

HEIDEGGER'S SPECTRAL ABYSS:
GROUNDING THE (STRANGE) RETURN OF THE
SUBJECT AND OBJECT IN THE ŽIŽEK & HARMAN
DUEL/DUET

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ABSTRACT: The split between the subject and object is the epistemological inheritance of modernity's enchantment with substance, notably shown by the subjectivism in the Cartesian 'cogito' and Kantian 'transcendental I'. In this paper, I will attempt to argue that despite Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics that eclipsed Descartes' dualism and Kant's transcendentalism, there is still a possibility of the return of both Subject and Object – exemplified even on ontological grounds in Žižek's Subject-Oriented Ontology and Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology. Conveniently, I will situate the two ontologies, dubbed respectively as SOO and OOO, in the recent Žižek & Harman *Duel/Duet* (2017). Further, I will rework the uses of two important notions found only in this debate– *unhintergebar* (the 'unsurpassable') and *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) – to explicate the transport from Heidegger's metaphysical abyss to spectral abyss. Arguing from Heidegger's ground (*grund*) and/or abyss (*abgrund*) that grounds possibilities of being, I will call this new ground for strange possibilities as *spectral abyss* (*gespenstisch abgrund*). To achieve this, I will do two things. First, I will briefly rehearse the epistemological split and Heidegger's ontological turn. And second, I will resituate the debate by showing how Žižek and Harman's ontologies can emerge from Heidegger's spectral abyss. My ultimate goal is then to explicate not the return but the ground that makes it possible for a strange return.

KEYWORDS: Subject; Object; Substance; Ontology; Abyss; Spectrality

“‘Being’ – we have no other notion of it than as ‘living.’ –For how can something dead ‘be?’”
Friedrich Nietzsche, *der Wille zur Macht*, 582

BY WAY OF RE-QUESTIONING: RE-INTRODUCING THE ŽIŽEK AND HARMAN DUEL/DUET

It seems that Heidegger’s turn to the question of being aligns with Nietzsche’s notes in *The Will to Power* §582 that affirms the familiar notion of ‘living.’ Though not exactly talking about life-philosophy, Heidegger’s recovery of such primordial question opens up what was taken for granted and thus provides the *ground for possibilities* even before the manifold ramifications of the mind to posit categories of being (recall dualism and transcendental idealism). Otherwise than being is death, which Heidegger says is the *end of all possibilities*: ‘this end ... limits and determines in every case whatever totality is possible for Dasein [Being-in-the-world].’¹ My primary aim in this paper is to salvage and rework Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics as a ground that opens not familiar but *strange* possibilities. This is upon attempting to argue that despite the ontological turn that eclipsed the epistemic split of the subject and object, as will be explicated in Descartes’ cogito and Kant’s transcendental ‘I’ later, what remains is not a dead-end but a strange re-turn. There is a sense in which the modern fascination with substance is a disposition for philosophers to think about *stuff* as early as antiquity. Substance, in this case, means the abstract core or essence that remains unchanged in contrast to accidental properties. Thinking about this, however, fundamentally enabled the split of a perceiving, signifying substance, namely, the *subject*, and the perceived, signified substance, namely, the *object*. The subject-object relation is an epistemic case that follows from the split of concern in being. As such, the ontological nature of Heidegger’s turn has to be re-questioned. Incidentally, two contemporary living philosophers take their ontological concerns from this split and it is in their debate² that I conveniently situate the introduction.

In “Graham Harman + Slavoj Žižek: Duel + Duet,” Harman and Žižek engaged in a conversation at W.M. Keck Lecture Hall in the Southern California

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie & Robinson (Blackwell, 1962), 277.

² This debate, among other encounters between the two, is important because of the two terms employed that is important for the reframing of their ideas, especially from a Heideggerian jumping board.

Institute of Architecture (SciArc) last 2017 to indirectly take our predicament at hand. Anna Niemark moderated the event, which primarily aimed to tackle criticism of Harman's philosophical position, namely, Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). Harman designates Žižek's position along with Alain Badiou as Subject-Oriented Ontology (herein I symmetrically call SOO). Both Harman and Žižek, in this sense, represent two opposing redefinitions of the subject and object; hence, on the one hand, the 'duel' aspect of the debate. A *prima facie* look at the event's overview already demarcates Harman's position of the subject as 'a talented and sometimes dignified object, but an object nonetheless' – thereby to be treated with all other objects equally in 'a flat ontology.' Žižek emphasizes this dignity as a crucial contradistinction to run against treating the subject simply as an object the same as the rest. On the other hand, the 'duet' aspect can be well clarified in Žižek's attempt at a conversation that differs from previous philosophical dialogues whose 'biggest problem', he says, is to determine who is correct.³ Says Žižek, 'I have no illusions that we will arrive at [similarities], it would be a great success if we just somehow clarify where the difference really is because ... It's not who is right but *in what* does the difference reside in the first place.'

Following from this conversational 'duet-ing' point, the practical application of my re-questioning is, like Francesca Ferrando's way of 'revealing narrative', to employ specific questions *in italics* as 'navigational tools ... implemented throughout the text, to assist the readers.'⁴ This would also take the paper on a path that brings to the fore Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics of dialogue that banks on the 'horizon of the question': 'we go back *behind* what is said, then

³ Continues Žižek: "here I'm pretty much a pessimist. I think the entire history of philosophy is a history of one guy allegedly superseding the other but really misreading him. For example, as an old Plato admirer, I claim it's clear how Aristotle misread Plato, or to go later it's clear that Kant misread Leibniz and the previous philosophers. Fichte and Schelling misread Kant. Hegel misread all of them. My favorite example: if any guy didn't understand Hegel it was Marx and so on. So let's just be modest. And I will just try to mark some differences."

⁴ Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 2.

we inevitably ask questions *beyond*.⁵ The logic of question and answer is re-applied in this sense only that the questions are not *behind* but *in front*, to take a more direct point. For instance: *why is this debate important for re-questioning Heidegger and his ontological hermeneutics?* Heidegger was not the topic of the debate but his idea resonates with the main topic of the subject-object relations. Harman and Žižek are admittedly Heideggerian, albeit the latter quips that he only ‘used to be so’ as part of his formative years.⁶ Although Gadamer continued Heidegger’s hermeneutics through a philosophical one, Gadamer as we have seen will simply provide the initial template of conversation, a provision that follows from the debate.⁷

My further task is to revise the uses of two important notions in the debate – *unhintergebar* (the ‘unsurpassable’) and *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) – to explicate the transport from Heidegger’s metaphysical abyss through ground (*grund*) and/or abyss (*abgrund*) to what I will call spectral abyss, which will characterize the return as a ‘strange’ one. To do this, I will divide the paper into two sections. First, I will rehearse the subject and object relation through Descartes’s dualism and Kant’s transcendental idealism, and Heidegger’s ontological turn as a brief detour. And second, as the meat of the paper, I will resituate Heidegger’s *metaphysical abyss* to the *spectral abyss* that will make it possible for Žižek and Harman’s ontologies to emerge. It is here that the two important terms will be re-introduced. My ultimate aim is that by introducing the spectral abyss which Heidegger did not clearly say and by re-navigating into the debate, one can explicitly speak for a common ground that envisages possible strange returns.

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd Edition (Continuum, 2004), 363.

⁶ Žižek remarks at The 2019 Holberg Debate, interviewed by Tyler Cowen: “You know that I began as a Heideggerian. My first book was on Heidegger and language in Slovenia. Today, I would settle accounts with that book in Nazi style – burn it... You know what was my formative experience? I remember when I was a young student, the big conflict in Slovenia was between Marxist Frankfurt School and Heideggerians. Heideggerians are more dissidents; Frankfurt School, official Marxist. Then the big French wave exploded, so-called Structuralism, Post-Structuralism. And both sides, dissidents and the party officials, use the same language attacking. That made my identity.”

⁷ In such template, Gadamerian elements are applied, e.g. the ontological valence of the picture, which herein refers to the use of metaphors. I should say that while the metaphor of the specter is not new, its usage has been limited to text-based criticism for example in literature or in epistemological sense to convey meaning in different fields (e.g. geography, literature, and gender studies), but not the primary question of ontology *per se*. For literature, see for example Maria Blanco and Esther Peeren (eds.), *The spectralities reader: Ghosts and haunting in contemporary cultural theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

DETOUR: A BRIEF (APPLEY) SKETCH OF THE MODERN
EPISTEMOLOGICAL SPLIT AND HEIDEGGER'S ONTOLOGICAL
HERMENEUTICS

There is a longer route to suppose the dualistic nature of epistemology, which is allegedly Cartesian as we came to know in a 'modern' historical sense. But there are also non-Cartesian substance dualisms that can already be seen in Plato, Malebranche, Leibniz, and Aquinas,⁸ which would all be important to discuss but unfortunately are outside the scope of the paper. I will thus take the shorter analytic route through apples⁹ and sketch therein Descartes and Kant's roles in the modern split of the subject and object. Later in the section, I will introduce Heidegger's ontological turn that sought to eclipse this relation.

How does Descartes' dualism explain the modern epistemic split using apples? Let's take a box of apples. After a bite, I notice that my apple has worms in it. After thinking of disposing of my apple, what would be the proper way of dealing with the other apples in the box? In a Cartesian fashion, I would, after certain meditations, altogether throw away all the remaining apples in the trash can. Dualism herein is not described as the apparent differentiation of me and the rotten apple, but the way in which by knowing that I am tricked once by my sense, I cast into doubt all the senses wholesale. The only way for me to be certain that I will no longer bite a rotten apple is to not rely anymore on any. That is to say, *cogito* (I think) is the name we call for the separate existing (*sum*: I am) 'thinking thing' – this mental substance – that becomes allergic to, no longer dependent on, physical and material substances. Says Descartes, "I thereby concluded that I was a *substance* whose whole *essence* or nature resides only in thinking, and which, in order to exist, has no need of place and is not dependent on any material thing" – "entirely distinct from the body."¹⁰ The split begins to basically make sense in this scheme

⁸ Cf. Rebekah Rice, *Death and Persistence* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 4.

⁹ I borrow this apple metaphor from the lecture notes of our Special Questions in Contemporary Philosophy Class on Heidegger and Nietzsche with Fr. Luis David, SJ at the University of Santo Tomas Ecclesiastical Faculties. David only used this to explain Descartes' doubting the senses. I will continue using its case in Kant and Heidegger henceforth.

¹⁰ René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford University Press, 2006), 29.

which recognizes the *subject* – the “subject of thought and experience.”¹¹ The subject and object relation plays out in the “debates about human becoming in a Cartesian Theatre committed to a division between subjects (minds, animate and sentient) and objects (inanimate and non-sentient).”¹² Cartesianism is, then, “the view most associated with the radical division of mind and body and mind and world into separate ontological domains that can be investigated without essential reference to each other.”¹³

*How does Kant’s transcendental idealism play its part in assuming the split?*¹⁴ Although Kant tried to reconcile the rationalist and empiricist arguments in modernity, according to which innate ideas or experience precede the other, respectively, his transcendental idealism that relies on the transcendental ‘I’ or ego nonetheless solidified the split. While rationalism qua Descartes’ skeptical idealism was not sure of the existence of apples and empiricism qua Berkeley’s dogmatic idealism cannot claim the apple’s existence without first perceiving it, Kant thinks of this setup as the “scandal of philosophy,” according to which philosophers before him were unable “to prove beyond doubt the existence of the external world” and proposes his transcendental idealism, his philosophical legacy dubbed as another ‘Copernican revolution’ in the history of ideas, as “the only refuge” against the challenges of doubting whether apples really exist.¹⁵ Kant need not invoke a God, the transcendent, as Descartes and the scholastics did, to arm his analytic insight on the reality of an apple. Instead, he uses the term ‘transcendental.’ With Kant’s transcendental analytic, the apple exists in such a way that it is a substance, a matter movable in space and time. Substance here is, as a formal criterion, “that which can exist (or be thought) (only) as subject, never as (mere) predicate (or determination) of something else (or other things).”¹⁶ The other name for Kant’s *transcendental* idealism, to make a clearer distinction from Descartes and Berkeley’s idealisms, is ‘*formal*’ or ‘*critical*’ idealism, herein concerned with “the *form* but not

¹¹ Rice, *Death*, 5.

¹² Philip Tonner, *Dwelling. Heidegger, Archaeology, Mortality* (Routledge, 2018), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ For purposes of brevity, I harmlessly will not discuss the notions of change, variation, or causality here.

¹⁵ Cf. Luigi Caranti, *Kant and the Scandal of Philosophy. The Kantian Critique of Cartesian Scepticism* (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 3-4.

¹⁶ Peter Frederick Strawson, *Entity and Identity and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 268-269. This is the formal or logical criterion of substance.

the existence of external objects” *per se*.¹⁷ In the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, he says, “The word transcendental, however, ... never signifies a relation of our cognition to things, but only to the *faculty of cognition*.”¹⁸ This means that space and time are neither objective, real (in experience) nor a substance, accident, or relation but are “subjective and ideal” or *a priori* intuitions, meaning to say, known prior to experience¹⁹ It would seem that in an empirical real sense (in experience), in order to know that the apple exists, I need to know that it is outside of me at a given point in time. However, for Kant, this is only possible if I understand what *outside of me* and *point in time* means in the first place. As he says, “You must therefore give your object *a priori* in intuition, and ground your synthetic proposition on this.”²⁰ In a transcendental approach, space and time are conditions for the possibility of experience. Claims Kant: “It is therefore indubitably certain and not merely possible or even probable that space and time, as the necessary conditions of all (outer and inner) experience, are merely subjective conditions of all our intuition.”²¹ What makes these conditions subjective and unified in possibility is the Transcendental ego or “I” through the transcendental apperception: “Consciousness of itself (apperception) is the simple representation of the I.”²² By ‘unified’, transcendental apperception synthesizes

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Paul Guyer, ed. Allen Wood (Cambridge University Press), 67.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* trans. & ed. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge University Press), 45.

¹⁹ In Kant’s philosophical project, two distinctions are important for the reader. First is the analytic/synthetic distinction, which is “what *makes* a judgment true or false”. A judgment is analytic if the predicate is contained in the subject (herein placed in the sentence and not subjectivity) e.g. “moon is a satellite of a planet”; otherwise it is a synthetic judgment if the predicate adds something new. Second is the *a priori/a posteriori* distinction, which is “the way we know” whether a judgment is true. Accordingly, *a priori* statements can be known *prior* to experience and *a posteriori* statements can be known *through* experience. In this case, there are three possible combinatory judgments only because “there are no analytic *a posteriori* judgments.” For Kant, synthetic *a priori* judgements can be supposed when pure reason “tells us something new about its subject, and yet which is known independently of experience.” Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* ed. Mary Gregor & Jens Timmermann, revised (Cambridge University Press), viii-ix.

²⁰ Kant, *Critique*, 188.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 189.

the manifold characteristics of an object: before the 'I' conceives of the apple as the apple, it notices different sensations and features like the apple's redness, some rashes, etc, as well as the apple's position and the time of day it is sensed. The remaining concern thus far is how to account for knowing the apple *per se* since Kant says that "all objects are mere appearances and not things given for themselves in this way; about these appearances, further, much may be said *a priori* that concerns their form but nothing whatsoever about the things in themselves that may ground them."²³ What differentiates Kant's epistemological split from Descartes further is not of the mind and the body, but appearance and reality: "both mind and body are different appearances of some single though *unknown* kind of substance."²⁴ For Kant, while it is now possible to ascertain that the apple exists through the conditions of experience, we still cannot *know* the apple-in-itself, solidifying the epistemological split of the subjective intuitions of the transcendental ego and the object of experience.

*How did Heidegger's ontological turn in hermeneutics eclipse this split?*²⁵ Descartes' legacy subsumes within it the traditional modern epistemology of the subject's relation to the object, the split being that "there are two kinds of subject-object relationships: Firstly, the subject knows the object. Secondly, the object is out there as the reality of the external world, and the subject tries to know what it is which is out there."²⁶ The 'I', or Cartesian terms, the 'I think' *cogito*, this 'thinking thing' *res cogitans*, is simply the subject. This "I" has in its very kernel the subject or the substance that becomes subject in the epistemic ground of modernity. And Kant "tries to establish the phenomenal content of the "I" as *res cogitans*."²⁷ Kant did two important things according to Heidegger. First, he finds it impossible to reduce the 'I' into substance ontically, and can only do it, again in a transcendental or formal idealism, through its form. And second, he clings to this notion of 'I' as 'I think': "I think' means 'I bind together'. All binding together is an 'I bind together'." As Heidegger says, "the 'I' seems to 'hold together' the totality of the structural whole. In the 'ontology' of this entity, the 'I' and the 'Self'

²³ Ibid., 188.

²⁴ Ibid., 16. Italics mine.

²⁵ Çüçen, Kadir, "Heidegger's Reading of Descartes' Dualism: The Relation of Subject and Object," in *Paideia*, <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Cont/ContCuce.htm> (Accessed March 3, 2022).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 367.

have been conceived from the earliest times as the supporting ground (as substance or subject).”²⁸ The ‘I’ binds together the conditions under which the possibility of an apple existing shape its substantial content. In the ‘I’, especially when it ‘binds together’, there always lies the *υποκειμενον*, *hypokeimenon*, the Greek term that is translated in Latin as *subjectum*. As such, through this ‘I’, Kant is still living the ghost of Descartes’ *cogito* but does so more strictly, making sure that the show of the Cartesian Theatre must go on. Kant, says Heidegger, “makes a more rigorous attempt than his predecessors to keep hold of the phenomenal content of saying ‘I.’”²⁹ Therein lies the problem or the slight frustration of Heidegger, because Kant was not ready to abandon the whole subject-object schema and proceed to an ontological expression of the world. That is to say, Kant keeps on falling back to the ‘I’ that Heidegger describes as “an *isolated* subject.”³⁰ And because “Kant did not see the phenomenon of the world”, he sees Being as the empirical through the splitting *a priori* conditions of intuiting time and space in a *res cogitans*, thereby understanding it as “the constant Being-present-at-hand of the ‘I’ along with its representations.”³¹

In contrast to the isolated subject (and consequently, isolated object) of the Cartesian Theatre, in the “Heideggerian Theatre”, “an agent’s conscious attention only comes into play when otherwise smooth actions don’t go to plan and the agent has to investigate alternative actions: this point echoes Heidegger’s account of the transition from the sphere of ready-to-hand to the present-at-hand.”³² Using the apple case, I know that the apple is not me – and I notice it – the moment when something goes awry, when I see the worm that is not supposed to be there, and so disturbs the engagement that I have with it. When this happens, the apple assumes an ontic equipmental status as ‘present-at-hand’ (*vorhanden*) and my noticing it brings vividly in mind (*gegenwärtigen*) the split that

²⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 365.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 366.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 368.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

³² Tonner, *Dwelling*, 33.

happens. The lesser I stare at, say, a clean apple outside of me and the more I start eating it, involving myself it, working my way to it, Heidegger says, “the more primordial does” my “relationship to it become” and he calls this ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*). Both present-at-hand and ready-to-hand are “kinds of Being which belong to entities within-the-world, and does so concernfully and with familiarity.”³³ But ready-to-hand has the character of *closeness*,³⁴ which has the potential of eclipsing the epistemic split between me and the apple in my hand. When one eclipses the subject and the object in ready-to-hand as a being in the world, one takes note of the *de-severance* (bringing close) and its *directionality* of closure “determinative of spatiality.”³⁵ Here, spatiality is not in the mind but constitutes the being of the world. The subject is then not split from the object but both belong to the world. The conscious belonging-to (*zugehörigkeit*) of the subject within the world – that is, *in* and *with* the world (*inwelt und mitwelt*) is what Heidegger of course calls *Dasein*, the being that takes issue with Being-in-the-world.³⁶ Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics here makes known that the “definite characteristic of *Dasein*’s Being” is “understanding of being itself.”³⁷ In effect, “in saying ‘I’, *Dasein* expresses itself as Being-in-the-world.”³⁸ And because “*Dasein*’s spatiality is not to be defined by citing the position at which some corporeal Thing is present-at-hand”, meaning that the subject in space within a particular place, “Being-already-in-a-world, however, as Being-alongside-the-ready-to-hand-within-the-world, means equiprimordially that one is ahead of oneself.”³⁹

The more direct approach to the eclipsing of the split of subject and object, however, is not through space, which is only *one* among others that constitutes the world. *Dasein*’s spatiality merely brings close the familiar, and the use of ‘eclipse’ here might be at best, a mere possibility of closeness but without fully closing the

³³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 138.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32. *Dasein* is “an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of *Dasein*’s Being, and this implies that *Dasein*, in its Being, has a relationship towards that Being—a relationship which itself is one of Being.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*,

³⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 368.

³⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 142; 369.

gap at which the subject and object lies since such only lasts temporarily. Instead, for Heidegger, the ontological ground is established precisely in time: “the existential-ontological constitution of Dasein's totality is grounded in temporality.”⁴⁰ In Heidegger, we see that *Dasein* is not a subject; it is not a consciousness that perceives time or perceives itself in time.⁴¹ It “cannot be conceived either as substance or as subject but is grounded in existence.”⁴² The ontological turn in Heidegger’s hermeneutics rests in the character of *facticity* (*factizität*). Facticity implies that “an entity 'within-the-world' has Being-in-the-world in such a way that it can *understand* itself as bound up in its 'destiny' with the Being of those entities which it encounters within its own world.”⁴³ Here, Dasein *stricto sensu* departs from the Nietzschean translation of being as *life* above in the introduction because Heidegger’s being is more concerned with the *facticity of life*. As such, “Factual Dasein takes time into its reckoning” and that because what we see in Dasein’s being “at bottom” is “temporality”,⁴⁴ time is not only constitutive for Dasein’s Being like space, but “Dasein is temporality”⁴⁵ itself – or in Heidegger’s hermeneutics: “Dasein as temporality.”⁴⁶ Gadamer expounds on this by saying that Heidegger did more than define subjectivity within the structure of temporality. For Gadamer, the eclipse fully attained its closure when Heidegger “burst asunder the whole subjectivity of modern philosophy—and in fact, the whole horizon of questions asked by metaphysics, which tended to define being as what is present”, that is, when the hermeneutics of facticity claimed that “being itself is time.”⁴⁷ In this eclipsing through facticity in the question of being’s

⁴⁰ Ibid., 488.

⁴¹ Ibid., 456. “How and why Dasein comes to develop the ordinary conception of time, must be clarified in terms of its state-of-Being as concerning itself with time.”

⁴² Ibid., 381. See discussion of Dasein and Self.

⁴³ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 456.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 381.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 457.

⁴⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 248.

revival, the challenge is to overcome “the spectre of Descartes”⁴⁸ – indeed “its climax in the Cartesianism of modern science and transcendental philosophy” makes Heidegger’s understanding an ontological turn. The question is whether this eclipsing did its job completely.

FROM METAPHYSICAL ABYSS TO SPECTRAL ABYSS: ŽIŽEK AND HARMAN’S HEIDEGGERIANISMS

How does Being ‘ground’? What is noticeable in the appley detour we just crossed is that it is really a targeted move against the subjectivism of modern philosophy, which may be said to be the culprit of the split. In a way, what that trend does is provide an anti-realist position, according to which there is no autonomy of the object – and we have never even consulted the object. As can be seen decades later, phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism “are perfect exemplars of the anti-realist trend in continental philosophy.”⁴⁹ Even Heidegger falls into this trap when we think of ontological hermeneutics as a kind of philosophical anthropology. No matter how the analytic of Dasein resists the focus on the subject, in moments where Dasein gets too in touch with itself as temporality, that is, in moments of death, the subjectivity of Dasein emerges more conspicuously: “the possibility of death is something that is my own, and at any time before the power of today, I can reveal that the possibility of “I” is of death, particularly “I”.”⁵⁰ And Gadamer observes this in Heidegger too when he says that “it still remains true that all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding.”⁵¹ But suppose this is not fair. Suppose the belonging-to temporality and “I” in Dasein is just a matter of mineness – “Dasein has *in each case mineness (Jemeinigkeit)*” – and that what Heidegger speaks of really is a gesture of comportment to its possibilities, since “Dasein *is its possibility.*”⁵² Then what we have is to deal with as Heidegger’s core

⁴⁸ Tonner, *Dwelling*, 44.

⁴⁹ Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Australia: Re.Press, 2011), 3.

⁵⁰ Zohreh Shariatina, ‘Heideggers’ ideas about death,’ in *Pacific Science Review B: Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2016), 97.

⁵¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 251.

⁵² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68.

thesis is the ontological hermeneutics that focuses on the *ground of possibilities*. For Heidegger, “*understanding is the existential Being of Dasein's own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself what its Being is capable of.*”⁵³ That is to say, understanding projects the disclosure of being’s possibility. And this is possible because Being is “the 'ground' which gives entities support; for a 'ground' becomes accessible only as meaning, even if it is itself the *abyss* of meaninglessness.”⁵⁴ Herein lies the very kernel of ontological possibilities: the etymological kinship between *Grund* ('ground') and *Abgrund* ('abyss') connotes the earlier Nietzschean difference between life and its hollow opposite, death. Both are possibilities of understanding being. And yet what if, in thinking of possibilities, this kinship is not a matter of conjunction but a strong disjunction as well. This means that ground *and* abyss both open up different possibilities: hence ground *or* abyss. We thus get a differing slash – ground *and/or* abyss – which does not limit the possibilities of being merely within life and death but even beyond it. This ontological slash differentiates itself from the ontological hyphen or dash that Heidegger uses. This slash represents a crack in the ontological hermeneutics that brings to the fore some Kantian relapses. The problem with Heidegger therein is not that its Dasein is some sort of philosophical anthropology but that the very ground of understanding is riddled with transcendental re-turns. And Gadamer is well aware of this: “we too are beginning with the *transcendental* significance of Heidegger's problematic. The problem of hermeneutics becomes universal in scope, even attaining a new dimension, through his transcendental interpretation of understanding.”⁵⁵ In a way, from the transcendental analytic or epistemological hermeneutics of Kant, Heidegger gives the transcendental ground an ontological scope. How do we approach this transcendental ground? In Nietzsche’s terms: “God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.”⁵⁶ In the Nietzschean Theatre, Kant

⁵³ Ibid., 184.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 194. Italics mine.

⁵⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 254.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §108.

abolished the transcendent by introducing the transcendental, but, like Descartes' insisting specter, the ghost of the transcendental remains, and we have to exorcise this ghost too! This life and death hollowness, the very nihilism that hovers over the death of God is, I claim, what Nietzsche incidentally also calls abyss.⁵⁷ In properly addressing this "new dimension" of Heidegger's transcendental ground, I will opt for the term *abyss*. To further distinguish it from Nietzsche's use of the term and Heidegger's other use of abyss (with ground), and properly address the ghostly possibilities that can exist in the ground of being, I will designate Heidegger's ground as *spectral abyss*. Here, I argue that this *spectral abyss* is radically capable of strangely opening up two different ontologies: the very scheme of the epistemic split between subject and object has once again been possible through an ontological slash, the emergence of what is now called Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) by Graham Harman and what can be called Subject-Oriented Ontology (SOO)⁵⁸ by Slavoj Žižek. The strangeness of grounding the return is not that what we get is the same subject and object but a weird reworking of the notions of subject and object. Let us now conveniently go over their engagement.

How do we understand this spectral abyss and how does it ground SOO and OOO? In the course of the debate, Harman asks Žižek what he gets from Heidegger that he does not get from Hegel. This is under the assumption that many Hegelians, and Žižek calls himself one and prefers Hegel's philosophy,⁵⁹ think that Heidegger 'is just a neo-Kantian relapse into transcendental philosophy.'⁶⁰ Žižek replies that Heidegger is for him the 'ultimate transcendental philosopher' but not like Kant:

...you know what interests me so much in Heidegger and you should be interested in it. The proof that he is the ultimate, for me, transcendental philosopher [is] not

⁵⁷ See Jan Gresil Kahambing, "The abyss, or the insufficiency of ethical nihilism for Nietzsche's *Übermensch*," in *Ethics & Bioethics in Central Europe*, vol. 10, nos. 3-4, 155-172.

⁵⁸ Levi R. Bryant, an ally of Graham Harman, suspects that the use of "*subject-oriented ontology*" might imply a fundamental distinction between, again, the subject and the object – between mind and "scientific" natural objects. See his blog on "Object-Oriented Ontology and Scientific Realism" in Larval Subjects (August 26, 2009), <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2009/08/26/object-oriented-ontology-and-scientific-naturalism/>. Graham Harman's *Guerilla Metaphysics* distinguishes OOO from scientific naturalism's lack of metaphysical content. See his *Guerilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Illinois: Open Court, 2005), 1. More on this later.

⁵⁹ Jan Gresil Kahambing, "Žižek's Nietzsche and the Insufficiency of Trauma for a Posthuman *Übermensch*," in *The International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2.

⁶⁰ For purposes of quoting, single quotes are taken from the debate while double quotes are text-based. I've written a full digital transcript of the debate but its pagination is not fixed due to references and notes.

in the Kantian sense, but in the sense that we are condemned, constrained, to a certain historical horizon/meaning of Being ... And then he asks this naïve question, so how do objects exist outside the horizon of being which is our way to apprehend them? And he admits it's a totally open question, he doesn't have anything to say about it. (debate transcript)

Žižek thus delineates Heidegger's transcendentalism from Kant's, but a transcendentalism nonetheless, in which the schema is transferred to being as a whole – to the whole ontological world of meaning, openly including the material objects that exist within it. That is to say, Heidegger entertains the existence of objects in an ontic mode of being but does not see a way out of dealing with them in a proper transcendental fashion. One cannot simply go out of this circle, which has now acquired a new ontological status apart from the epistemic hermeneutical circle of subject and object. This is why as Ricoeur emphasizes,⁶¹ Heidegger does not really want to get out of the circle but only to go into it *in the right way*,⁶² within the ground of being that avoids fancies by anticipating things themselves, away from the Kantian conditions of possibility. If, then, for Kant, the transcendental concerns the *a priori* conditions of possibility, Heidegger according to Žižek merely lays this circle, herein now same as the ground of being, as open as possible. This transcendental ground of possibility is what he calls *unhintergebar*:

If there ever was a thinker, I claim, who is radically historicist and transcendental, it's Heidegger. ... his point is, of course, not in the usual Kantian sense but in the more radical sense, transcendental. What do I mean by transcendental? It's simply the idea that because of our finitude, we never speak from a void. We are always thrown into [a] certain pre-understanding of the world, which is "always-already" here. You cannot, never, encounter as you know very well, simply things the way they are. You always approach them from a certain historically specific horizon. And for Heidegger, this is – Germans have this beautiful term – *unhintergebar*, what

⁶¹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy. Critical Essays* ed. Michael Murray (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), 156: "Here, therefore is posed in principle the distinction between anticipation to the things themselves and an anticipation which only comes from fancies (*Einfälle*) and popular conceptions (*Volksbegriffe*)."

⁶² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 195.

you cannot step behind. (debate transcript)

In Žižek's texts, he explains *unhintergebar* as the "unsurpassable embeddedness in our life-world."⁶³ And is Jürgen Habermas the philosopher of lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) not the perfect example of this 'ultimate transcendentalism'? 'When we have the threat that biogenetics will objectivize us, he pulls a simple transcendental trick. His reasoning is: but even if I objectify you as a neuronal mechanism, in doing this, I already presupposed certain rational argumentation, which is *a priori*' says Žižek. A transcendental horizon already thus pervades the logic of the lifeworld that for Habermas' hermeneutics presupposes consensual modes of rational communication (which of course does not mean there is no room for antagonism).⁶⁴ Žižek's point, however, is not to remain on this *ground*. This radical surpassing of *unhintergebar* risks opening up dangerous possibilities since to do this, "one has to cut off this embeddedness and accept the *radical abyss* of one's existence."⁶⁵ Remaining in this *ground* reduces us to "symbolic-plants," unable to surpass our symbolic universe, so that the only way to "repeat the passage from plants to animals also at the symbolic level" is by "cutting our symbolic roots and accepting the abyss of freedom" – which is a dangerous move obviously since "cutting its roots is death."⁶⁶ In other words, when this happens, one almost instantaneously removes the ontological slash and goes further deeper into the abyss. What does this radical abyss mean? Or first, *what does abyss mean for Heidegger?* Heidegger's abyss *simpliciter* is the relegation of being's essence to meaning and meaninglessness, between those that can acknowledge 'worldhood' and those that have its 'poverty'. The familiar interpretation is that plants and animals are not Dasein because of their tie or rooting to meaninglessness: they do not, unlike man, realize their environment *as* environment (the 'as' structure being a crucial feature of Heidegger's non-presuppositionless ontological hermeneutics). Cykowski's *Heidegger's Metaphysical Abyss: Between the Human and the Animal* recently expounds this very well albeit concluding that we can only

⁶³ Slavoj Žižek, "Nature and its Discontents," in *SubStance*, vol. 37, no. 3, (2008), 63. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (Bloomsbury, 2019), 153.

⁶⁴ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. The Critique of Functionalist Reason* vol. 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

⁶⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Sex*, 153-154. Italics mine.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

scarcely conceive the animal-human relation so that it is crucial to reexamine this again.⁶⁷ Sloterdijk opines that this expresses man's "shattered animality" because he "is the product of a super-birth that created from a nursling a worldling."⁶⁸ Cykowski argues that there is still the hierarchy of man and animal through their relationship to the environment (*umwelt*) but it is man that has to look into the abyss since the human, like a 'metaphysical ape', does not have full certainty about his world or the environment *as* environment. In the ground or abyss of existence, this can be taken that the "abyss of essence"⁶⁹ that Heidegger speaks of between the man and animal also applies to man's self-reflexive negativity both in the sense that the human "*metaphysical being* ... has to 'deal with' the abyss" and man's spectral relationship to being as *grund* of possibilities. Says Cykowski:

The *abyss* that Heidegger refers to is both part of Dasein, the being that incorporates an 'absence' in its 'essence', and one that we are drawn into when we attempt to work through the very question that his lecture course poses concerning the human being's uncannily complex relation to life.⁷⁰

Here, there is an uncanny relation of man to the world that opens up the radical possibility of the abyss. The radical abyss that Žižek talks about is the idea that because the ghost of Descartes and Kant abounds again in this ontological ground, what we get is "ultimately *cogito* itself, the abyss of self-relating negativity that forms the core of transcendental subjectivity" – which Žižek names the "in-human subject."⁷¹ While this might work with the logic of Nietzsche's overcoming and *Übermensch* – "man is a rope, fastened between animal and Overman – a rope

⁶⁷ Beth Cykowski, *Heidegger's Metaphysical Abyss: Between the Human and the Animal* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁶⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, "Rules of the Human Zoo: A Response to the *Letter on Humanism*," in *Environment and Planning*, vol. 27 (2009), 20.

⁶⁹ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* Trans. J. Glen Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 16.

⁷⁰ Cykowski, *Abyss*, 186.

⁷¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Sex*, 154.

over an abyss”⁷² – towards the post-human,⁷³ Žižek’s ontology is no longer confined only to the abyss of the subject able to roam with the abyss of freedom. Instead, through a radical dealing with the void of the subject, he is now working on an ontology that looks at reality and objects through cracks and incompleteness. Hence, Heidegger’s ground and/or abyss constitutes a *metaphysical abyss*, a transcendental existence where possibilities are confined to the abyss of essences, whereas to radicalize this means to move towards what I call a *spectral abyss*. It is in this sense that I rework the notion of *unhintergebar* in a sense of this radical cutting off, this transport from *grund* and *abgrund* to *gespenstisch abgrund*.⁷⁴ The idea of man’s uncanny relation to the world is one that is riddled with spectrality, so that the *radical abyss* from Žižek might be called the unsurpassable *spectral abyss*, which to say that the passage is not from human to overhuman but from human to non-human. The specific non-human here is anything that does not reduce itself from the actual and possible relations of ground. Inhuman or non-human refers to anything that is part of a *strange* reality,

⁷² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for everyone and no one* trans. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), Prologue 4.

⁷³ Jan Gresil Kahambing, “Without Sex: An Appraisal of Žižek’s Posthumanism,” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2018), 8.

⁷⁴ I have to clarify that the spectral abyss (*gespenstisch abgrund*) as a spectral ontological ground that I am introducing differs, although it draws from, Hegel’s *geist* and Derrida’s *hauntology*. I take Hegel’s ontological move that possibility and contingency are more important than actuality and I agree with Derrida that time is out of joint and that the metaphor of the ghost can be used to describe a different ontology. But I am neither claiming that this abyss is the same as introducing an absolute subject nor that I am reducing the ground as simply occurring in a state of *metaxy* or in-between, which also has a Platonic tone into it. This ‘in-between’ has been interpreted of course by Gadamer in a kind of conservative hermeneutics through the fusion of horizons [see *Truth and Method: “the true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between”*, 295] or by Derrida’s radical hermeneutics of *différance* (“we must let ourselves refer to an order that resists the opposition” see “Différance” in *Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass (Great Britain: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982, 5). There is more to this but can be better reworked as a different paper. Here, it is supposed to sufficiently say that the very character of the spectral abyss is primordially to open up an ontology of strange possibilities, including *geist* and *hauntology*. For Žižek, Derrida’s *hauntology* still operates like an irreducible “hydra” where if we cut one head another one pops out. See Jan Gresil Kahambing, “Derrida and/to Žižek on the Spectral Victim of Human Rights in Anil’s Ghost,” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 13 no. 3, 2019, 10. Derrida’s *hauntology* might operate on the *différance* that is “not only irreducible to any ontological reappropriation but as the very opening of a space in which ... philosophy produces its system and its history” which includes ontotheology and “exceeding it *without return*” (*Différance*, 6, Italics mine). The crucial difference is that for me, *it is still possible to return* albeit strangely. Finally, the preferential use of *gespenstisch* is closer to the ghostly since *spektral* has connotations with prisms, hence to spectroscopy.

undefinable, or to use Latour's term, the 'unthinkable'⁷⁵ – beyond the intuitions of time and space. My use of 'spectrality', therefore, points to the possibilities of the uncanny, of the strange, and the spectral abyss is the very ontological ground for strange or uncanny possibilities to happen.

What is Žižek's SOO and how does it inform us of the spectral abyss? In going into his ontology, one can well note that Žižek delves into the insight of the subject from the object's standpoint. But there is a caveat and it might be long-winded to trace this view, which will hurl us back to Schelling, Hegel, and Lacan – Žižek's "foremost exemplars" – but it is sufficient to state here, though the traces will be employed whenever necessary, that Žižek's (*Parallax*) view is against the naïve realism where, in assuming the object's position, one can understand reality and one's subjectivity.⁷⁶ On the contrary, Žižek argues: "materialism means that the reality I see is never 'whole'—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it."⁷⁷ This is Žižek's Heideggerianism, a background that still informs a *transcendental significance* albeit in an uncanny correlation to material reality. While the obvious name of this spectral ground for Johnston is the namesake of his book *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*,⁷⁸ Harman's rebranding of it is more direct and I symmetrically use SOO. SOO, in my view, is not to bring back the obfuscation that his ontology is rooted *stricto sensu* in the modern subject, but that in knowing Žižek's ontology, one can already presuppose that his notion of a voided abysmal subject is symptomatic of an incomplete reality. As Žižek explained in the debate: 'it's not only either [1] in subjectivism we constitute reality, or [2] reality is out there unknowable or [3] reality is out there [and] we can know it. My position would have been the fourth one, maybe more subtle.'

⁷⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37.

⁷⁶ Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, "Towards a Speculative Philosophy", 5.

⁷⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2006), 17.

⁷⁸ Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

For Žižek, the way to understand reality is through a *reality with a + 'plus'*, through an excess, which, borrowing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, he calls *object a*. Object a is a remainder (from a loss) but a necessary remainder, the stain that makes reality function: paradoxically, it is the object that “keeps the gap of desire open.”⁷⁹ It is not therefore that by imploring the *cogito* and transcendental ego, or the modern subject, there is already a certainty beyond reasonable doubt that both *cogito* and transcendental ego exists. On the contrary, there is, paradoxically, a self-reflexive void and excess in the *cogito* and transcendental ego.⁸⁰ And the abyss of this subject reflects the abyss of reality and vice-versa: “Reality, he [Žižek] repeatedly states, is non-All; there is a gap, a stain, an irresolvable hole within reality itself.”⁸¹ He explains this perfectly in the debate through its connection to the fundamental quantum physics of Bohr, rather than Heisenberg, and computer games. If we play a video game, some parts of it, say the houses or trees in the remote background, are inaccessible since the game is not programmed for us to go that way. At the level of quantum physics, what we get at the bottom are atoms, so what we get when we peak further is indeterminacy, which is more consistent not at a Heisenbergian epistemic level but the Bohrian ontological level. Says Žižek, ‘I don’t think there is a reality-in-itself which is just impenetrable to us. What if this impenetrability is a feature of reality itself? Reality is not just out there [and] we cannot get at it. Reality is itself flawed, imperfect, antagonistic. It’s incomplete in itself.’ This is how SOO emerges from the *spectral abyss* in Žižek: the idea that in the subject’s relation to the world there are gaps, radical cuts, and within those gaps, the subject emerges. Hence, the “irrepresentable X’ that founds the spectral nature of reality”⁸² resides as the void of the subject’s ontology. Or in Žižek’s words in ‘Beyond the Transcendental’: “there is no subject which is the agent of the process and suffers a loss, for the subject is the outcome of a loss.”⁸³

⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso, 2001), 151.

⁸⁰ Žižek here makes use of the noir film *Blade Runner* to illustrate this point. See his *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Duke University Press, 1993).

⁸¹ Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy”, 5.

⁸² Jan Gresil Kahambing, “Derrida and/to Žižek”, 14; Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Mapping the Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1994), 21.

⁸³ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2014), 150.

What then about Harman's Heidegger and how is OOO an emergence of this spectral abyss? Before we go into his take on the debate and understand his position, one can already draw some of the vital remarks he gave in his book on Heidegger. In *Heidegger Explained*, Harman is already aware of this *abgrund* stemming from the *unhintergebar* of Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics though without naming it. Says Harman: "Heidegger was the champion of a 'hermeneutic' approach in which things are interpreted as they emerge from a shadowy backstage," which is to say that "all perceptions and statements emerge from some sort of dark background, whatever this might be."⁸⁴ This 'shadowy backstage' or 'dark background' is, of course, the *spectral abyss*, and Harman draws inspiration from Heidegger on this account that objects "withdraw" from their presence and thus cannot give full contact. This withdrawal is, for me, a spectral mechanism since the ghostly (*gespenstisch*) only lies in between presence and absence. That this withdrawal constitutes an ontology is characteristic of the spectral abyss' *unhintergebar*, which Qinjie Wang insightfully translates as 'darkness.'⁸⁵ Harman is

⁸⁴ Graham Harman, *Heidegger Explained. From Phenomenon to Thing* (Open Court, 2007), 160-161. Italics mine.

⁸⁵ I take this idea of abyss as 深渊 (Shēnyuān) – commonly translated as depth or deepness – from Qinjie 'James' Wang who, in our seminar on Hermeneutics and Temporality at the University of Macau, translates it as 'darkness', which opens up and provides a strange clearing (*lichtung*) such as Heidegger's link to mysticism. He says for example of the abyss or *abgrund* as a 'ground without a ground' or to use Harman's term, 'invisible depth' (*Heidegger*, 2). Wang says that this is a locus for the *human being* to show itself. Harman also pointed out that for Heidegger, "A stone has no world. Plants and animals also have no world, but are only bound to their surroundings" (*Heidegger*, 111). But later, Qinjie Wang claims, Heidegger changed his perspective from this to connote even angels and also some animals albeit Heidegger was not clear about this (In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger did say something about the plants and animals belonging to "the hidden throng of an environment": in *Of the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 23). Cykowski acknowledges this ambiguity while still stressing the anthropocentrism, saying that "the ontological and ontical gifts that Heidegger is willing to bestow on the animal remain ambiguous, they are granted in some places and taken away in others, but it is clear that the concept of the singularity of the human is always preserved", 9-10. What all of this means is that the abyss is a fertile ground (and is still a ground) for possibilities and projections of beings. By introducing the spectral abyss, I make this ground more explicitly spectral when it grounds *strange possibilities*. The potent question here is: are we going back to pre-Heideggerian philosophy with this darkness? The late Michael Inwood who died in my year of writing described one role of *grund* (ground), *abgrund* (abyss), *ungrund* (groundless ground), and *urgrund* (primal ground) as a pre-Heideggerian account that accommodates "speculations of such mystics as Eckart and Böhme about the nature of God and the soul" (*A Heidegger*

cognizant of the transcendental leanings of Heidegger who “remains loyal to this Kantian tradition in philosophy”⁸⁶ so that his main objection is that Heidegger does put premium and privilege for Dasein in it. While Heidegger’s legacy or single great thought is that “*being is not presence*,”⁸⁷ Dasein’s presence seems to be felt differently than with other beings. That “there is world only when Dasein is present,”⁸⁸ ontologically speaking, is Heidegger’s conception of *grund* and/or *abgrund*. Or that only in Dasein there is meaning and meaninglessness. Whereas outside the human Dasein there is unmeaning (*unsinniges*): the apple, which as an object does not have a meaning of its own, only has meaning for Dasein.⁸⁹ This means that “*only Dasein can be meaningful [sinnvoll]*” and Heidegger adds that “*only that which is unmeaning can be absurd [widersinnig]*.”⁹⁰ However, again, this ‘absurd’ is precisely where the spectrality abounds and the *spectral abyss* must not be relegated to an ontological ground of unmeaning but must welcome strange albeit absurd possibilities, even outside the central pedestal of Dasein. The irony that Tonner also observes is that “Heidegger objected to the anthropocentric dimension of Western thought. Despite this, Heidegger’s own work did not fully transcend this anthropocentrism. In *Being and Time* Heidegger placed Dasein at the centre of the ontological universe.”⁹¹ Frede then calls Heidegger’s ontology of ground and abyss in Dasein’s perspective as “transcendental anthropocentrism.”⁹² On the contrary, for Harman, “although human Dasein’s involvement with things brings them into an ambiguous interplay of presence and absence, the same is true of the things with respect to each other” where “objects withdraw from one another *even in the absence of all Dasein*.”⁹³ Harman’s “unusual” corollary objection to

Dictionary, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999, 83). My potent answer is that it is possible to return but the general direction is not a total or full return because the main function of the spectral abyss is to lay the possible foundation of strange things to emerge, even to the return of mystical speculations.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁸⁹ I thank my colleague Wang Fen for extending the interpretation of *unmeaning* to earthquakes and tsunamis.

⁹⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 193.

⁹¹ Tonner, *Dwelling*, 90

⁹² Dorothea Frede, “The question of being: Heidegger’s project,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* ed. by C.B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65.

⁹³ Harman, *Heidegger*, 162. Italics mine.

Dasein's privilege is about the consequence of reducing objects to their relations to other objects, even to Dasein. Accordingly, an object is nothing outside the abyss or the invisible relations it has with the environment. To define all objects, however, based on their relations is difficult because it cannot explain change: if the apple is nothing but a set of relations with other objects, then why account for change? There needs to be an autonomy of objects that grants a tension to the way in which objects are perceived: the apple perceived by me, but also by the worm inside it, by another person who doesn't like apples as my metaphor, and so on. In other words, while there might be a privileging of readiness-to-hand (*zuhandenheit*) in the object before perceiving it as an object in presence-at-hand (*vorhandenheit*), Harman thinks that what Heidegger missed is a kind of causation that emerges from this tension, an inanimate one – even from an apple with another apple. Here, we get Harman's Heideggerianism, which focuses on the strange autonomy of inanimate causation from the debate.

I admit that he [Heidegger] is a transcendental philosopher in terms of his self-conception. I think he sees himself that way especially in *Sein und Zeit*, but what I think happens is something in the tool analysis that he doesn't quite realize he takes us in another place. Get the tool analysis, everything is working flawlessly and then something breaks and so you notice for the first time that the floor that I was relying on has collapsed... Now, the usual reading of this is that praxis comes before theory. First, when we're using it practically and therefore it's connected to these other things and now it's theoretical because it broke. The problem is that theory and praxis aren't different enough as I see it. Both theory and praxis are translating the object into their own terms. One is conscious. One is not conscious. But it doesn't really make a big difference I don't think. And too many Heidegger scholars have read that as being the key difference: praxis comes before theory. What's going on there is that there's something deeper than theory and praxis. And I think Heidegger could have been talked into that. What he probably wouldn't have agreed with of course is the idea that I have that there's something deeper even in inanimate causation because he had no way to think about that at all: two things smashing into each other where Dasein was not there at all. Heidegger has nothing to tell us about that. (debate transcript)

Harman argues in *Tool-Being* that the true split is not, as in Kant, between

humans and the world but *objects and relations*.⁹⁴ Harman thinks that it is not the priority of praxis [*zuhanden*] or theory [*vorhanden*] that must be at work but on the tensions, “something deeper than theory and praxis” in “inanimate causation,” so that “if we read Heidegger’s tool-analysis in the right way, the lingering priority of Dasein in his philosophy is vaporized, and we encounter a *strange new world* filled with *shocking possibilities* ... [and] what emerges in its place is a *ghostly cosmos* [that unleashes] ... the enfolded forces trapped in the things themselves.”⁹⁵ This ‘strange new world’, the ‘ghostly cosmos’ is the *spectral abyss* of Object-Oriented *Ontology*.⁹⁶ This spectral abyss might be the same as what Harman calls *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, since for him, while Heidegger and later on Derrida and Wittgenstein pummeled the old metaphysics of presence, “by the same stroke, he [Heidegger] unknowingly suggests a possible campaign of *guerilla metaphysics*”: “Tool-beings turn out to be a *strange* variant of traditional *substances*.”⁹⁷ In OOO, Harman says especially in *The Quadruple Object*, an allusion to Heidegger’s *Das Geviert*, that “objects must finally prevail” and that objects are “as strange as ghosts in a Japanese temple, or signals flashing inscrutably from the moon.”⁹⁸

In the debate, Anna Neimark emphasized Victor Shklovsky’s term *ostranenie* (or defamiliarization). Žižek suggests it be translated ‘extraniation’ – the ‘reason to avoid alienation’ or ‘rendering strange’ – but Harman aptly calls it *estrangement*. Says Žižek, with *ostranenie*: ‘you get a certain inhuman view of the situation and that fascinates me absolutely, so it’s more complex.’ I claim that *ostranenie* is the primary feature of the *spectral abyss*. In OOO, there is a need to defamiliarize the notion of object and our access to it: OOO “is not a form of materialism” and “has no interest whatsoever in the concept of ‘matter’ [since] “*objects withhold themselves not just from human access, but from each other as well.*”⁹⁹ This “*withdrawal or withholding* of things from direct access is the central principle of OOO.”¹⁰⁰ The tensions of objects and their relations are only through *vicarious* causation, since a

⁹⁴ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being. Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Illinois: Open Court, 2002), 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid.,

⁹⁶ Levi Bryant called it Ontology from Harman’s use of Philosophy.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (UK: Zero Books, 2011), 11.

⁹⁹ Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2017), 258.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 7.

vicar is needed for the indirect interaction of the objects.¹⁰¹ Against the axioms of new materialism such as the priority of contingency, “things are generated in our ‘practices’ and therefore lack any prior essence”, Harman vouches for *immaterialism* in OOO, according to which not everything is contingent and “everything has an autonomous essence, however transient it may be, and our practices grasp it no better than our theories do.”¹⁰² It is a problem therefore if we focus too much on relations, correlations, actions, and communication – everything flows and is contingent – because there are also tensions, non-actions, and non-communications that explain “collapse” or what Harman calls ‘proximate failure’. For Harman, “*an object is better known by its proximate failures than by its successes.*”¹⁰³ In ‘Return to (Strange) Objects’, Ruy stresses that too much emphasis on how the building flows with the environment loses its autonomy.¹⁰⁴ As Harman explains concerning proximate failure: ‘if something succeeds too easily it’s probably just the environment, it probably is just fitting in. But if something fails you know it’s a bit out of sync with the environment.’ While in Heidegger this can mean that, as Palmer explicates, “THE TERM “WORLD” in Heidegger does not mean our environment, objectively considered [*Vorhandenheit*]”¹⁰⁵ because of the abyss of essence and the poverty of world in animals and plants, for the spectral abyss, there are so many things that are going on in objects. The peculiar character of OOO’s spectral abyss is not that the withdrawal is so deep. In this sense, the spectral abyss too undergoes a certain kind of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization), since Harman’s approach is not to “retreat ever deeper into the *conditions* ... the very conditions of these conditions” but to drive “back toward the *surface* of reality”¹⁰⁶ – the militant guerilla metaphysical

¹⁰¹ Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 2.

¹⁰² Graham Harman, *Immaterialism. Objects and Social Theory* (UK: Polity Press, 2016), 15-16.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁰⁴ See David Ruy, “Returning to (Strange) Objects”, *TARP Architecture Manual: Not Nature* (2012), 38-42. A further explication of this is discussed in Todd Gannon, Graham Harman, David Ruy, and Tom Wiscombe, “The Object Turn: A Conversation”, in *Anyone* 33 (2015), 73-94.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press, 1969), 132.

¹⁰⁶ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*, 6.

movement is to emerge albeit in a shocking attack at the forefront of the cosmos.

CONCLUSION

Heidegger's eclipsing of the mind and world, of the subject and object relations, did not only provide grounding for possibilities in his ontological hermeneutics but also, as I have tried to expose, a spectral grounding for strange possibilities. The ghost of the transcendental is not overcome but is welcomed in the spectral abyss. However, while the *unhintergebar* managed to eclipse an epistemic split, it also opened up a further ontological split. SOO explains the cracks in reality that make it function while the subject emerges from it. OOO explains a cosmos with objects having the possibility to cause each other. There is, of course, still a lot to unpack since what this paper did was just to *ground* the return: which is to say that the return awaits, exciting more fascinating conclusions. In conclusion, I will simply focus on the duet (following Dan Zahavi's point that differences are overstated in philosophy). Harman states that Žižek's subject as *object a*, is not the same as OOO's object but as Žižek retorts, both SOO and OOO operate on a strange mechanism where objects are 1) emergent and 2) do not have to be actual. This is made possible by a spectral abyss that can accommodate *ostranenie* or defamiliarization. In OOO, we see the defamiliarized object, and with SOO, a defamiliarized subject. And we should not be afraid to confront the other strange returns of a defamiliarized subject-object relation. Žižek accedes that 'the subject is [yes] an object [but] unavailable to itself' and Harman acknowledges that the subject-object relation is a *special* relation of an object-object relation. With this initial convergence, the spectral abyss further haunts and the emergence of strange possibilities awaits.

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