

THE CONTOURS OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY REALISM: INTERVIEW WITH GRAHAM HARMAN

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Abstract: An interview with Graham Harman about his Object Oriented Ontology. He discusses its relation with phenomenology and other contemporary philosophers. Moreover, he comments on contemporary social problems such as xenophobia and his early academic years in Cairo.

Keywords: Selected: Graham Harman; Object Oriented Ontology; Phenomenology; Aesthetics; Islamic Philosophy; Eurocentrism

You are the founder of object-oriented philosophy, or object-oriented ontology (OOO). You develop this philosophy as a reaction to human-oriented philosophies. You challenge the entrenched philosophical and intellectual tradition that solely concentrates on humans and considers everything else as something of a by-product of human action, relation and existence. You suggest that not human beings but objects must be the center of gravity in terms of our thinking and understanding of being and reality. This means that realism, and not any sort of idealism, must set the horizon for 21st century philosophy. Would you like to describe briefly the contours of this new realism? Do you think 21st century philosophy will be marked by such a realistic spirit?

There is no way to predict which way the century will go in philosophy, since this is largely contingent on who provides the best new ideas, and whatever is best tends to come as a surprise. But what we can say is that since realism has been

ignored as a serious option for over a century (here I am speaking of the continental tradition) there are more untapped resources on the realist than the anti-realist side. But I should first clarify what I mean by realism. Manuel DeLanda and I discussed this in our co-authored book, *The Rise of Realism*.¹ As DeLanda notes early in his famous book on Deleuze and Guattari, realism is usually defined as the idea that there is a reality outside the mind.² That's certainly the usual definition of realism. But I happen to find it misleading: why should reality only be outside *the mind*? To say this is to make the same assumption that Descartes did, to the effect that we have to start from the mind and somehow work our way from there toward the exterior of the mind.

Yet the key to realism should be that objects have reality outside each other as well. When objects interact, they don't interact with one another in any total fashion, but only with caricatures of one another. There is always something more to these objects beyond their interaction. This freaks people out –they immediately cry “panpsychism!”– because of the widespread unstated assumption that the incompleteness of relation is a special property of the human psyche. That's simply a dogma of modern European philosophy, and it's time to leave it behind. Ontology is not just about human-world interaction, but also about the world-world interaction, or object-object interactions. This immediately makes the problem sharper, because we already have too many thinkers getting away with claiming not to be idealists because *of course* they realize that something exists outside the mind. Such disclaimers mean nothing as long as their *philosophies* give us nothing more than the thought-world relation.

For example, in Lacanian psychoanalysis we have the Real.³ But all this Real actually does is traumatize humans with unsymbolizable excess, and I say this as someone who now reads Lacan almost constantly, in fascination. In Husserl there is the “horizon,” which some Husserlians want to claim is already Heideggerian Being, though the fact that a horizon is tacitly rather than explicitly present is not enough to get us beyond the human sphere.⁴ Then there are Heidegger's followers, who boast that the implicit structure of the tool takes us beyond the

¹ Manuel DeLanda & Graham Harman, *The Rise of Realism*, Cambridge: UK, Polity, 2017.

² Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London, Continuum, 2002.

³ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. B. Fink, New York, Norton, 2006.

⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. D. Dahlstrom, Indianapolis, Hackett, 2014.

priority of explicit cognition, as if the word “implicit” were enough to get us outside the thought-world relation.⁵ And of course there is Merleau-Ponty, who tells us that the world looks at us just as we look at it, and this is held to be a radical futuristic break with the modern tradition even though it’s still an opposition between “the world” and “us,” even if it seems to have a reversed polarity.⁶

But what about parts of the world interacting with each other? From Merleau-Ponty there is merely silence on that score. Today there is Badiou, for whom inconsistent multiplicity (that which exists prior to any count) is only the retroactive assumption that haunts any count.⁷ None of this is fundamentally different from Kant, who at least recognizes the incongruity between the thing-in-itself and appearance in a way that is now out of fashion.⁸ If we oppose all of this with a call to examine object-object relations as well, the reflexive response will be that “science already does it.” What this shows is that philosophy has carved out a supposedly inviolable space for itself by agreeing to an unspoken division of labor: science deals with objects, but philosophy considers the relation between thought and world, often consoling itself with the notion that this relation has some sort of transcendental priority over discussion of objects. One obvious problem with this division of labor is that neither science nor transcendental philosophy is likely to stick to its own side of the fence for long. On one side there will be the Heideggerians saying that “science does not think.”⁹ On the other, we will hear Thomas Metzinger and Wolf Singer announcing that neurology will replace most of philosophy, though of course we will still need philosophers to sit on ethics panels. One suspects that they will eventually want AI to make ethical decisions as well.¹⁰ There is nothing wrong with applied ethics, but philosophy is a lot wider than that.

An even more central problem is advanced by Bertrand Russell, one of the

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, New York: Harper & Row, 1962.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis, Evanston: IL, Northwestern University Press, 1968.

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham, London: Continuum, 2005.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N.K. Smith, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1964.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J.G. Gray, New York: Harper, 1976, p. 8.

¹⁰ Wolf Singer, in Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of Mind and the Myth of the Self*, New York, Basic Books, 2009, p. 71.

godfathers of analytic philosophy: namely, that science only gives us the relational properties of things rather than anything intrinsic about them.¹¹ This argument has received new impetus from the young philosopher of mind Philip Goff, who pinpoints psyche as what is intrinsic about things and uses this to argue for panpsychism.¹² While admiring Goff's effort, I can't follow him here, since I have argued elsewhere that immediate first-person consciousness and third-person relational description are both parasitic on a deeper stratum that I call zero-person reality.¹³ What we really need is a global theory of translation between intrinsic realities (OOO's "real objects") and their conversion into caricatures (OOO's "sensual objects") without trying to misidentify either of these with minds.

As soon as we talk about real individual objects that are incompletely knowable and even incompletely relatable, we are already in the vicinity of one of the currently least fashionable currents in the history of philosophy: Aristotle, his medieval heirs, and Leibniz on the topic of substantial forms.¹⁴ People usually don't like the sound of that, because it sounds like a conservative call to return to the fossilized past, though it is nothing of the sort. Obviously, there is plenty in Aristotle that needs renovation before we adopt it; that is always the case with ancient classics. We still have much to learn from this tradition. Yet it is too impressed with entities that exist in nature, whereas we in the contemporary world have more concern with artificial and composite objects. We have airplanes; we have artificially produced insulin; we have COVID, which despite being natural may not have existed until a few years ago. There are cities, which I also consider to be objects on the same footing as hydrogen atoms. Yet neither Aristotle nor Leibniz is able to tell us much about cities in an ontological context,

¹¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Analysis of Matter*, London, Routledge, 2022.

¹² Philip Goff, *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023; Philip Goff, *Galileo's Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness*, New York, Vintage, 2019; Philip Goff, *Why? The Purpose of the Universe*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023.

¹³ Graham Harman, "Zero-Person and the Psyche," in *Mind That Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*, ed. D. Skrbina, pp. 253-282, Amsterdam, Benjamins, 2009.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, *Metaphysics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016; Francis Suárez, *On the Formal Cause of Substance: Metaphysical Disputation XV*, trans. J. Kronen & J. Reedy, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000; G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. R. Ariew & D. Garber, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.

despite the political discussion of cities by Aristotle.¹⁵

Can we ask, then, what the problem is with human beings?

There is no problem with human beings. We are an interesting species, and even if we were boring, we would naturally be more interested in ourselves than in most other things. Humans can think and do many fascinating things, but that does not mean we need to be the center of ontology, or half of ontology. But in modern philosophy that is exactly what you get: the prejudice that there are two basic types of things, (a) human thought, and (b) everything else. Just think of how implausible it is that a struggling species on a beautiful but minor planet should count for half of reality. It's not quite as stupid as it sounds, of course. The reason the moderns think this way is because they think human thought "represents" reality while the rest of reality just sits there and exists. So, a more complicated argument is needed against the assumptions of modern philosophy. Yet it is helpful to remind ourselves that humans are just one sort of entity among countless others: jellyfish, black holes, copper, dogs, and everything that exists elsewhere than our own planet. Humans do not deserve an utterly different ontological status from all the rest of it. We can't assume that human thought is something nearly magical: an "ontological catastrophe," as Žižek brazenly claims.¹⁶ Here I am much closer to Jane Bennett's turn away from human exceptionalism, though I do enjoy Žižek's writing and speaking immensely.¹⁷

Your interpretation of Heidegger as you developed in your book *Tool-Being* is very unorthodox.¹⁸ You challenge the well-rooted idea that for Heidegger, Dasein is the privileged entity that asks the question of being and becomes the hero of the existential drama. Do you think Heidegger is an object-oriented ontologist *avant la lettre*?

Here I would say both yes and no. Jorge Luis Borges wrote a famous essay

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis, Hackett, 2017

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters*, London: Verso, 2007. For a detailed monograph on this topic see Joseph Carew, *Ontological Catastrophe: Žižek and the Paradoxical Metaphysics of German Idealism*, Ann Arbor: MI, Open Humanities Press, 2014.

¹⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: NC, Duke University Press, 2010.

¹⁸ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Chicago, Open Court, 2002.

about how writers create their own predecessors; his case study was Kafka.¹⁹ Everyone is inspired by a chain of influences in which they see something that is actually there, but which few if any others have noticed before. I often think of how T.S. Eliot was fascinated by the poetry of Jules Laforgue, who isn't usually considered one of the greatest French poets of the late 19th century, but he gave Eliot something he needed. It doesn't follow, of course, that these earlier figures were already trying to do what their later admirers were doing. It might even be too threatening for the later author if the earlier one was already on the scent. This is why Harold Bloom thinks an author often deals with "the anxiety of influence" by combining the influence of two or more predecessors.²⁰

In any case, there are certainly a number of elements in Heidegger that inspired OOO. The tool-analysis is the main passage, of course. But consider his later essays on the thing, where he makes it clear that the thing exists apart from us and even prior to any of its functions: the jug is not a jug because it holds wine, but holds wine because it is this jug.²¹ His willingness to let things exist in their own right apart from us is the sense in which we could call him object-oriented *avant le lettre*. Both German Idealism and Husserlian phenomenology are rather dismissive of the thing-in-itself, to say the least. Heidegger is not so dismissive, with the high point of his esteem for the *an sich* coming in a famous passage near the end of his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* where he admonishes the German Idealists for selling the thing-in-itself short.²²

But we should ask ourselves the following: what, ultimately, is the major difference between Kant and Heidegger? My answer to this question is that in Kant, there is no room for object-object interactions. There is the phenomenal space occupied by human thought, and then there is the thing-in-itself that we

¹⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka and his Precursors," in *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952*, trans. R. Simms, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964.

²⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Second Edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, pp. 161-184, New York, Perennial Classics, 1971. See also Martin Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures: Insight Into That Which Is and Basic Principles of Thinking*, trans. A. Mitchell, Bloomington: IN, Indiana University Press, 2021.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. J. Churchill, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1965, pp. 251-252.

humans can never reach. The inaccessibility of the *an sich* is treated as a special human tragic destiny. But for OOO, of course, even objects themselves encounter each other only as appearances. People think this is crazy. They assume it means panpsychism, but that's only because they falsely identify appearance in the sense of approximation (the fact that the dog I see is not the dog-in-itself) with appearance in the sense of visual experience by consciousness. These are two entirely different things. And even if we insist on limiting conscious experience to humans, animals, and perhaps plants, it does not follow that when two chemicals interact in a beaker they are interacting with the full reality of each other. The fact that the relations between things are relations between appearances rather than things-in-themselves has nothing to do with human finitude specifically (this is what Heidegger also misses). It simply results from the fact that relations do not exhaust their relata.

As concerns the philosophy of Kant, there is nothing to be found about object-object interactions, except insofar as they are already treated by natural science. He sees no philosophical problem here, because he only allows philosophy to deal with the opposition between (1) phenomenal appearance to human thought, and (2) the thing-in-itself. He has nothing to say about what might be going on between different parts of the in-itself. Indeed, he cannot even be sure if the thing-in-itself is one or many, since he considers unity and multiplicity to be categories of the understanding rather than concepts valid for the in-itself as well. In Heidegger, by contrast, there is a trace of objects interacting with each other, and it can be found in the tool-analysis, which occurs most famously in *Being and Time* but is already there in his early Freiburg Lecture Course of 1919.²³ Here he famously discusses objects interacting with each other in a system of tools. The hammer refers to the nail, and the nail refers to the wood, and ultimately everything refers to the human being, *Dasein*, which dominates the structure because ultimately everything in the tool-system is colored by the fact that it acts for-the-sake-of *Dasein*. Despite this thoroughly modernist primacy of *Dasein*, there is still a sense in which each of the tools refers to other tools as well.

In this way Heidegger raises the question of object-object interactions in a way that had largely been lost to Western philosophy after Leibniz, with the

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, trans. T. Sadler, London, Continuum, 2008.

remarkable exception of Whitehead in the twentieth century.²⁴ Whitehead was primarily a mathematician, and we know from Thomas Kuhn that newcomers in any field (much like the young) have greater independence from the guiding dogmas of that field. As someone who had come into philosophy almost by accident, Whitehead had not been brainwashed by Kantian assumptions in the way that most modern philosophers had, and this allowed him to make the unbelievably bold claim that the thought-world relation is not different in kind from any other relation. Any relation is a “prehension,” and prehenions never exhaust whatever it is that they prehend. Yet Whitehead strays into a different problem, which is his assumption that the *prehender* is exhausted by its prehenions: thus he upholds a relational ontology, like Bruno Latour after him, and this is why they both would have benefitted from some familiarity with Heidegger and his tacit admission of a non-relational core of things. Or even better, there is Heidegger’s one-time student Xavier Zubíri, who saw the point more clearly.²⁵

But to repeat, there’s already something there about object-object relations in the tool-analysis, and that is the first taste of it in the continental tradition since Leibniz— other than some of Nietzsche’s musings on how the will to power unfolds even between non-human beings.²⁶ This is the primary sense in which Heidegger did pave the way for OOO, and made my own path possible. Are there other paths that I might have followed? I suppose I could have started with Aristotle, or with Leibniz. But Heidegger, being more contemporary, made it a lot easier. He doesn’t quite go far enough for me, because the independence of the thing for him is too closely linked with “earth” –one of the moments of his infamous “fourfold”– and earth in his philosophy is too holistic, too unified, to do justice to individual things.²⁷ It has a lot in common with the pre-Socratic *apeiron*, just as his conception of Being does. There is an analogous problem with the holistic interpretation he gives of his own tool-analysis, which fails to do justice to the fact that tools also *break*, and that they cannot break unless they are

²⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, Free Press, 1978.

²⁵ Xavier Zubíri, *On Essence*, trans. A.R. Caponigri, Washington: D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1980.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale, New York, Vintage, 1968.

²⁷ See Graham Harman, “Dwelling with the Fourfold,” *Space and Culture*, 12.3 (2009), pp. 292-302.

partially withheld from the tool-system from the outset. In this respect there remains a permanent difference between what he was trying to do and what OOO wants to do.

OOO and your philosophical journey have a strong relation with phenomenology and phenomenological philosophers. In one way or another, OOO deals mainly with Husserl and Heidegger. On the other hand, OOO aims to do philosophy in many ways that differ from the phenomenological method. Nevertheless, both chronologically and from the view of the continuity of thinking, can we call OOO a post-phenomenological movement of thought? How does OOO separate itself from phenomenology?

In the interest of fairness, we should first distinguish between my version of OOO and that of Levi Bryant.²⁸ My own philosophical trajectory is saturated by Husserl, whereas in the case of Bryant it is a matter of Deleuzian and Lacanian influence.²⁹ Much philosophical discussion revolves around the relation between thought and the world; in Husserl's case, the tendency is always to deny that there is any world-in-itself that could not, in principle, be made the object of an intentional act. I'm enough of a realist that I don't accept Husserl's conclusions on that point. What interests me in his work is the tension between intentional objects and their qualities or adumbrations, and you don't even need to be a realist to take an interest in that. I see a blackbird fly through the garden, and perceive it and speak of it in numerous ways, but none of this changes the fact that it's one and the same intentional object.³⁰ This tension between sensual objects and sensual qualities is central for my version of OOO, but you won't find it in Bryant, or really in anyone else writing philosophy today other than my direct allies.³¹ What is really striking is that even phenomenologists don't talk a lot about this, even though it marks Husserl's essential break with the Humean

²⁸ Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Ann Arbor: MI, Open Humanities Press, 2011.

²⁹ Levi R. Bryant, *Difference and Givenness: Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism and the Ontology of Immanence*. Evanston: IL, Northwestern University Press, 2008.

³⁰ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay, vol. 2, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 680.

³¹ For further discussion of this important difference from Bryant see Graham Harman, *Skirmishes: With Friends, Enemies, and Neutrals*. Brooklyn: NY, punctum, 2020, pp. 75-81.

empiricism that is still found even in Franz Brentano, in which objects are treated as “bundles of qualities.”³² Even when Dan Zahavi responded polemically to Tom Sparrow’s book *The End of Phenomenology*, targeting me and others along with Sparrow, he had nothing to say about this aspect of my interpretation of Husserl.³³ But it’s the whole point of my relation to phenomenology!

Naturally, the object/quality dyad is not what interests most practicing phenomenologists. The big interest for most of them is to concentrate on what is *given*. The hope is that philosophy thereby gains a more radical, unshakeable starting point than ever before, one that can outstrip whatever scientific discourse is trying to subordinate philosophy at any given moment in history. (These days, it’s neurology.) But problems arise from this. The first was exposed by Heidegger: most of the things we deal with are not given to us, but are presupposed or silently relied upon, and become given only when they somehow go wrong. I’m speaking of the tool-analysis, of course. But there is also Heidegger’s one hundred or so pages at the beginning of *History of the Concept of Time*, my favorite of the Marburg lecture courses, where he talks about how Husserl missed the question of being.³⁴ The usual defensive reaction from Husserlians is to say that his notion of the “horizon” already accounts sufficiently for the *Seinsfrage*. The reason this doesn’t work is that being is not just a tacit background that can be made explicit whenever we want; instead, it is that which can never be made present. It is simply not a horizon.

By no means do I say these things in a spirit of Heideggerian triumphalism. For as mentioned, OOO owes an important debt to Husserl in an area that Heidegger never saw as clearly. In *History of the Concept of Time*, he says that Husserl made three essential discoveries: intentionality, categorial intuition, and the original sense of the *a priori* (as having an ontological rather than an epistemological sense). It’s not a bad list, but the funny thing is that Heidegger

³² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978; Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, trans. A. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell, & L. McAlister, London, Routledge, 1995.

³³ Dan Zahavi, “The End of What? Phenomenology vs. Speculative Realism,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24.3 (2016), pp. 289-309; Tom Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. T. Kisiel, Bloomington: IN, Indiana University Press, 1985.

missed the most important discovery by Husserl, which was intentional objects. The reason he misses it is that there is little room for it in his philosophy. His personal mission was to radicalize phenomenology by insisting on the importance of that which is never given. And yes, this does afford him any number of insights that are closed off to Husserl. Along with the *Seinsfrage*, there is Heidegger's turn from Husserl's essentially rational-scientific thinking subject to historically rooted Dasein. In David Farrell Krell's first book (though I think Gadamer was the original source) there is the amusing anecdote about how Husserl prepared a lecture to show the relevance of phenomenology to all the sciences, but forgot to include history.³⁵ That's quite believable.

But let's be fair to Husserl. Franz Brentano famously revived the medieval term "intentionality." And while intentionality is often described –misleadingly– as the view that mental acts aim at something *outside* themselves, what intentionality is really about is *immanent* objectivity.³⁶ This obviously carries the danger of idealism, but Brentano never really clarified the relation between his conception of intentionality and any outside world that might lie beyond the immanent sphere.³⁷ It was his Polish student Twardowski who tried to spell out the nature of this relation by distinguishing between "objects" outside the mind and "content" inside the mind.³⁸ I interpret Husserl's struggle with his fellow Brentano pupil Twardowski as one of the keys to developing his original standpoint. Husserl could never accept the idea that the "object" pole lies outside the mind, because he was worried that this would make knowledge impossible: how would the Berlin in my mind match up with the Berlin in the outside world?³⁹ OOO would counter that philosophy was never meant to be a form of knowledge; this is a modern prejudice shaped by the recent dominance of the

³⁵ David Farrell Krell, *Intimations of Mortality: Time, Truth, and Finitude in Heidegger's Thinking of Being*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1986, p. 5.

³⁶ Franz Brentano, *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint*.

³⁷ See Barry Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano*, Chicago, Open Court, 1999.

³⁸ Kasimir Twardowski, *On the Content and Object of Presentations*, trans. R. Grossman, Dordrecht, Springer, 1977.

³⁹ Edmund Husserl, "Intentional Objects," in *Early Writings in the Philosophy of Logic and Mathematics*, trans. D. Willard, pp. 345-387. Amsterdam, Kluwer Academic, 1994. See also Graham Harman, "Merely Intentional Objects: A Defense," *Foundations of Science* 28 (2023), pp. 1177-1183.

sciences. But however misguided Husserl's fear that something might transcend knowledge had wonderful results, leading him to a stroke of genius. Namely, he *accepted* Twardowski's distinction between object and content, and simply imploded both of these into the immanent sphere.

Consider his marvelous critique of Brentano's central principle that all intentionality is grounded in presentations, by way of the counter-claim that intentionality consists fundamentally of "object-giving acts." What this means is that Brentano is essentially still an empiricist who thinks that an object is the sum total of everything it presents to the mind. Husserl's breakthrough, by way of Twardowski, was to see that we intend an intentional object without accepting all of its presented qualities as belonging to the object. The object appears by way of adumbrations (*Abschattungen*), and the whole point of the phenomenological method is *not* to be duped by all of the presented qualities, but to strip them away through eidetic variation until we get at the essence of the thing. (In OOO we call this the *eidos*, since the term "essence" is reserved for something else.) This would obviously be impossible for someone like Hume, who could not accept any such distinction between the essential and accidental properties of an object; he would insist that all of the qualities in a bundle are equally there. But Husserl drives a wedge between an intentional object and its qualities, much like Aristotle did for real substances and their accidents. Heidegger does retain a vague sense of this, as I've explained in accounting for the earliest version of his fourfold, but he is really just too contemptuous toward visible "beings" to spend as much time with them as Husserl does.

But this is really Husserl's fundamental step forward in philosophy: his recognition of the gap between the intentional object and its qualities. However much the object changes, as long as you experience it as the same object, it is the same intentional object. This entails nothing for the real object with which the intentional one may be correlated: after all, I might be hallucinating an apple, so that there is no real object corresponding to it. In OOO terminology, the intentional object is called the *sensual* object (not the "sensible" object, since it covers purely intellectual objects as well) and Husserl's adumbrations are described in terms of sensual qualities. We abbreviate these as SO and SQ. For OOO, then, the first key to Husserl is his discovery of the SO-SQ tension. This is largely what human experience is about. We encounter a world of intentional

objects changing in various ways, which is the usual meaning of the word “time.” Right now my wife Necla is sitting next to me, eating an early dinner. She is chewing, and so her lips are changing positions every tenth of a second or so, but obviously I continue to recognize her throughout this process. I would never speak like Hume and say something like: “her lips are constantly changing position, but since she looks 99.84% similar to how she did one second ago, I will say that the resemblance is sufficient.” No, we must side with Husserl here. This is Necla, and since she is chewing, her face looks slightly different every instant, but of course I think of her as the same person. As an intentional object she remains the same; we don’t need to locate her stability solely in a hidden real world, as if the sensual realm were nothing but a pure flux. There are identities even at the level of the sensual.

So, we have the SO-SQ tension. But there is also the SO-RQ tension, because what is the point of eidetic reduction in phenomenology? The point is that you are trying to find those qualities that *cannot* change, that an object *needs* in order to be the same object. If I were suddenly to see Necla transformed into a robot or something even more bizarre, I would obviously be horrified. That example is far-fetched, but it does sometimes happen that we misrecognize an object, and there comes a point where we cross a line and the object is no longer the object we thought it was. Paradoxically, then, a sensual object has real qualities. The difference with OOO here –and it’s a big one– is that Husserl treats the real qualities as the ones that can be grasped by the intellect as opposed to the senses. But for OOO, as for Heidegger, the intellect is just as guilty as the senses of reducing objects to caricatures of their deeper selves. It follows that the real qualities of a thing are never entirely knowable. Any quality you can name is already a sensual quality. People often misread OOO as saying that we can name a thousand or so qualities of an object and only some of them later prove to be real. Even Quentin Meillassoux made this mistake in his opening remarks to the French translation of my book *Dante’s Broken Hammer*.⁴⁰ But no, that’s not the point. None of the qualities of a thing that we can list are the real ones; they are just

⁴⁰ Quentin Meillassoux, “Préface: Métaphysique des choses entre elles,” in Graham Harman, *Le marteau brisé de Dante*, p. 18; Graham Harman, *Dante’s Broken Hammer: The Ethics, Aesthetics, and Metaphysics of Love*. London, Repeater, 2016.

verbal hints at the real ones.

In any case, Husserl gives us two tensions: SO-SQ and SO-RQ. Objects have a strangely loose relation with their own qualities, something that has been known since Aristotle, but insufficiently appreciated. What Husserl misses, thanks to his horror of the thing-in-itself, is the real object that can never be directly present to the mind. In a sense, even Kant and Heidegger fail to deliver on this: Kant because he can never be sure whether the in-itself is one or many, and Heidegger because for all practical purposes he treats Being as one and the ontic world of beings as the only place where we find the many. There are moments where he does better than this, but he never fully grasps what is at issue here. Yet the tool-analysis at least gives us a good taste of an RO-SQ tension: some qualities of the hammer become visible when it breaks, yet the hammer itself can never become fully present even when we stare directly at it. As for the difficult RO-RQ tension, in which neither term is directly accessible to thought, this can be found in Leibniz when he covers the point that every monad is one, yet it must also have a multiplicity of qualities, since otherwise all monads would be interchangeable.⁴¹ Collectively, these four tensions are what OOO calls “aesthetics.” The realm of art is that of RO-SQ, which also happens to be where OOO locates space. But now we are on the verge of becoming too technical for an interview.

As for your comments about post-phenomenology, I would say that we can see OOO as a post-phenomenological movement...

We should probably begin by saying that the term “post-phenomenology” has already been taken, since the late Don Ihde used it to refer to his own take on the philosophy of technology.⁴² Although largely ignored by his fellow American continental philosophers, Ihde has a tremendous following in Europe. His approach is original, but for me it has the defect of merely trying to empower the “world” side of the thought-world relation more than is usually the case. To escape the limitations of modern philosophy, this is not enough. You need to find ways to talk about object-object relations and not just flip thought-object relations around so that the object is stronger than in previous philosophy. This is also a

⁴¹ Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 214. (Paragraph 8 of the “Monadology.”)

⁴² Don Ihde, *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context*, Evanston: IL, Northwestern University Press, 1993.

problem with Merleau-Ponty's standpoint.

That said, if we interpret the term "post-phenomenology" in a more general sense, it is true that my version of OOO (as opposed to Bryant's) is unthinkable without phenomenology. To get to where I am standing, you need the tension between sensual objects and sensual qualities (which is *time* in the OOO fourfold) and the tension between sensual objects and real qualities (*eidōs* in the OOO fourfold). These two elements are the real key to Husserl's philosophy: not the bracketing, which goes astray by erasing the real. I don't think you can find anyone in the history of philosophy who gets the object/quality distinction quite like Husserl does, other than Aristotle with substance/accident. Kant gets pretty close, with his distinction of the transcendental object=x from the thing-in-itself. But he ends up treating the transcendental object as the empty form of thought rather than as an object apart from its sensual qualities. This mistaken idea later infects Badiou's theory of the object in *Logics of Worlds*, and explicitly so.⁴³ Badiou comes right out and tells us that he's borrowing this idea from Kant's transcendental object.

In relation to the question above, the phenomenology of the *Logical Investigations* has many realist tendencies, and we can see its impact on the first generation of phenomenologists.⁴⁴ Moreover, as "heresies" from orthodox transcendental phenomenology, we can see non-transcendental ways and phenomenological realisms in contemporary phenomenology. And also, in the contemporary realisms (for example Meillassoux's conception of "correlationism"), under the label of "phenomenology", the divergence in this tradition along with its "heresies" seems to be overlooked. Is it a fair approach to gather all different ways of phenomenologies under the term "correlationism"? How do you see the situation of contemporary phenomenology in respect to OOO?

The heresies of so-called realist phenomenology are not heretical enough for me. Generally speaking, the "realists" in phenomenology are the ones who prefer the *Logical Investigations* to *Ideas* and other later works that offer a full-blown

⁴³ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. A. Toscano, London, Continuum, 2009. See also Graham Harman, "Novelty in Badiou's Theory of Objects: Alexander and the Functor," *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas* 26.3 (Septiembre-Diciembre 2023), pp. 291-299.

⁴⁴ Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 2 vols.

idealism of the transcendental subject. Heidegger, for example, might be described a phenomenological realist in this sense.

How might one modify Husserlian phenomenology to obtain a robustly realist position? The easiest way would be to challenge his presumption that nothing exists that could not, in principle, be the object of an intentional act. I would support such a move. As mentioned, I think Heidegger does this in his tool-analysis, and we can find analogous efforts, perhaps including Jean-Luc Marion's effort to bet heavily on givenness as a fundamentally passive experience.⁴⁵ And let's not forget my favorite "realist phenomenologist," Emmanuel Levinas, whose notion of alterity further stresses the inherent mismatch between the phenomenon and whatever cannot appear.⁴⁶

All these basic modifications of Husserl's position do tend to satisfy the usual definition of realism. As mentioned, a clear example is given by DeLanda when he argues that Deleuze and Guattari are realists in the sense of accepting a reality outside the mind.⁴⁷ But why should reality be a reality specifically outside *the mind*? This concedes too much to phenomenology framed as a philosophy that begins from the given, and I cannot imagine a phenomenology that begins anywhere else. In other words, we begin with the supposedly unshakeable starting point of thought encountering a world of phenomena. But this assumes, just like Kant, that the inability to reach the in-itself (which Husserl rejects, though other phenomenologists may not) is a special burden of human finitude. But finitude is not just human. There is also a finitude of inanimate causation, in the sense that no two objects ever confront each other completely; they always meet one another as caricatures. It doesn't matter in the least whether this interaction is "conscious" or not. The unique properties of consciousness do not need to be settled in Step One of our philosophical position, because the more fundamental distinction is between any reality and how it presents itself to any other reality, whether human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate. We don't even need to get into the weeds on the panpsychism controversy here. The deeper distinction is

⁴⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. J. Kosky, Stanford: CA, Stanford University Press, 2002.

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1987.

⁴⁷ DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*.

between reality and relation, and it is not just humans that relate to other things. As far as I have seen, all the supposed realist variants of phenomenology, including Heidegger with his *Sein/Dasein* couplet, assume that we can only talk about human finitude because we have direct access to the human sphere but not to the inanimate. Here I disagree, and also think that the fate of contemporary philosophy hinges on this point. If I talk about what happens when fire burns cotton, that is something I must infer. But when we speak about human finitude, this is also something we must infer: we cannot perceive finitude directly, after all. When a human philosophizes about human thought, it is not the same human in these two cases. I can try to engage in clear introspection about what I was just thinking, but can't simultaneously introspect the introspection. Jacques Lacan's refutation of Descartes works in precisely this way: in "I think, therefore I am," it is a question of two separate "I's", not the same one.⁴⁸ Even earlier, José Ortega y Gasset made a similar criticism of Husserl.⁴⁹ For perhaps the first time in the history of philosophy, we have been trapped by an argument: in this case, the surprisingly flawed argument that we can only talk about the given because there's nothing else to talk about. Incidentally, this is not the same point as Wilfrid Sellars's critique of "the myth of the given," which merely problematizes the difference between phenomenal givenness and mediated scientific knowledge.⁵⁰ The difference is that Sellars ends up putting *everything* on the level of the given, in the sense of the accessible, while OOO draws the opposite conclusion.

But to get back to the other part of your question, I would say phenomenology is clearly a case of correlationism. For Husserl there is only an intentional object in so far as it is correlated with consciousness, and vice versa. Of course this will lead to complaints that we are oversimplifying phenomenology by reducing it to a single term and ignoring internal differences. But that always happens whenever someone objects to some important presupposition in a rival school of thought. Consider Heidegger, who not only talks about "the forgetting of being,"

⁴⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York, Norton, 1981.

⁴⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, "Preface for Germans," in *Phenomenology and Art*, trans. P. Silver, New York, Norton, 1975, pp. 17-76.

⁵⁰ Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press, 1997.

but goes on to claim that everyone between Plato and Husserl is forgetting it. Now, of course Heidegger realizes that there are many different philosophies between Plato and Husserl. He is simply claiming that none of that diversity is relevant to his central question. We can always argue against Heidegger as a historian of philosophy: I happen to think he overrates the pre-Socratics and underrates Plato, and of course his relative silence about Spinoza is fairly suspicious on political grounds. But that is not the same thing as dismissing his question of the meaning of being. So, it isn't enough to say that Speculative Realism is painting phenomenology with too broad a brush. Of course there are differences among the phenomenologists. I just don't see any phenomenologist who is capable of posing the question of object-object interactions in the radical terms demanded by OOO. We need to escape the circle of givenness, and by definition, any philosophy that does so is not a phenomenology.

From personal experience I have a funny example of how broad critiques can sometimes go wrong. One of my favorite travel experiences is that I was able to visit East Berlin in August 1989, just a few weeks before the collapse of Eastern European communism began. I was one of the last people who had a first chance to see what this version of Eastern Europe was like, with the guard dogs and the machine guns and all. I was even slapped in the face by a bathroom attendant. But anyway, like many philosophy students who made the trip, I took advantage of the opportunity to buy many low-cost editions of books by Marx and Engels, printed on very cheap paper. Naturally, I bought the standard three-volume edition of *Das Kapital*. I also bought a short book by Engels, though I've forgotten which one. But there was an index in the back explaining who all the people were to whom Engels referred in the book. I'll never forget that this index referred to Kant and Hegel as "German bourgeois philosophers." Most students of philosophy will immediately laugh at that, since it seems a bit absurd to explain Kant and Hegel away with a simple dismissive phrase. But the problem here isn't the oversimplification itself. From a Marxist standpoint it must seem entirely fair to write them off as bourgeois philosophers, since they pay little attention to the modes of production underlying their specific philosophical systems, which makes these systems mere "ideology" from a Marxist standpoint. The only way to confront this is to argue against the Marxist doctrine that the economic base of a society conditions any supposedly autonomous ideas. I think this is easy

enough to do, which does not mean that Marxism is worthless. But getting back to your question, I don't think there is any phenomenologist who can sufficiently account for reality in the OOO sense of the term.

That said, Meillassoux admits that he wasn't clear enough when defining correlationism in *After Finitude*.⁵¹ More specifically, he used the term ambiguously to refer both to the sceptical form of correlationism found in Hume and Kant, and to the absolutizing of the correlate in Hegel and Schopenhauer. Or rather, he sometimes carefully distinguishes between them in *After Finitude* and sometimes does not. This is why he had to explain correlationism more precisely in his 2012 Berlin lecture.⁵² There is also the problem that people disagree about the most essential feature of correlationism. For some, including Meillassoux, the main problem with correlationism is its commitment to finitude, which he badly wants to overcome. On this basis OOO is criticized for merely spreading correlationism into the inanimate realm by saying that objects can't exhaust each other any more than human thought can exhaust them. But for OOO, the real problem with correlationism is the idea that there is always human thought involved as one of the two poles: that we can only speak about the thought-world relation, never about world-world relations that solely involve non-human objects. In this respect I am much closer to Latour's critique of modernism than to Meillassoux's critique of correlationism. Meillassoux –like his teacher Badiou– also misses what is truly important about phenomenology. He says that Husserl is all about “description,” a definition that Tom Sparrow savages in *The End of Phenomenology*. Husserl is really about the object-quality gap, as I've been arguing.

In practice, when people speak about “realist phenomenology,” what they usually mean is that there is something beyond the human grasp, or that humans can somehow be traumatized by the outside. It still amounts to the same central duality of thought and world. Consider Merleau-Ponty, whose reflections on the body might seem like an exciting breakthrough, insofar as the body seems

⁵¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier, London: Continuum, 2008.

⁵² Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning,” trans. R. Mackay & M. Gansen, in *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity Since Structuralism*, A. Avanesian & S. Malik, eds., London, Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 117-197.

irreducible to either thought or world.⁵³ Notice that this does not solve the problem of how the duality of thought and world is allowed to continue its philosophical monopoly, while object-object relations are simply handed over to natural science. Throughout my graduate student career, Merleau-Ponty and Schelling were always treated as “philosophers of the future.” They were somehow so far ahead of us that we still needed to catch up, still needed to stage repeated “Schelling Renaissances” or dig ever more deeply into *The Visible and Invisible*, in the belief that this would set the stage for a new era of philosophy.⁵⁴ Now, I enjoy reading Merleau-Ponty and Schelling too, but by no means are they fifty or one hundred years ahead of us.⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty basically remains within the same coordinates that Husserl established. In the late work of Merleau-Ponty there is “the flesh,” meaning that the world looks at me just as I look at it, and even Lacan treats this as a staggering breakthrough.⁵⁶

But why is it always the world and I that look at each other? Tectonic plates look at each other too. The reciprocity between thought and world gives us nothing at all about parts of the world looking at each other. The best place to get this in the twentieth century is Whitehead, but he is the exception that proves the rule: he is surely the greatest philosopher of the past hundred years who is fully accepted neither by analytic nor by continental philosophers. He strikes many as a crackpot or a fringe figure *precisely because* he rejects the transcendental standpoint that treats human thought as the center of ontology. (He also makes use of God in his system, another reason that many find him suspect.) The critiques made of Whitehead are similar to the ones made of OOO, as if we were offering a crackpot panpsychism in which desks have emotions. But that is not what OOO is about. Instead, it’s about the fact that objects interact only by simultaneously withdrawing from each other. To reach genuine realism, you can’t just stipulate in a throwaway manner that something exceeds the human mind.

⁵³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, Second Edition, London, Routledge, 2002.

⁵⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*; F.W.J. Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries Into the Nature of Human Freedom*.

⁵⁵ Graham Harman, “The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy,” *Open Philosophy* 3 (2020), pp. 132-146.

⁵⁶ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

Do you think other than yourself any other philosopher or philosophical movement that will be very important in the 21st century?

I'm in no position to rank my own importance or lack thereof, so let me speak about others instead. The late Bruno Latour has been important to me since the 1990s. He has long been a key figure in the social sciences, but not so much in philosophy. In fact, I remember a time ten or fifteen years ago when I still had to explain who Latour was to philosophers. When we invited him to Cairo in 2003, he said that it was only the second time he had been invited by a philosophy department: ironically, the first was the UC-San Diego department featuring Patricia and Paul Churchland. Many people dismiss Latour as some sort of postmodern social constructivist relativist. In all fairness, he sometimes sounds like one, but that's not the heart of what he's up to. The real key to Latour is that in his Actor-Network Theory (ANT), objects of all different kinds interact with each other, easily crossing the line between human and non-human. It is true that he is more a philosopher of science than a philosopher of nature like Whitehead, which means that for Latour the human observer still ends up in a privileged position at the end of the day. Yet there are other aspects of his philosophy that tend toward an acceptance of object-object relations as a topic of philosophy.

Unlike Heidegger, Latour is also willing to talk about homely everyday objects, and not just quasi-sacred kitschy examples like temples, jugs, and wooden shoes. The main objection I have to both Whitehead and Latour is that they define objects in terms of their relations; an entity or actor is what it does. This makes both of them too close to Hume's "bundle" theory of object, so that neither of them remotely approach Husserl's insights on the object-quality rift. Nor can they reach Heidegger's conception of being as that which withdraws, because there is no room for anything hidden in Whitehead and Latour, except as a temporary conundrum that future relations can always help to unravel.

Let me add that I love Kant. I love the thing-in-itself, and the conception of autonomy across all three of his Critiques. But Latour is right that we are still working too much in Kant's shadow even today, and that this needs to change if we are going to move into a new philosophy, and even a new conception of

ecology.⁵⁷ The ecological crisis is going to force us to take objects more seriously than before. This is equally true of political theory. Modern political theory is split between a Left that thinks human nature is good but oppressed, and a Right that thinks human nature is evil and needs to be even more oppressed for everyone's safety.⁵⁸ The only exit is to see non-human actors as an essential part of the political sphere. David Graeber and David Wengrow have called for a new theory that humans are naturally imaginative and experimental rather than good or evil. But it's just another modernist theory of human nature, and therefore it cannot do the job.⁵⁹

You argue that some objects go beyond our sensible and intellectual capacities. You call them real objects. Real objects, if we understand your theory correctly, withdraw from any direct contact with any other object, including conscious, intentional creatures. This means that when I am holding my phone, I am not holding a real phone but a sensual phone, so my holding can be called, at best, a touching without touching. But if I am not touching a real phone when I am touching my phone, why would I still call it a *phone*? Why not call it **phone* or *transcendental X*? Why would the ordinary word *phone* in ordinary language still apply to it? What would be my justification to call it *phone* but not something else? Besides, how do we know that we are talking about the “same” thing when we talk about the real phone?

As the first step of my answer, I need to clarify OOO's relation to Saul Kripke's theory of names as rigid designators.⁶⁰ I first became interested in Kripke while translating Cristina Lafont's book on Heidegger and the theory of direct

⁵⁷ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climactic Regime*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge: UK, Polity, 2017; Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climactic Regime*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge: UK, Polity, 2018.

⁵⁸ Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*, London, Pluto, 2014; Graham Harman, “Realism Without Hobbes and Schmitt: Assessing the Latourian Option,” in *Idealism, Relativism, and Realism: New Essays on Objectivity Beyond the Analytic-Continental Divide*, D. Finkelde & P. Livingston, eds., Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 259-275.

⁵⁹ David Graeber & David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. For a critique, see Graham Harman, “Displacing the State of Nature: A Disagreement with Graeber and Wengrow,” *Bajo Palabra* II.32 (2023), pp. 109-122.

⁶⁰ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press, 1980.

reference.⁶¹ The obvious value of Kripke for me is that his theory severs reference from meaning in a way that makes room for OOO's object/quality rift. *Guerrilla Metaphysics* was probably the first publication in which I discuss Kripke. At some point I was rereading the book and was dismayed to see that I was ambiguous, sometimes treating the referents of names in Kripke's theory as real objects and sometimes as sensual ones. Niki Young deserves the credit for pointing out to me that Kripke's names can only point to sensual objects, since names do not partake of allure, and real objects come into play only with allure as a split between real objects and their sensual qualities. That's basically right, except that I think proper names *can* generate a certain kind of allure. Imagine repeatedly shouting the name of a dead lover into a dense fog. That would be as alluring as any artwork. But I think Young's point basically holds, and I made use of it in *Skirmishes*.⁶²

More recently, I have come to appreciate Thomas Kuhn's reservations about Kripke's theory of names.⁶³ At the University of Illinois in 1977, Kuhn was in discussion with Richard Boyd, with both of them in agreement that the Kripke/Putnam theory of names was an advance beyond its predecessors.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, Kuhn also held that "despite the amount that Putnam and Kripke have written on the subject, it is by no means clear just what is right about their intuition."⁶⁵ On the same page Kuhn contends there is a difference between the following two cases: (a) pointing at Boyd and saying "Boyd", and (2) pointing at the needle of a galvanometer and saying "electric charge." Kuhn accounts for this difference by saying that the second case "supplies no information at all about the many other sorts of events to which the name 'electric charge' also unambiguously refers."⁶⁶ My interpretation of this statement, in terms of OOO, is that Boyd is a sensual object but electric charge in the case of the galvanometer

⁶¹ Cristina Lafont, *Heidegger, Language, and World-Disclosure*, trans. G. Harman, Cambridge: UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁶² Harman, *Skirmishes*, pp. 260-265.

⁶³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure: Philosophical Essays, 1970-1993, with an Autobiographical Interview*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 198-199.

⁶⁴ For Putnam's contribution see Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of Meaning," in *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2*, Cambridge: UK, Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 215-271.

⁶⁵ Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure*, p. 199.

⁶⁶ Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure*, p. 199.

is a real one. Kuhn and the audience are familiar enough with Boyd that to name him simply means to pick him out among an assortment of many other objects, which is how Kripke's theory of names usually works. But "electric charge" has more of an alluring effect in the example cited, especially if it occurs in the early days of its discovery before charge has become a generally known entity. One of the less explored aspects of Kuhn's distinction between paradigm-shifting and normal science is that the former has an aesthetic effect not found in the latter, and this is linked with the fact that a paradigm shift challenges established views about which qualities belong to which objects.

You asked whether the real and sensual versions of an object need separate names. I tend to think that this would simply lead to unnecessary typographical marks, such as the asterisk you proposed. Whereas many people like to introduce new terminology (and my friend Timothy Morton is unusually good at it), I prefer to modify existing language to have a different sense. But you are right that any name can be made more mysterious and alluring, and this means that we lose a handle on what we are talking about. This is happening today with such phrases as "dark matter" and "dark energy," whose existence is known only from a small number of measurable effects. But if I say "telephone," it is so familiar that we at least think we have a grasp on what it is for all practical purposes, and in most cases we do. But now imagine an unnerving experimental film called *The Telephone*, in which such an object has a number of disturbing features that elude our understanding. We are now dealing with a real object rather than a sensual one, and I'm not sure much would be added by calling it a name different from "telephone." The second part of your question was how we know we are talking about the same thing when using the same name to refer to both a sensual object and a real one simultaneously. Well, we don't know. We constantly make mistakes of that sort, especially in science. Scientists spoke for generations about "phlogiston," but no one still believes it exists.

In the pre-Einstein period astronomers were convinced there was a hidden planet called Vulcan, which also turned out not to exist. It was invented to explain the anomalies in the orbit of Mercury. They tried to say that Vulcan was always on the opposite side of the Sun from Earth and that this was why we never saw it. But after General Relativity was able to account for the anomalies of Mercury, Vulcan was no longer needed, and people stopped referring to it. Even in ancient

Greece, the Pythagoreans believed in something called the “counter-Earth,” which they needed in order to have the desired ten entities in the heavens. Today, of course, most people have never heard of this “counter-Earth,” and presumably no one at all still believes in it. What have we gotten rid of more recently? I grew up with a strong interest in dinosaurs, like many children. It was common knowledge at the time that dinosaurs were reptiles, as even their name suggests. But then it turned out that dinosaurs were related to birds, not reptiles. We still have the sensual object of reptilian dinosaurs, in the minds of people like me who remember that phase of paleontology, and in countless outdated books from the period. But there is no real object reasonably well correlated with that sensual object, and thus we say that reptilian dinosaurs never existed. But of course, science changes. And just in the last few days, the very existence of dark matter has been challenged, and we’ll see where that goes.

You argue that objects have a strong tendency to withdraw themselves into darkness, perhaps into “the night in which all cows are black”, as Hegel would say.⁶⁷ But you also argue that there is still a way to contact them, albeit in an oblique way. For you, art, or the production of metaphors, is what provides a communication between two real objects, or two “inward I”s, as you put it. Accordingly, when we are under the influence of an artwork, we leave behind or transcend our sensual being by putting ourselves in place of the metaphorical object intimated in the artwork, and by doing so the hitherto impenetrable inwardness of the real object is, for the first time, opened to us. This is the only way, according to you, to make any veritable contact with a real object, albeit still in a theatrical form.

Our question is the following: According to you, we humans are able to contact real objects through aesthetic experience despite their constant withdrawal from visibility. Does this mean that non-human objects, which also suffer from a lack of a veritable contact, communication or dialogue with each other, have to remain alien to each other inescapably? Do you think metaphor is solely a human product? Aristotle argues that while humans are the best imitators, each creature in nature has a mimetic faculty

⁶⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 9.

and constantly imitates each other and their environment.⁶⁸ Are there aesthetics, theatricality and metaphor in nature in the broadest sense of this term? If not, what gives humans privilege in their relation to real objects?

I should begin by pointing out that the night in which all cows are black was a reference to Schelling's philosophy of the absolute, and there is nothing like that in OOO. In the realm of real objects, it is not the case that all cows are black simply because they can't be observed directly. Figuratively speaking, they come in every color of the rainbow, and we constantly receive hints about their underlying nature: when Heidegger's tools break, to give just one example.

As for the first part of your question, everyone wants our dealings with the world to take the form of a representation, one that more or less adequately mirrors what things look like. Richard Rorty wrote a famous critique of this procedure.⁶⁹ But there are other and deeper ways that objects affect us than by being spread out before us for visual examination. Yes, there is something like scientific knowledge of the world, but the current in philosophy of science I find most interesting tells us that this knowledge has a primarily transient, inadequate, and negative character. I'm thinking here of Karl Popper on falsifiability, Imre Lakatos's view that scientific research programs are always riddled with anomalies, and Thomas Kuhn's attack on cumulative continuity in science.⁷⁰ (Bruno Latour interests me more as an ontologist than as a philosopher of science, since I don't agree with him that a scientific theory is nothing more than the sum total of actors that were mobilized to establish it.)⁷¹

For obvious reasons, science has wanted to make statements about the world without any reference to the humans making these statements. Humans have seemed like contaminators of truth who spoil reality with their political motivations, and even spoil the arts by not exercising pure taste but becoming

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals & History of Animals I, Parts of Animals I*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis, Hackett, 2019.

⁶⁹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1981.

⁷⁰ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London, Routledge, 1992; Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980; Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

⁷¹ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*, trans. C. Porter, Cambridge: MA, Harvard University Press, 1988.

too emotionally involved with artworks: see Immanuel Kant's Third Critique and Michael Fried's work on anti-theatricality in painting.⁷² But now there is Badiou, and one of his strongest ideas is that political truths do not exist without someone's fidelity to them, and the same no doubt goes for his artistic, scientific, and amorous truths as well. In fact, his notion that philosophy is always haunted by anti-philosophy amounts to a theatrical model of truth more than a representational one. More than anything else, truths are what guide the sincere investments of a subject in one thing rather than another.⁷³

As for the second part of the question, the demarcation between humans and other life-forms is one of the ancient concerns of philosophy, even if the results have been relatively meager so far. There is much to be learned from Aristotle's *De Anima*, but ultimately he gives us a rather commonsensical division between plants, animals, and humans.⁷⁴ In his time they knew nothing about fungi, bacteria, archaea, viruses, lichens, or symbiotic relationships between different life forms. St. Thomas Aquinas adds a distinction within animals between those that can only sense (such as shellfish) and those that can both sense and move; otherwise, his schema is similar to Aristotle's.⁷⁵ With Descartes we have a more implausible model where everything besides God is either *res extensa* or *res cogitans*, so that if you are not a full-blown thinking human you are really just a machine. If you torture monkeys and make them scream it doesn't matter, because these are merely mechanical sounds like wheels in need of grease. No one but a psychopath could truly believe such a thing, let alone act on it. In Heidegger we also find a threefold schema, but it doesn't even say anything about plants: the wordless stone, the world-poor animal and the world-forming human.⁷⁶ I think he was initially aiming high in his 1929-30 Lecture Course, but then couldn't give us anything more than another commonsensical distinction. He never explains

⁷² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. Pluhar, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1987; Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

⁷³ See for instance Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, trans. K. Reinhard & S. Spitzer, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018.

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, trans. H. Lawson-Tancred, London, Penguin, 1987.

⁷⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, vol. 1, Notre Dame: IN, Christian Classics, 1948, pp. 100-101.

⁷⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*.

what world-poverty means, and anyway, this concept does nothing to allow us to distinguish between different animals. Is a dolphin the same as a sponge? Is a monkey the same as a cockroach? Some might say that we should let biologists make these distinctions for us, but I disagree. In every field there are philosophical questions where philosophers are best-equipped to weigh in, though they seldom succeed in doing so. More recently, Meillassoux himself offered a fairly commonsensical distinction between matter, life, human thought, though he more daringly added the virtual God who does not exist now but may emerge in the future. But among other problems, this schema lumps all life-forms other than humans into a single category.

Someone who does a better job on these topics is Helmuth Plessner, a less famous contemporary of Heidegger.⁷⁷ He argues plausibly that the gap between single-celled and multicellular life is one of the most important ontological leaps in nature, along with the distinction between creatures with a central nervous system and those without one. I also tend to think that playfulness will end up ranking as one of the higher mental faculties.⁷⁸ As for what makes humans special, I think we are more likely to learn this from psychoanalysis than from neurology.⁷⁹

You argue that Husserl’s famous phenomenological principle “back to the things themselves” is misleading. Instead, according to you, the correct principle should be formulated in reference to Kant, as “back to the things-in-themselves.” What are the main differences between these two ambitious projects?

Husserl makes it clear that he regards any notion of a “thing-in-itself” as absurd. It is impossible that anything should exist that might not be the terminus of a possible intentional act. Earlier we spoke about the reason for this: Husserl

⁷⁷ Helmuth Plessner, *Levels of Organic Life and the Human: An Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. M. Hyatt, New York, Fordham University Press, 2019. See also Graham Harman, “On the Punctuation of Organisms: The Case of Helmuth Plessner,” in *Life in the Posthuman Condition: Critical Responses to the Anthropocene*, edited by S.E. Wilmer & Audrone Žukauskaite, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. 111-129.

⁷⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Boston, The Beacon Press, 1955.

⁷⁹ See for instance Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function: As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York, Norton, 2006, pp. 75-81.

doesn't want the complexity of having to explain how the Berlin in my mind would relate to the Berlin in the world. But wanting to avoid a difficulty is not sufficient grounds for positing the non-existence of a problem. After all, it should be clear to anyone that many wild things can happen in Berlin, while few of them can happen in my idea of Berlin except as fleeting phantasies. In this sense, Husserl continues the German idealist critique of the thing-in-itself, though he does add an additional tension between intentional objects and their two kinds of qualities. This tension is what makes the eidetic reduction both possible and necessary, and of course it led to several generations of beautiful phenomenological descriptions performed by such authors as Merleau-Ponty and Levinas.

Reading Heidegger is enough to show many of the problems with Husserl. The question of being does not really exist in Husserl, as Heidegger showed in the opening *History of the Concept of Time*, since the standard of reality for Husserl is direct presence to the mind. The tool-analysis and the fundamental cognitive role given to moods cannot really be found in Husserl, even if we look with the best of intentions. My point is not to praise Heidegger at Husserl's expense; as mentioned, Heidegger largely overlooks the Husserlian object/quality rift that finally makes it possible to work our way out of Hume's excessive influence. But Heidegger is simply more alert to what we philosophers call the in-itself. True enough, he is just as quick as Husserl to denounce the question of the outside world as a "pseudo-problem." But as already mentioned, there is an important passage in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* where Heidegger explicitly takes the side of the in-itself against German Idealism, though unfortunately he chooses to emphasize human finitude rather than the finite reality of the things themselves. This is one of the major limitations of Heidegger: he is too fixated on the *Sein/Dasein* pair, a variant of the standard procedure of modern Western philosophy. Yet he does leave some room in the tool-analysis for tools to influence each other, and that's why OOO embraces him as a forerunner. A forerunner is someone who took steps that we today can recognize as half-steps, with the aim of extending them.

As we spoke above, OOO decentralizes human, human action, its relation and existence in philosophy. The issue of subjectivity is one of the main concerns of modern philosophy up until now. Does OOO

offer a new mode of subjectivity? Can we think that OOO offers a new reception of the subject which is decentralized and not a privileged being over others?

I've never liked the term "subject," since it implies that human thought is something massively different in kind from everything else in the universe. This is the orientation of Badiou and Žižek, who might even be called a subject-oriented ontologist.⁸⁰ Where I do agree with Žižek is that I think psychoanalysis, and Lacan in particular, is likely to provide some of the hints that allow us to come up with a new conception of the human. But unlike his Ljubljana School group –including Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, and a number of non-Slovenians– I don't think Lacan should be read through the lenses of Hegel.⁸¹

It also seems to me that aesthetics is another area of philosophy likely to shed light on the differences between humans, animals, and plants. Plessner makes some progress in going beyond external criteria for what makes one animal species different from another, and this part of his path is worth following. If I can digress for a moment, one problem we face in continental philosophy is the widespread misunderstanding of Heidegger's tool-analysis as saying "praxis comes before theory." In fact, this has already spread well beyond continental thought, since it is the core of Hubert Dreyfus's interpretation of Heidegger, which dominates analytic commentary on his work.⁸² Although I'm glad Dreyfus was able to make Heidegger seem approachable to more analytic philosophers, the idea that social background assumptions come before explicit theoretical content is not really a heavyweight idea. The problem is that the difference between social background practices and explicit thoughts is not such a big one. Our thoughts inevitably fall short of reality itself, but the same is true of our practices. My unconscious use of a chair does not touch reality any more intimately than my conscious thoughts about it.

⁸⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London, Verso, 2012.

⁸¹ Mladen Dolar, "Hegel as the Other Side of Psychoanalysis," in J. Clemens & R. Grigg, eds., *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 129-154; Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*, London, Verso, 2012.

⁸² Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1990.

I won't go further into this topic, since I only brought it up only to introduce aesthetics as another mode of cognition distinct from theory and praxis. Aesthetics is more closely related to Heidegger's account not of the hammer, but of the *broken* hammer. When the hammer malfunctions, we do become obtrusively conscious of it, but that does not mean that the innermost being of the hammer is presented directly before us. Instead, the failure of the hammer merely *alludes* to its being, which remains withdrawn and absent. We could then go on to classify the different modes of cognitive allusion that belong to any given life form. This is the terrain I would prefer to explore rather than the ultimately rather banal difference between practical and theoretical. There have already been a number of great philosophers of aesthetics: Aristotle, Kant, Hegel. But it has mostly remained a side topic of philosophy. As George Santayana put it in *The Sense of Beauty*, even though aesthetics is a minor part of philosophy, it is a major component of human life.⁸³ You'd be surprised how many purely aesthetic decision you make every day, such as what shirt to put on, or whether to open the bedroom curtain yet or not. My wife and I chose our apartment for aesthetic reasons even though we can barely afford it. It has abundant sunlight, and nice views of both the Pacific Ocean and part of the Long Beach city center, whereas our previous apartment was on an internal courtyard and was therefore too dark. The weather is nice almost every day. There is the water, the fresh air, animals ranging from herons to leaping dolphin to tree-climbing raccoons, not to mention the South American parrots who reportedly once escaped from a pet store fire and have now multiplied by the thousands. The greatest virtue of California is an aesthetic one. And beyond the simple pleasure of living here, I would like to see aesthetics become the central discipline in the next century of philosophy.

You argue that we must take into account the moral status of nonhuman beings. We should treat them not only as a mere means but also as an end, a status Kant exclusively grants to humans. This means that dignity, at least in the Kantian sense, is not a privilege of a group of beings such as rational beings but universally shared by any entity. What would then be the basic steps to expand ethics into

⁸³ George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory*, Mineola: NY, Dover, 1955.

the realm of objects? What would be the basic forms of loving and respecting them? How can we change our common, uncritical attitudes towards nonhuman animals, objects and environment? How can OOO help us see that something is fundamentally wrong in our basic forms of treating objects as a mere means, especially in terms of contemporary forms of production and consumption?

I'm not sure I would go quite as far as the wording of this question suggests. The de-privileging of humans in OOO is meant more in ontological terms, and is designed to combat the biases of the transcendental standpoint in philosophy. It is often our critics who push things further and say ridiculous things such as "for OOO, humans have the same ethical status as garbage." Not at all. That's a lazy critique by people who are over-invested in a politically charged version of transcendental ontology.

That said, there are indeed some openings from OOO onto an improved ethical status for non-human entities. I've been a vegetarian by choice since age seven, from the very moment I fully realized where meat was coming from. That was somewhat hard to do in the Iowa of the mid-1970s, but I've stuck to it. Moving away from sheer biography, once we drop the idea that human thought has some sort of unique cosmic status, we are more able to see it as part of a continuum with various sorts of animal intelligence, emotional capacity, and aesthetic sense, along with playfulness and a sense of humor.

As for the ethical status of non-sentient reality, the canonical treatment in my view is *The Imperative*, by Alphonso Lingis.⁸⁴ If we see a cigarette burning in a dry forest, most likely we feel an ethical imperative to stomp it out, even if someone fails to do so through laziness or outright perversity. If a human were to run across a penguin chick, only a sadist would crush and kill it, and even that sadist would do so precisely for the grotesque pleasure of committing an atrocity against something with ethical value. But Lingis goes a bit further than this. Imagine that you have a delicious *grand cru* piece of gourmet chocolate. We know, deep down, that the chocolate should only be consumed under special conditions, just as certain bottles of wine are reserved to commemorate major life events. If someone were to take the chocolate and wolf it down, chased with a glass of

⁸⁴ Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative*, Bloomington: IN, Indiana University Press, 1998.

Coca-Cola, perhaps belching loudly afterward, we would find something ethically grotesque about this behavior, even though no sentient creature is tangibly harmed by it.

Lingis mentions visiting a beautiful temple in Kyoto during snowfall, with the flakes falling gently on centuries of Japanese history. But amidst this extraordinary setting, the person he was with put on a Walkman and was listening to low-grade pop music. Lingis was angered, thinking his friend had ruined the entire experience. And there is something to this. People with tact and taste tend to do the right things in the right circumstances and not the wrong things, whereas people with bad taste offend us because they are not doing things in the right way. This is not about educational or class snobbery, but simply about whether people act appropriately in a given circumstance. When I lived in New Mexico, my friends and I would sometimes drive to Jemez Springs at dusk to sit in the mountainside hot springs. It was a peaceful, beautiful site that brought a sense of communion with nature. But then one night, a newcomer came with some of those cheap green glowsticks, swaggering and talking too much for the setting. He cracked one of the sticks in half to get it going, and made the most absurd utterance: “Hey, a buck fifty for twelve hours of light!” In my eyes, at least, that was a flagrant violation of the Lingisian imperative.

Then we can open up the question of whether animals themselves can behave ethically or unethically. The usual assumption is that only humans can be judged this way, but this often stems from religious presuppositions. There are plenty of online videos these days in which a young animal’s mother has died and the baby ends up being raised by a different mother, even of another species. It might feel easy to denounce such videos as sentimental rubbish, but if we are honest with ourselves, we will probably find ourselves silently praising these animal mothers for going beyond the call of duty and raising the young of another. If we can praise such cases, can we denounce others, or must we conclude that animals are simply killing-and-eating machines beyond good and evil? Recently we’ve been watching online a pair of eagles in California waiting to hatch their eggs. One day some ravens came close to the nest, apparently with the aim of eating the eggs. The mother eagle put up a great fight with numerous wing slaps, and then the father returned to the nest and drove the ravens away. Something seemed heroic about it. Does that mean that I’m merely “projecting” human ethical

virtues onto a more mechanical world of animals? That seems like a badly outdated, ultimately Cartesian view. The truth is, philosophers have no compelling theories one way or another about the human/animal divide, which should be replaced by multiple divides between all kinds of creatures. Why do we assume that the human/dolphin divide is any wider than the dolphin/shark divide, for instance? I'm not proposing a theory yet, just adding a few cautionary notes.

A lot of smart people are working these days on philosophical issues concerning animals and plants, and I expect a lot of progress to be made on these topics over the course of the next century. It is one topic on which modern philosophy has failed grotesquely, doing little more than repeating commonsensical clichés. It is an area where wordplay often passes for thought: such as Heidegger's idea that humans are "world-forming" and animals "poor in world," without ever giving much clarification on what either of those terms means.⁸⁵

OOO is not indifferent to ethical and social issues. We would like to ask about some central problems in our world today. We can say that xenophobia is very dominant in almost all parts of the world in the face of the immigrancy and borders. As seen from your social media account, you are much interested in social and political issues in the US. What would you like to say about this problem, the problem of raising xenophobia all over the world, as a philosopher?

Xenophobia is the stupidest attitude one can have, and it makes me angrier than almost anything else. Humans are spread across the planet, and have formed cultures and languages with centuries or millennia of history behind them. This presents a golden opportunity for learning about certain contingencies in our own culture, and beyond that, doesn't it make sense to find new ideas wherever they are available? These days we also have a sort of reverse xenophobia where anything creative by white males of European descent is automatically denounced. There are no doubt some historical debts to be repaid, and some groups with legitimate grievances. But why ignore good ideas just because their

⁸⁵ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World–Finitude–Solitude*, trans. W. McNeill & A. Walker, Bloomington: IN, Indiana University Press, 2001.

originators had pale-colored skin, or a y-chromosome, or because they are dead? We need every good idea we can get.

Maybe some of this is because I grew up in small-town Iowa, almost as far from an ocean as one can possibly be. We didn't travel much in my childhood; my parents were young hippies who didn't have the money for it, and they had three young sons. For me, travel was part of a mythical future that might or might not one day come. Initially I travelled mostly to Europe, but also to Mexico and once to Brazil. Then came the job offer from Egypt, which changed everything. Not only did Egypt itself open my eyes to many things, it also put me close to many other countries, and I saw as many of them as I could. I ended up marrying a foreigner: you have already met my wife Necla, who like both of you is Turkish, from Ankara. It has become my second home. There are still some parts of the world that I have completely missed, such as Southeast Asia, Central America, and West Africa. But they are all on my radar. I will possibly be visiting Georgia for the first time this summer, to lecture. I have never regretted travelling to any new country, or regretted spending money on this purpose. It was so unlikely that I would ever have had these opportunities. My grandfather on the Harman side loved maps and atlases and would daydream over them in my presence. But he was only able to travel abroad once, to Canada, and not even all the way to Toronto. I wish he could have come with me on all these trips, as my father eventually started to do.

This gets at the root of my abhorrence for Trump. America would be a complete bore without its black and Latin populations, along with its many other voluntary and involuntary immigrant communities. I was going to start by saying that we don't know whether Trump is really a racist or is just using racism to manipulate his followers. But that would be too generous: he and his father were found liable for housing discrimination as far back as the early 1970s, and the evidence of his father's membership in the Ku Klux Klan is enough to put the housing issue in an even uglier light. A few years ago a scholar of Woody Guthrie, one of the major American folk singers, found the lyrics to an unrecorded song about the racism of "Old Man Trump," Donald Trump's father, who was Guthrie's landlord at one point. For me, the idea of an America dominated by white Protestant reaction is horrible. I grew up in the midst of that sort of demographic group, and it isn't worth returning to unless its spiced up by many

more influences. In this respect, my return to the United States in 2015 could not have been more horribly timed.

Moreover, can we think of Eurocentricism which excludes other particulars in its claim of universality, as a similar and another form of xenophobia in philosophy and the intellectual borders? Does OOO have a possibility to offer an alternative to ideological priority of Europe and the West, and its subordinating “universality”?

Yes, because the emphasis on cultural diversity is built into OOO. The real can only be approached indirectly, and that means that you’d better not get too cocky about your own culture’s favored means of doing so. We can never make a OOO argument for the superiority of western reason like Husserl does in *The Origin of Geometry*.⁸⁶ In fact, relativism is a bigger problem for us than Eurocentrism, though relativism doesn’t bother me as much as it does other realist philosophers such as my friends Markus Gabriel and Maurizio Ferraris.⁸⁷ For me, the real enemy is idealism rather than relativism, and idealism is what you get when you think that any particular human means of accessing the real could be congruent with the real itself. You are confusing the thing with some sort of ideal knowledge of the thing.

At any rate, no one could say that OOO isn’t friendly to a wide range of cultures, because we are. The electives I’ve taught in the past few years include Islamic Philosophy, Chinese Philosophy, and Indian Philosophy. I’ve added Frantz Fanon to the liberal arts core at SCI-Arc, which I supervise. But perhaps I’m most familiar with the Islamic philosophical tradition, due to the important years I spent in Cairo. I’m certainly in favor of finding good ideas wherever they are, but my reason for emphasizing Islamic philosophy is that I consider it a part of the Western philosophical tradition, and we need to settle the relationships between these two camps before we start making demands for a “world” philosophy. Islamic thinkers obviously come from the same monotheistic lineage of prophets that gave us Judaism and Christianity. They also work directly in the

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry An Introduction*, trans. J.P. Leavey Jr, Lincoln: NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

⁸⁷ Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*, trans. S. De Sanctis, Albany: NY, SUNY Press, 2015; Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle. The story of Western philosophy cannot be told accurately without a broad view of what was happening in the Islamic world during the cold winter separating the later Roman Empire from St. Anselm and Abelard in the 11th century. There was the great Irishman John Scotus Eriugena in between, but he was the exception that proves the rule.

Most Euro-American philosophers know at least a bit about the likes of al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), and Averroës (Ibn Rushd). And these are important thinkers who need to be learned better in Western countries. But the irony is that my favorite Islamic philosophers are not these Greek-sympathizing rationalists, but the more hardcore religious figures such as al-Ash'ari and al-Ghazali. The reason is that their idea of God as the sole causal actor launched the occasionalist school, which helped to establish seriously the idea that objects are cut off from each other. That is obviously a key OOO view, though we regard the divine solution as an arbitrary mechanism. When looking at any case of causation, we can't just say "God did it." Someone might embrace this as a personal religious view, but we need justification for such a statement if we hope to convince anyone else. As I've argued in my books, we are still in the occasionalist era, in the sense that Hume and Kant are occasionalists who merely replace God with the human mind as the sole place where causation occurs. This may be more palatable to secular Western academics than invoking God in the manner of al-Ash'ari or Nicolas Malebranche, but it's still an unconvincing attempt to give all causal power in the universe to a single super-entity.

There is also the fact that individual cultures have a finite lifespan, just like animal species. For instance, I happen to be from a culture that has long assumed that "majority rules" is the basis for any fair political system, that maximum economic development should be the key principle of society, and which has leveraged that economic development into massive military power as well. But we are at a moment of deep political uncertainty, and the United States as we know it could be gone in twenty years, or maybe it will continue for another six hundred. All we know is that it will eventually exist no more, and neither will what we call modern Western philosophy. It is important to be able to imagine what might take its place, and to that end it is obviously useful to study the other philosophical cultures that have existed. Too often this turns into attempts to gain moral superiority by denouncing the West. As stated earlier, this is not a good

idea, because there are many intellectual and aesthetic treasures that we owe to Europe. Let's look more widely than Europe, but let's not pretend that it doesn't have much to offer anymore.

Your academic career took a path that is quite different from a typical professional American philosopher. You worked at the American University in Cairo for sixteen years. You produced most of your works there. Did working in a tumultuous Islamic country in the Middle East rather than an idyllic American college town have any impact on your philosophy in any form? Cairo has recently undergone huge social and political turmoil but historically it was one of the most vibrant cultural, intellectual and civilizational centers in the Islamic world. Did this background play any role in the development of your philosophy?

Yes it did. Bathing in the atmosphere of Cairo for sixteen years is something for which I will always feel grateful. It is probably the luckiest thing that ever happened to me.

Job applications are now done mostly online. But back in 1999 when I was a freshly minted Ph.D., we had to look for advertisements in a short newspaper called "Jobs for Philosophers." Maybe they're even still using that name somewhere; I don't know. But there used to be roughly 250 jobs listed in each issue, and as an individual you might find yourself at least somewhat qualified for forty or fifty of them. I think I applied for thirty that year. But there were two in particular that intrigued me more than the rest: the American University in Cairo and American University of Beirut. Despite the similar names, they are rivals rather than branches of a single institution. I had never been to that part of the world, and had no idea that it would become so important for me.

Job interviews in those days were almost all held at the convention of the American Philosophical Association between Christmas and New Year's. That year it was in Boston. I had four or five interviews, and the one that went the best was with Cairo. I was interviewed by the Chair of Philosophy, Steffen Stelzer: an interesting person who was born in East Germany and studied with Derrida in Paris, but ended up in Cairo for most of his career until retiring. There he became one of the leaders of the Sufi movement. The interview was held in his hotel room, a practice no longer permitted, but in that case it made me feel more

comfortable. For whatever reasons, he decided shortly afterward to offer me the job, and I was quick to accept. That's the main dividing line in my life as a whole, unless it was when I discovered philosophy in high school.

As you say, Cairo has been one of the centers of world civilization, and is the largest city in the Islamic world, though Istanbul may be catching up. Those first few years in Egypt were the most exciting period in my life. Time really slows down when you first enter an environment that unfamiliar; it felt like I was gaining extra years of life due to all of that slow-motion unfolding of a new place. I'd never lived in a place with sunny weather before, though since 2019 I've been in another such place after we moved to Los Angeles. I would return repeatedly to the Khan al-Khalili bazaar in the medieval district of Cairo, the pyramids and the Egyptian Museum, and head up to Alexandria on many weekends to get a dose of fresh air. There was the mountain in the Sinai where Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments. On top of that, I had opportunities to visit Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, some of the Persian Gulf Countries, a bit of Africa, several trips to India, and once to Japan and South Korea. All of these places were completely new to me. Flights to Europe are also cheaper from Egypt, and so I spent a lot of my vacation time there. The American University in Cairo was generous with research and conference grants, so I was often able to spend a month in Paris working on a book. From being a procrastinating graduate student, I became a very productive junior faculty member, so the environment obviously had a good effect on me.

I'm saving mention of Turkey for last, since it turned out to be the most important nearby country for me. My wife was also on the faculty in Cairo, though she arrived nine years after I did. Before I knew her I had already made ten trips to Turkey, just because I loved it so much. I should say that they were all trips to Istanbul, which was so fascinating that I never went out to see any other places until Necla took me to her family in Ankara. By now they have taken me to see many parts of the country. They even have a small summer place on the Aegean coast, just a few miles from Miletus, the birthplace of Greek philosophy. That is a thrilling visit for me every summer, though the heat is nearly unbearable. Another favorite place was the ruins of Perga, where there lived the mathematician Appollonius, who studied conic sections. We had studied him in detail during my undergraduate years, so that was another highlight.

Upon arrival in Cairo I knew nothing about Islamic philosophy, but dove into it immediately. After a little while I decided I should teach it in class, finding it odd to be teaching Egyptians nothing but European authors: Hume, Mill, and so forth. This gave me a bit of an adrenaline rush at first, because I wasn't sure I was qualified to teach Islamic subjects in Cairo, but after awhile you realize that you're dealing with undergraduates who may have received good but unsystematic schooling. A similar thing happened when I began teaching at SCI-Arc. At first I was afraid to bring up architectural subjects with the students for my sake. But by now I'm afraid to bring up architectural subjects for their sakes, because many of them have not yet read the basic texts in the field. With a few years of careful study, you can become a reasonably informed interlocutor on many subjects even if not an expert.

In any case, Cairo was only supposed to be a two-year job for me, maybe four years at the most. There was a strict sixty percent tenure quota by department, and Philosophy was already over sixty percent as the result of a political compromise a few years earlier, in which both rival factions had gotten tenure for the person they wanted. But since I loved it there, my strategy was to get so much work done that it would be hard for them to get rid of me. And I did get the work done, though there were some real cloak-and-dagger conspiracies by some to get rid of me anyway, and by others to keep me around. In the end, I came out victorious from all of these shadowy and somewhat ridiculous schemes. And finally Lisa Anderson showed up from Columbia University as our Provost and then President, and she was a genuine Ivy Leaguer who always supported productive faculty over the many backbiting courtiers. Eventually I ended up as Associate Provost and Distinguished University Professor, and it was a good situation. We only left because of the deteriorating security situation after the 2011 Revolution. And even then I kept flying to Cairo from Ankara for a couple of years, and even flew from Dubuque, Iowa to Cairo for a semester, which was pretty crazy. After that it was clear that I needed a job in the United States, and that's where the SCI-Arc part of the story begins.

Today there is a small discussion about the character of “Islamic Philosophy”, and also whether it is a living tradition or it was a process in the history of philosophy. What we today call “Islamic Philosophy” is mainly the history of philosophy made before Kant

(except for a few figures). In this sense, can the endeavor of OOO going before/beyond Kant offer an alternative view to the reception of the historical form of Islamic Philosophy in the contemporary scene? Shortly, through OOO, can we understand Islamic Philosophy in another way than as a mere history of philosophy?

Kant was a great philosopher. But he presented his philosophy as a Copernican Revolution that rendered everything before him as little more than dogmatic metaphysics. Once you contest this self-description of Kant (as Whitehead did well before OOO) one of the advantages is that you can now gain renewed access to the philosophical seriousness of pre-Kantian figures. Aristotle is a big one for me, but there was a long period during which Islamic thinkers (along with Jewish thinkers writing mostly in Arabic) were carrying the torch as Europe entered a phase of relative intellectual decline.

As for the current state of Islamic philosophy, Peter Adamson makes the point that Islamic philosophy didn't stop with Averroës; that's just when Europe stopped being influenced by Islamic thinkers.⁸⁸ I can't say a lot about the home-grown philosophies of the Islamic world today, since my encounters in Cairo were mostly with Egyptian Heideggerians, and I didn't like their version of Heidegger much. I actually learned more from meeting a group of relativity theorists at Cairo University; they were mavericks who claimed, apparently in agreement with some physicists in Russia, that black holes don't exist. Although I was unable to follow most of their equations, they were an interesting group to visit.

If I had to guess, I would say that Iran probably has a lot going on philosophically right now, though it's hard to get word of it. But yes, there could be some interesting philosophers in the Islamic world that we've never heard of. Even Europe has had important recent philosophers who are still little known, so this kind of thing happens. You can't find the best philosophers when you're looking for philosophers who remind you of the previous generation of important ones. There won't be a "next Derrida" or "next Deleuze." Instead, it will be someone who is initially unrecognizable because they don't fit these molds.

⁸⁸ Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*, vol. 3, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

One last question: while your contributions to philosophy have often been admired and heavily discussed, the very medium in which most of your philosophy is articulated, namely your writing itself, has been overlooked. Most people say that you are a brilliant writer. But what they don't say is how you have become one. Would you like to tell us about your adventure and experience of writing?

In high school and even college, I had friends who were more polished writers than I was. It took years before I was recognized as talented in this respect. What helped me advance most as a writer were strong examples. Everyone reads Nietzsche at a young age, and no one else can successfully write in that style, but he did leave me with the lasting impression that vigorous and personal writing is a necessity. My real early model for philosophical writing was José Ortega y Gasset, whom I discovered almost by accident. He was always directly present in every sentence he wrote, and that was something well worth emulating. It was like he was speaking to the reader, trying to show them important things as if one-on-one, and not many philosopher give me that impression.

But then came the Alphonso Lingis experience during study for my Master's Degree. Lingis is still the best writer of English prose I've ever met.⁸⁹ Even now, at almost ninety years old, he's a brilliant stylist. Since I know Lingis personally and have spent a fair amount of time with him over the years, I was also able to observe him writing, seeing how he fit it into the rest of his day. My style is certainly different from his, but he's always on my mind when I'm writing. I try to make sure that whatever I write wouldn't bore Lingis if he were reading it. But there are plenty of good stylists in philosophy to learn from: Plato, Bergson, Schopenhauer are widely admired as writers. I used to love the simple directness of Descartes's *Discourse on Method*, the book I reread most often as an undergraduate.⁹⁰ Years later I discovered Giordano Bruno, who still cracks me up whenever I read him.⁹¹ People don't know what they're missing if they haven't yet read Bruno. As for other living writers, I greatly enjoy reading Elaine Scarry,

⁸⁹ Tom Sparrow, ed., *The Alphonso Lingis Reader*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

⁹⁰ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. D. Cress, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1998.

⁹¹ Giordano Bruno, *Cause, Principle, and Unity*, trans. R. De Lucca, Cambridge: UK, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

and I've already mentioned Jane Bennett.⁹² But I don't like reading Derrida, and never have. We have an almost sacred obligation to create a bond with our readers and lead them along to see what we have seen. The point is not to make as many puns as possible, though perhaps in the case of James Joyce it was justified.

When I write, I try to imagine reading each sentence out loud to a group of listeners in my living room. If I intuitively feel them becoming distracted as I read, then I know the sentence needs to be fixed. The most important point is that *clear* writing is not enough, and this is what analytic philosophy most often gets wrong. Clarity is an important part of writing, but only in the negative sense that reading unclear prose is distraction and a bore. A merely clear sentence does not necessarily draw anyone in, and a sentence needs a reader as much as a painting needs a beholder. The writer needs to aim beyond clarity, at *lucidity*. Lucid prose is the sort where every sentence commands the reader's attention because the topic under discussion seems to be directly there on the page, as a drama in which we are personally involved. This requires rhetorical skill, but in our era "rhetoric" has been misinterpreted as "mere rhetoric." We ought to go back and learn rhetoric from the Greeks and Romans, or even from a really good modern political speaker like Daniel Webster in the nineteenth-century United States.⁹³ Philosophical writing is not something to be ejected into outer space in a pristine titanium tube and judged someday by alien computers. Instead, it is addressed to readers here on earth, and every sentence we write should be aimed at flawed and distractible human readers. We should not demand more labor from such readers than is strictly necessary. Philosophy is hard enough as it is.

We are sure that young philosophers especially will be very happy to read this part of the interview. Thank you very much again. It was a pleasure to listen to you.

You are welcome.

⁹² Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton: NJ, Princeton University Press, 1999.

⁹³ Edwin P. Whipple, *The Great Speeches and Orations of Daniel Webster*, Washington: D.C., Beard Books, 2001.