: The only word I've had of response is Harman's supposedly publishing a book, I think called *Skirmishes*—it's been pushed back a few times—where he intends to engage with critics, and he did say that he would engage with the paper that this book grew out of. I don't know whether he still

intends to do that. The few comments that have come from his direction about the existence of the book haven't been very positive so far. So, I honestly don't know what to expect. And, you know, no one is obliged to respond to anyone else's criticisms, though I'd certainly be interested to see him try.



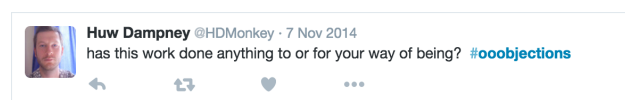
PW: To make this a bit more biographical, I didn't always think that metaphysics was a good thing, and I still have very particular views on metaphysics: what it is, why it's okay. At some point I subscribed to a certain kind of analytic anti-metaphysics, from Wittgenstein, and a certain continental one. And I was slowly weaned off that by engaging with the work of Gilles Deleuze, which presents an interesting metaphysics that draws on contemporary science, and shows that certain tools that science has developed for looking at the world force us to reevaluate our view of the world as a whole, not just piecemeal.

If you're not actually interested in addressing all of these quite substantive criticisms that have been made of metaphysics, there are going to be problems

What happened to me after being interested in this was that suddenly I realised that, if this stuff *can* be good, I needed to understand *why* can it be good. I needed to justify to my previous self, in light of all of my previous worries about the possibility and value of metaphysics, why this could be good, and that's what I spent my PhD doing. I came across Harman's work when I was still finishing my PhD, and what I discovered there was that, whereas I'd spent two or three years working on the question of what metaphysics is, what it could do, what the methodology should be for going about it, that Harman's work addressed none of these questions, it just went, right, I'm going to do metaphysics, and there was no methodology whatsoever, pretty much. And so that's the first warning sign: if someone says, right, we're just going to do metaphysics again. If you're not actually interested in addressing all of these

quite substantive criticisms that have been made of metaphysics—and, you know, people were worried about metaphysics for a reason, for a number of good reasons—if you're not willing to engage with those, there are going to be problems.

So that's the first point. And then digging deeper, looking at particular issues, what I discovered was—as I said, I'm interested in Deleuze's work. Harman dismisses Deleuze's work in a very simplistic way, in fact the most detailed point in his work at which he criticises Deleuze is during a fictional monologue in his half-philosophy-half-literature book *Circus Philosophicus*, and that should give you pause for thought. I discovered there was just a lot of flippancy with regard to the existing metaphysical debates I was familiar with.



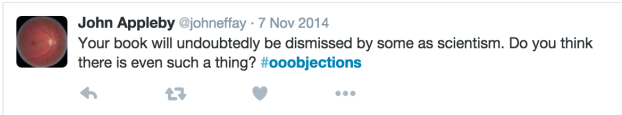
PW: Oh....

RM: Has it changed your life?

PW: I think it's definitely changed my life, whether it's for better or for worse is a more difficult question! As much as anything else, I don't think many people ever get the opportunity to really thoroughly disagree with something. I don't know if anyone else has ever had the desire to go oh, I just want to *really really* understand that person's ideas in depth so I can take them apart. I don't know if anyone else has that kind of perverse desire; but I certainly have had that desire, and it's nice to have at least once in my life fulfilled it—to be able to know that I actually can, if I want to, go through someone's entire work, and charitably and thoroughly critique it.

RM: Does it make a difference having done it publicly as well? Would you have been as satisfied if you'd done it in your bedroom and no one had known about it?

PW: No, I don't think so, and it's nice to have it in such a beautiful form...with ham sandwiches! Whether it does good things for my reputation is another matter. But I'm pleased to say that I feel like I've fulfilled a promise, to myself as much as to anyone else. So that's good.



PW: Okay, so, a bit of context: Harman is very fond of dismissing other philosophers, particularly Ray Brassier, who wrote the postscript to the book and is also associated with SR, as being engaged in 'scientism'. And scientism is basically just a pejorative term which means giving too much authority to science. It doesn't actually have any positive content other than saying, you're too beholden to science, you're licking the boots of physicists, or whatever. I think this book can't reasonably be accused of scientism, because I don't put forward any positive metaphysics in it. I do talk about science at various points, and I do suggest that the way in which Harman's philosophy forces us to think about science is incredibly problematic—but I think I justify those claims fairly well. I suppose what I should say to this is really: if it's scientism, then fine. I think I give science its due, I don't think I give it too much or too little. Harman disagrees. But then, his view is that science doesn't know anything about the world. I mean, this is one of the things that's most bizarre about Harman's work: he claims to liberate reality in itself for us, but his picture of how that works basically ends up saying that science is not literally true. That our best science can never be literally true. *Metaphysics* can be literally true, what he's saying can be literally true. But at best, science can be kind of figurative. And I think that's dangerous nonsense.

RM: A comment from Terence Blake: 'Pluralism means more and better argument, not less. But is it always the same type of language and argument that's needed?'

PW: It's not always the same type of language and argument that's needed, but it always has to be argument. There's going to be disagreement over what argument is, but I would just remind people that, although there can be different kinds of argument, they all belong to the same genus, and you can say stuff is and isn't argument.

RM: Another question from Twitter: 'Is there an aesthetics that fuels your philosophical enterprise, as baleful as the SR art world seems in light of your book?'

You do say some really harsh things about the adoption of SR and OOP, not even so much into art practice as into a discourse that surrounds contemporary art. But is there an aesthetics to your own work? You've already said that it's messy! And you can't help that because of what you're trying to do.

PW: I think I make a lot of aesthetic judgments. When you present any ideas, I think you're confronted with a set of questions and there are definitely aesthetic choices that have shaped the way in which I've gone about presenting my ideas both critically and positively. But I do also have certain views about the nature of art, and what's problematic about the relationship between philosophy and art. And I think—and I say this in the book—I think that OOP exemplifies some of the worst aspects of the way in which philosophy and art can relate to one another. To put this in a different way, in which I've often described it to other people, when OOP or OOO became popular, people began asking questions like: What would an object-oriented ethics look like, what would an object-oriented politics look like, what would an object-oriented geography look like? You'll even find conferences on object-oriented ethics. And my general answer to this is: nothing. For the most part, there's just nothing it can give any of those specific disciplines. There's nothing specific can come out of it. But the one exception is art: there can be OOO art—but it's just awful art! It's not just even that OOO gives a bad account of art, but that it encourages terrible art because it encourages this idea of the mystique of everyday things—it encourages people to engage in the Duchampian gesture of placing objects within the gallery context and calling it art, independently of anything that originally made that gesture interesting. And what we're left with is that it provides a thin justification for what I consider to be lazy and uninteresting art. So in that sense I have a definite aesthetic preference for art that isn't that!

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You confirm that you believe that Meillassoux is a metaphysician of sorts, and that correlationism is still a problematic issue in his work, and in metaphysics going forward. How do you still claim to know something, as you say, claim to metaphysically know something, without still being wary of our drive to correlate? In Spinoza's ethics he talks about taking the attributes of the world as necessary,

never contingent. So, how do we get out of that drive to correlate, and from anthropocentrism...?

PW: I don't think that we break out of the correlation in the way Meillassoux suggests. Meillassoux's way of posing the problem of correlation is that of our being trapped inside a circle that we've got to find our way out of—we have to find something that's absolute, that's not relative to our own subject position. And his argument is that it's contingency itself that is this absolute. But although I think, as opposed to naïve realisms, that it's necessary to say something about how we can know things, understand things in themselves, I don't think this takes the form of a breaking out. Actually, Gabriel Catren puts this in the best way: the way in which we represent the world always involves conditions, to do with the structure of our language, our biology, or whatever, and that these things can potentially distort the way in which we represent the world. The way Catren describes it, however, is that since we can actually represent these conditions, we can actually understand the conditions of representation, and we can find the ways in which they distort it. We can discover, to give some classical examples, that bourgeoisie ideology, or patriarchy, colours our way of seeing certain social relations, we can see how these things distort them, and in doing so, can repair those distortions. Now, that isn't a once and for all thing—it's not like, finally we've got correct representation, finally we've gotten outside of correlation; no, it's just that we can always perpetually engage in that process of refining and improving.

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We're never confronted with some sort of limit to our ability to know things that is intrinsic, that we can't ever get out of. But neither do we have to think of it as some sort of absolute getting outside of that limit. Understanding the structure of that process through which we revise our representations—that, for me, is the epistemological side of articulating the possibility of metaphysics.

RM: A question from Twitter that is related: 'Harman argues that epistemists want to preserve knowledge as a special kind of relation to the world, quite different from the relations that raindrops and lizards have to the world. For them raindrops know nothing, and lizards know very little, and some humans are more knowledgeable than others. Is this a fair characterization of your position? Do you think that some humans know more than raindrops and lizards? And if so, aren't you committed to preserving a special kind of relationship to the world?'

PW: Errrrmm, yes. Yes, I'm an 'epistemicist', I think is the term Harman uses. And it's a really weird term, because it's like its one of those terms that basically means 'everybody but me', but attempts to dress itself up as something more substantive. Basically what it means is, people who think it's possible to know things. Which is most people, actually. And there's epistemicists don't have much in common other than the fact that they're opposed to radical sceptics. So yeah, I'm an epistemicist. But the crucial thing is that it all comes down to what people mean by this term 'special relation'. Why you think that because humans can know things and raindrops can't, that somehow humans are special? Well, there are many differences between humans and raindrops. Which differences are the ones that make the human special and which are the ones that don't? I certainly think that, in the history of philosophy, there *are* people who've made humans metaphysically special. If you talk about humans as having an immortal soul that has a certain metaphysical position in the cosmos in terms of its relation to a creator, that's an obvious case where you've given humans some kind of metaphysical special status. Saying that I know there's a lot of my family in the audience, but the table doesn't...I don't think that makes me particularly special! That's just the way it is.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You talked about other disciplines such as art or geography, and how they might take up OOP. But as a philosopher, do you think you can speak for other disciplines and whether or not they can make use of OOP or any other philosophy?

PW: I can't speak *for* those other disciplines, but I can speak *to* them. And when it comes to the ways in which they deploy philosophical concepts I think I can speak with some authority in so far as that's

my training, just as they can speak on behalf of their particular area. When it comes to the opinion about art and bad art, I'll admit that that's my aesthetic opinion. I think I can give reasons for it. I think most people can give reasons for their aesthetic opinion. But I don't take myself to be particularly authoritative there, I will simply own up to thinking that much of what goes under the guise of OOO art simply isn't very good.

So I don't think any authority is absolute here, it's just that you might want to listen to someone who has training in that area; and I want to listen to geographers and artists, people in other areas, about their own stuff.



pw: Okay, this is something I've been thinking about a lot and I can't say I have a definitive answer. But I think it's important to understand that artists, and a lot of art in the sense of high art, which makes its way into galleries etc., these artists do engage with concepts. Philosophers also engage with concepts. And in that overlapping sphere of engagement there's a lot of possibility to tread on each others toes and get confused about what each other is doing. I think that it's important to get clear about the difference between the way in which philosophers engage with concepts and the way in which artists engage with concepts, in order that you can have a productive discussion. Because on the one side you can end up with artists trying to do philosophy through art, which I think is generally just going to fail.

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RM: Isn't there a certain amount of continental philosophy that's trying to do the inverse, as well?

pw: Yeah, you can also get the opposite, you can get philosophers trying to do art through doing

philosophy, and that can be as bad if not worse—trying to draw on a certain aesthetic affect or authority. And another thing is, it's not just philosophy and art—you also have the intermediary of philosophy of art, philosophy that tries to engage with and describe what art is, on the other hand you have art criticism, which is something that very much emerges out of art and is related to art as its own internal discourse. And these things have to be kept separate too, I think philosophers should be able to and can talk about what art is without therefore necessarily having anything remotely like good taste! And vice versa, I think you can have fantastic art criticism where art critics don't necessarily have any worked out or well thought through opinion on what art is as an essence, or whatever. This isn't to say you can't have productive conversations: I think philosophers of art should talk to art critics, and art critics should talk to philosophers—I think everyone should talk to each other! But we have to be aware of the methodological interfaces between those discourses, where, when we step into one conversation, what's being talked about and what's being done is slightly different from a different conversation.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Your appeal to methodology seems to be designed to rescue us by bringing us back into a more stringent philosophical practice. But aren't you're harking back to an ideal of philosophy that cannot be recovered, in a world where there are multiple discourses and everyone's interdisciplinary?

pw: Firstly, I think that's possibly a little sociologically inaccurate, at least if you look at academia, where—and in fact this is something that frustrates me—philosophy is increasingly specialised. It's increasingly specialised into things like philosophy of art, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, etc., particular areas where people are quite heavily concerned with the methodological interfaces between the discipline they're talking about and the philosophy of that discipline. I don't think they're always very good at it, e.g., that's something that philosophy of mind is often quite bad at with regard to empirical psychology. But some of what I think of as the best philosophy done in the contemporary world, say in the philosophy of science, is precisely methodologically clarifying the questions that concern scientists are dealing with—actually trying to

preserve a certain methodological self-consciousness that enhances scientific method. The best example is quantum theory: there's so much crap that people say about the implications of quantum physics, but there is wonderful work done in the philosophy of science, people paring this down, saying, you shouldn't think this has incredible implications for how we think about consciousness or reality or whatever...no, it turns out that the implications of that research, they're still interesting, but here is how you should think about them. So I actually think that increasing methodological self-consciousness is something that philosophy has become increasingly concerned with.

Paradoxically, the specialisation that philosophy has engaged in has nevertheless made philosophy less self-conscious with regard to its own methodology!

Paradoxically, the specialisation that philosophy has engaged in has nevertheless made philosophy less self-conscious with regard to its own methodology! The idea of systematic philosophy, in which you could do all of these different things, and link them together, has become a lot harder to sell. So that's one sense in which methodological self-consciousness has declined. But I don't think it's to do with the relation between philosophy and other disciplines; it's very much more about philosophy's own role. So I think that philosophy specialises in that kind of methodological self-consciousness, but we just need to be methodologically self-conscious *about* methodological self-consciousness.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You said that you used to think that metaphysics was over. Why do you now think that metaphysics is worthwhile?

PW: I was at one point really heavily influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, specifically his later work, where he's concerned with describing the language games we're engaged in, describing our use of language. And he basically thought that metaphysics was bumping our heads up against the limits of language, it was coming across problems that were just built into the way we talk about things, rather than things themselves. And there are certain problems

for which this actually looks quite right—I think that Wittgenstein was right in that there are certain things that people thought were traditionally metaphysical problems that turn out to be just issues to do with how we talk about things.

I think what philosophical metaphysicians bring to the table is a clarification of the questions that are at stake

To give an example, personal identity, one of the classical metaphysical problems: What makes a person identical over a period of time so that, say, if someone loses their memory, are they the same person before and afterwards, things like this. There are lots of metaphysical debates about this, and solutions ranging from positing an immortal soul to talking about continuity of memory. I think this isn't a metaphysical problem, I think it's just a matter of how we talk about things. But I don't think all metaphysical problems are like that. Among the problems that have been handed down throughout the metaphysical tradition you can demarcate them into the real problems and the false problems. So a good problem would be, say: What is time? I can tell you that's a good problem, because it's a problem that really vexes physicists. I'm not saying that physicists need philosophers to answer it. I think that physicists who are engaged in that stuff are just *doing* metaphysics. Metaphysics is the kind of discourse where we're engaged in interpreting the most abstract concepts that structure our worldview. And I think doing that involves talking to scientists, generally. But what philosophical metaphysicians bring to that conversation is methodological self-consciousness. So I can't give you a great answer to the question What is time? But I can give you some good ideas about what it would be to provide a good answer to the question. I think what philosophical metaphysicians bring to the table is a clarification of the questions that are at stake—which is just to say, they demarcate the good problems from the bad ones.

So, just to give one more example, because I think it's a good example that's not from physics: we do talk about essence, we do talk about what things are, it's a kind of category that we apply to the world and that's incredibly useful and important in the way

we engage with things. Our understanding of essence was fundamentally changed by the Darwinian revolution in biology. Talking about what a lion is, or what a human being is, that whole thinking of essence had to change quite radically. So any new metaphysics thinking about the nature of essence has to take those kinds of things on board.

Metaphysics is complicated, it's not something that gets finished, I don't think. It's just that it is a kind of discourse, an enquiry we engage in. We can't help it.
