

OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY AND THE OTHER OF WE IN ANTHROPOCENTRIC POSTHUMANISM

by Yogi Hale Hendlin 

Abstract. The object-oriented ontology group of philosophies, and certain strands of posthumanism, overlook important ethical and biological differences, which make a difference. These allied intellectual movements, which have at times found broad popular appeal, attempt to weird life as a rebellion to the forced melting of lifeforms through the artefacts of capitalist realism. They truck, however, in a recursive solipsism resulting in ontological flattening, overlooking that things only show up to us according to our attunement to them. Ecology and biology tend to get lost in the celebration of “thingness,” which puts on par artifacts, trash, and living beings. Such abstractions fail to understand the political, ethical, and ontological implications of eliding the animate/nonanimate distinction, which from the opposite direction (of flattening) reproduce the same violences of historical colonialism (hierarchical humanism). I argue that ontological flattening entails epistemological narcissism, fails to take into account plural (interspecies) perspectives, and propose biosemiotics can address these shortcomings through becoming-with nonhuman knowledge.

Keywords: biosemiotics; interspecies; new materialism; object-oriented ontology; posthumanism

At its best, the philosophical movement of posthumanism productively weirds life, rebelling against capitalist realism’s conforming tendencies to canalize and separate lifeforms. Posthumanism dismantles the Great Chain of Being myth that has been used to systematically exclude classes of humans and the rest of life from self-determination.¹ Posthumanism legitimates the claims made on us by the territories we inhabit, the organisms we love, and the habitats that compose us. Deconstructing globalized hierarchies of oppression aggrandized through technoscience, posthumanism enables generative vulnerability, positioning the various human beings that compose our species as plural and incommensurable rather than tokens of that contorted type *humanity*. Our species too, according to posthumanist designs, is but one amongst others without promoting certain differences

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(especially surrounding rationality) into entitlements to unilaterally exercise power over others' lives (Haraway 2008; Wolfe 2009; Braidotti 2013).

While sometimes conflated with “the posthuman” or transhumanists—who really are just humanists taking perfectionism to its logical disembodied conclusions—intent on abstracting away the physical world to arrive at a universal notion of rationality rendering human and other earthly life obsolete, posthumanism queers, and decenters. Humanism has historically instrumentalized life—humans included—for the sake of universalizing values of progress. The concept of “the human,” just like “the Anthropocene,” obscures an irreducible plurality of forms and values. Such agglomerating categories usually serve the interests of those most responsible for societal misdeeds (like the fossil fuel companies responsible for global warming), aiming to dilute institutional responsibility for harms to perpetuate the colonial convenience of dehumanizing others as a technique to justify usurpation of commons (as with slavery). Breaking free of the category human allots the diversity of actual existing humans deserved voice and recognition, without forcing conformity to a homogeneous performance of being human according to what bell hooks (2000) has called the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”

Yet, posthumanism has left in its deconstructive wake an uneasy vacuum of tenable positive tenets to replace the previous cultural and conceptual moorings it has thankfully laid to rest. Unable to produce consensus around a guiding replacement cosmology, however, various substitutes have rushed in to fill the empty conceptual space. One of the stickiest contenders has been the collection of philosophies going by the moniker “object-oriented ontology” (OOO).²

A metaphysical realist stance dealing with the question of representation—the supposed gap between how we interpret the world and how (or what) it actually is—OOO and its variants take the classical Platonic and Kantian distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena* and claim that the essence of objects remains withdrawn from our or any inquiry. Suspect of philosophies that claim knowledge or access to the world or parts of it, OOO—an umbrella term to describe the family of philosophies including object-oriented philosophy (OOP), onticology, and posthumanist variants (epitomized in Jane Bennett's book *Vital Materialism*)—asserts that the objecthood of things is their most fundamental aspect. Into the category of object goes just about everything—human beings, other organisms, trash compactors, dreams, scenarios, fiction or nonfiction, material or immaterial.

“All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, nonhuman, natural, cultural, real or fictional,” is the first tenet of OOO (Harman 2018, 9). Throwing these disparate items into the black hole category “object” allows us to examine a crucial quality of all these different things these philosophies' proponents claim. This basic status of

object reveals the inexhaustibility of each of these types of objects, as all objects are impervious to scrutiny, not just by humans, but by any effort of understanding (by any conceivable observer, human or not).

As one of the leading proponents of OOO, Graham Harman, writes: “There is no direct access to the world that could permanently establish the existence of these objects, or even much simpler variants of them, for the simple reason that *there is no direct knowledge of anything*” (Harman 2018, 51–52). Any attempt to understand or represent an object (including via “much simpler variants of them”) misses the mark, we are told. This emphasizes the mediatedness of experience, which other fields such as semiotics deals with via relating the interpreter’s interaction with an object according to their representation changing the object in its future relations. As Cornelis de Waal (2003, 9) indicates, “[w]hereas the nominalist claims that only individuals are real, the realist holds that relations are as real as the individual objects they relate.” Thus, as a nominalist theory, OOO states that objects are not changed through their relating, at least not in ways that could preclude their full previous set of potentialities.

Indeed, as OOO inner-circle writer of the popular blog *Larval Subjects* Levi Bryant describes in his *The Democracy of Objects*, individuating objecthood is emancipatory, liberating objects from the ways in which people attempt to instrumentalize objects to meet their own ends.

If objects simultaneously withdraw and are self-othering, then this is because, on the one hand, substances never directly manifest themselves in the world while, on the other hand, they perpetually alienate themselves in qualities and states as a consequence of their own internal dynamics and the exo-relations they enter into with other objects. (Bryant 2011, 135–36)

In other words, every interaction is like gravity: the object’s qualities or facets are pulled to meet the demands of the interaction. Such interactions only ever partially accesses the full features and potential of the object. “[T]he only necessary criterion for an object in OOO,” writes Harman, “is that it be irreducible in both directions: *an object is more than its pieces and less than its effects*” (italics in original, Harman 2018, 53). The OOO family of philosophies venture to “think a subjectless object” with the “ontological thesis that all objects ... equally exist while they do not exist equally,” the main point being that “no object can be treated as constructed by another object” (Bryant 2011, 19). A main aim of this philosophical program of ontological flattening is to champion the independent existence of objects, not relying on human apperception for their existence. For this reason, Bryant (2011, 27) renames his position a “onticology” rather than an ontology, proliferating jargon terms for each author’s minor differences in the OOO tent, but also showing that such splitting of terms occur on an ontic-semantic level rather than anything actually interacting with our lived folk experience.

Overcoming the idea that objects only sprout into existence or importance when humans are examining them is certainly a welcome step from certain previous canonical philosophies. The dark romanticism of Heidegger's hammer, which only shows up as a hammer once it fails to meet our expectations by breaking, certainly plays a central role in OOO. The anti-scientistic stance of OOO asserting that "[a]n object is not a bundle of qualities, and for this reason a thing cannot be reproduced simply by duplicating all of its qualities" could be challenged empirically (though I would not advocate for such a research program) (Harman 2011b, 69). But what is behind this anti-positivist claim?

Harman, in writing about fellow speculative realist, Quentin Meillassoux, outlines his own position.

Kant holds as follows:

- (a) The human–world relation stands at the center of philosophy, since we cannot think something without thinking it.
- (b) All knowledge is finite, unable to grasp reality in its own right.

Meillassoux rejects (b) while affirming (a). But readers of my own books know that my reaction to Kant is the exact opposite, rejecting (a) while affirming (b), since in my philosophy the human–world relation does not stand at the center. Even inanimate objects fail to grasp each other as they are in themselves; finitude is not just a local specter haunting the human subject, but a structural feature of relations in general including non-human ones. (Harman 2011a, 4)

Epistemic finitude leads to epistemic humility, speculative realists believe. If essences elude us, anything we say about an object is hopelessly reflective of our own filters, rather than a successful reading of the object. The qualities we can observe in objects say more about us than they do about the objects themselves. According to this ontology, objects are withdrawn and exist independently of each other, foreclosing relations between them, not because relating is anthropocentric, but because *all* objects withdraw equally and encounter the same impossibility of constitutive interaction.

Not all posthumanists are object-oriented ontologists, and vice-versa, but both movements tend to intentionally blur or erase the boundaries not just between humans and nonhumans, but between living organisms, artifacts, ideas, and science fiction—without accounting for real differences. This radical shift in perspective from our common sense can provide insight, but ironically the very move to attend to difference (say, in humans) has reintroduced a unitarism in the flattened ontology. The provocative relativism of ontologically flattening remains ungrounded, and ultimately, I claim, detrimental. For enlivening other-than-human beings and things, these philosophies can be useful for aesthetics and attending to the way

ordinary things can impact our lives. But flattened ontologies' verso side—whether in OOO or speculative materialist varieties (and so on)—also fails to take into account the real distinctions between humans and animals, animals and plants, living organisms and artifacts, and existence and fabulation. As high art, temporarily erasing these distinctions has its place; but as a tenable philosophy capable of guiding policy, praxis, and ethics, it can lead to dehumanizing rather than decentering. These ethical questions are clearly seen when looking at the accountability of corporations or damages caused by AI (Floridi and Sanders 2004). On a personal level, such ontological reframing exercises often ask us to betray our own senses and common sense, to enter into posthumanism's eerie juxtapositions. Rather than “staying with the trouble” of real phylogenetic difference, making peace with the contradictions of interpretation and interpenetration, many varieties of posthumanism—and there are many—escape into the science fiction realm of (con)fabulation.³ While telling strange stories can productively help us play with our frames of reference and reimagine the world, speculative realism and posthumanism too often ask readers to stay in a perpetual state of disorientation.

Fundamentally, OOO cannot account for the co-constructive and co-constitutive nature of selves, the interleafing arising and passing away of phenomena and relations. In what follows I identify the following stumbling blocks of object-oriented versus relational approaches:

- (1) The deliberate de-differentiation between the fictional (ideational) and the material;
- (2) The lack of accounting for emergence between objects;
- (3) The potential for abuse begat by the dissolution of categorization boundaries for objects;
- (4) The lack of embedded ethics (only tacked-on ethics; see Karen Barad's notion, below);
- (5) The absence of process, relationality, and (co-)constitutive interpretation;
- (6) The problem of plurality (overlooking non-animal bodies and accompanying subjectivities: plants, fungi, bacteria, archaea);
- (7) The ease in which objectifying-oriented ontologies abet the ecology-destroying technoscientific juggernaut;
- (8) The creation of a priest class of object whisperers, privy to the ontology of objects that remains inscrutable to lay others.

While admittedly more charitable readings could be made of OOO, I suggest that these weaknesses are irreconcilable with the central motivational tenets of these frameworks. And that these are not bugs, but features

of OOO philosophies, sufficiently counterproductive politically and ethically to warrant moving on to greener philosophical pastures.

After examining why and how I come to this conclusion, I argue that a generative decolonial posthumanist subjectivity more likely revolves around some version of relational ontology, requiring attention to how beings are in the world according to their own perceptions and proclivities. I suggest that the gap between subjects need not be insurmountable, to the degree we are willing to sacrifice parts of previous selves to become other. Combining a Batesonian and biosemiotic perspective, I explore how an ecological and indigenous posthumanism marks differences between the born and the built, and attends to the validity of collective as well as individual subjectivities.

THE ALLURE OF OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGIES

The generative space created by posthumanism's deconstructive program promised a new way of seeing the world, including through OOO. Finally, the old strictures of humanism were falling apart. As the twentieth century clearly connected the conceits of anthropocentrism to violent domination, humanist ideology's stranglehold lost its luster. In his call for "phylogenetic humility," Robert Sapolsky (2003, 97) drives home the point:

Many of us hold the deeply entrenched idea that evolution is directional and progressive: invertebrates are more primitive than vertebrates, mammals are the most evolved of vertebrates, primates are the genetically fanciest mammals, and so forth. Some of my best students consistently fall for that one, no matter how much I drone on in lectures. If you buy into that idea big-time, you're not just wrong, you're not all that many steps away from a philosophy that has humans directionally evolved as well, with the most evolved being northern Europeans with a taste for schnitzel and goose-stepping.

Progressivist narratives have historically been weaponized to exploit the organisms with whom we share this planet as well as ourselves (colonized and colonizer alike *à la* Fanon). Yet, critical perspectives on the myth of the standardized human—a single version of perfection (of body, emotions, rationality, and behavior exemplified in *The Vitruvian Man*)—through recognizing human exceptionalism's dark colonial history, have gained ground in science and art, academia, and the general public (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010; Herzing 2010).

If decentering the human in our current cosmologies is the trend, OOO could be seen as the ultimate realization of a posthumanist phenomenology, attuning to others without an egoistic will of one's own, simply doing the universe's bidding, object to fellow object. The truly posthuman subject does not operate in a human world, or a more-than-human one, but simply reflects the totality of worlds and worlding impressing upon us in

this moment. Convert Timothy Morton (2018a, xli) describes it thusly: “OOO offers us a marvelous world of shadows and hidden corners, a world in which things can’t ever be completely irradiated by the ultraviolet light of thought, a world in which being a badger, nosing past whatever it is that you, a human being, are looking at thoughtfully, is just as validly accessing that thing as you are.” Badgers and humans disclose unique aspects of the world, as we interpret the world through our own species-specific Umwelt, or sensory and ideational filters, as Morton forwards. Yet, one engagement does not negate the truth-value of the other, or render them somehow all the same or necessarily just as valid. Certainly, according to James Gibson’s (1979) theory of affordances, not all interpretations of an object faithfully attend to objects in the way that they offer themselves. Engagement with the world does not sap the potential for other organisms to engage just as deeply but differently with the same objects. Dog’s noses can be trained to smell cancer or the coronavirus, giving them marvelous sensory insight to a swirl of objects invisible and inaccessible to human capabilities (Walczak et al. 2011; Else 2020).

Such ontologies of appreciation feel intrinsically liberatory. They refreshingly allow us to do away with shame, guilt, judgment, and the social constraints and guidelines, which canalize our action into legible, sanctioned, controllable—and exhausting—performances costing extreme suffering and dissonance. Finding security in a Parmenidean world of Forms (objects) that exist pure and untouched from their context, we can take refuge in an ideal realm of permanence. But examining things changes them, and badgers nosing objects leave traces of pheromones. Industrialized culture has touched many things, rendering most of them inscrutable junk for the majority of other potential ways of interacting organisms are used to. Inspection has consequences.

Nonetheless, the problem of relation, which science especially has assumed (not just in psychology but also biology) to be a one-to-one revealing, is currently undergoing a productive crisis. Morton (2018b, 17) calls for a scintillating Indra’s net of explanation to deal with our essential incompleteness: “OOO believes that reality is mysterious and magical, because beings withdraw and because beings influence each other aesthetically, which is to say at a distance.” Because of OOO’s belief in the autonomy of objects, the question of how they relate gets sublimated to another level, aesthetics. Echoing Kant’s distinction between the *noumena* and *phenomena*, Harman’s OOO differentiates real objects and sensual objects, the former withdrawn and autonomous, accessible only in imagination, and the latter existing “*only* in experience” (emphasis in original, Harman 2011b, 49).

Because of the atomization of objects, they cannot and do not relate with each other directly. Withdrawn objects can only relate according to what Harman calls “vicarious causation.” Bryant explains:

How do objects relate to one another when they are necessarily independent of all their relations? ... Relations between objects are accounted for by the manner in which objects transform perturbations from other objects into information or events that select system-states. These information-events or events that select system-states are, in their turn, among the agencies that preside over the production of local manifestations in objects. (Bryant 2011, 31)

This explanation derives from Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory of cognitive openness and operational closure. It is a cybernetic model where there is no hardware connection between different systems, only awareness of the changes that comes to be via other systems in the ways that the interference pattern of ripples in the universe coincide with the ways of knowing of that system (or in this case, "object"). While Luhmann was discussing social subsystems (such as how medicine only appears on law's radar insofar as the legal aspects of medical practice impinge that social subsystem) rather than a generalization of objects (he would roll over in his grave knowing that bubblegum wrappers and fantasies were being conjectured as having the same interaction as social subsystems), what is attractive about this description is that it does not reduce relating to a single common denominator but preserves the different ways in which different beings (or things?) are capable of relating.

This "noncorrelationist" view, which gets the term from Quentin Milousox's *After Finitude*, has repeatedly been used by nOOBs to reconceptualize the effects of quantum physics contrary to the Copenhagen Interpretation of interference and observer-effect determinacy: "particles withdraw from one another, not because humans are observing them in certain ways, but because the implicate order is withdrawn from itself" (Morton 2011, 183). This point I will repeatedly raise, as such talk of "the implicate order" begs the question of how (certain) humans are granted access to understanding this withdrawn order.⁴

SPECULATIVE LEAKS

"You, a speck of flea shit, an electric chair, and a solar flare are all equal objects." This almost sounds like a neat idea, until you pause to consider its ethical implications. "You" may indeed get a kick out of comparing yourself to a speck of flea shit or a solar flare. But substitute "you" for pretty much anyone else on the planet and you begin to see how dehumanizing "posthumanism" can be. (Kafka 2015)

The objectification of life includes an objectification of humans; yet, we have a twisted history of who gets to do the objectifying and who becomes the object. The stealth colonialist vestiges in OOO are not often discussed, because they explode the narrative of the "realism" of such speculations. The freeing of realism from slavishly following logically and unreflectively

from facts and empiricism is not the problem; the absolute disconnection of realism from science, the desire of living beings to flourish, and situated diverse bodies, is worrying.

Former speculative realist Ray Brassier criticizes speculative realism's "misology" (hatred of reason) thusly:

It is precisely this concern with renegotiating philosophy's relation to the natural sciences that is conspicuously absent from the Harman-sanctioned branding of Speculative Realism. ... in Harman's hands, Speculative Realism merely exacerbates the disdain for rationality, whether philosophical or scientific, which is among correlationism's more objectionable consequences. (Brassier in Wolfendale 2014, 418)

Posthumanism's necessary project of disambiguating who or what has caused the climate crisis glossed as the Anthropocene, revealing the plural ways of being human behind the catch-all categories of human and humanism, veers into a denial of orientation at all in some speculative materialist renderings. To deny our species-specific capacities, including the various (indigenous) ways in which reason and science operate according to the ecological flows of local habitats, omits generative pluralizings of reason (beyond even the human).

If all objects have a similar "level" of experience and are equal ontologically, then there is no reason to care about species going extinct more than one's local fast-food joint going out of business. OOO-curious political theorist Steve Vogel has compared shopping malls to mountains in terms of their ontological status, and not-so-implicitly, their worth (2015). Malls are valuable to people as they represent cultural landmarks, that—since there is no such thing as nature anyways—may be even more valuable (*to who?*) than mountains. Never mind geological time, autopoiesis, non-human value, or the life/artifice distinction—value is simply whatever we subjectively take it to be. And if ontologies are flat, then any preference or ranking of one over another boils down to either caprice or a will to power. To think that we can sandbox ontological flattening, that such thoughts will not spill over into our political orientations is naïve, I claim. We can strip objects of anthropocentric ontological hierarchies without ignoring how malls or mountains afford different types of ecological flourishing for the rest of beings we inhabit Earth with. Small wonder that Andrew Cole (2015) has thus judged these forms of New Materialism "commodity fetishism in academic form."

"All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, nonhuman, natural, cultural, real or fictional," Harman (2018, 9) proclaims. Besides the impossibility of giving equal attention to everything given our or any other organism's evolutionary filters, attempting to do so renders us impoverished rather than enriched. Like the *dissoi logoi*—the ancient Greek exercise of making the weaker argument the stronger

one—speculative realism makes into a personal exploration of topsy-turvy perception what better should be a structural and political one: disarming the structures preventing neurodiverse and species queer attending that free beings naturally experience in different ecological and social niches.

“Them” is a major problem with OOO—the great lumping of everything into the abyss of one-dimensional objecthood. The lists of OOO and allied groups (such as Jane Bennett’s list: “Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick”) is a rhetorical format that does away with relations and co-constitutiveness (Bennett 2010, 4–5). The very list format both artificially groups together disparate items and renders intertwined relations distinct. As posthumanist and speculative realist scholar Ian Bogost (2012, 40) comments, “Lists remind us that no matter how fluidly a system may operate, its members nevertheless remain utterly isolated, mutual aliens.” But Bogost and Bennett, Harman and Morton, keep the listmaker in the background, as if there were but one way to present groups: as individuals in an assemblage.

Bennett similarly downplays how the “thing power” of electrical grids or city streets is not the same “thing power” of Antarctic snowstorms or 15,000 B.C.E. uninhabited islands (Bennett 2010, 24–28). The thing power—or object agency—of human-made artifacts is quite a bit different than that of organic substances. While our artifacts always exceed the artificer and do take on figurative “lives of their own,” the romanticism involved in delighting over the seeming autonomy of these objects too often lends a false autochthonous valence to them as well. Rather than owning up to the human programming involved in AI and machine learning, we yearn for that spark of excess that might transform our artifacts into technological entities of their own creation (at least partially).

Pretending that differences that make a difference do not really, creates an artificial vacuum for every sort of rentier-seeking phishing exploitation to rush in. In lumping—going from (too) many categories to one—speculative realism too often plays into the hands of singularitarians intent on eliminating human and other life. Being pro-object, it turns out, is the perfect ideology for those who are willy-nilly blasé about the value of ecosystems, our planet and its inhabitants. We would do well to notice how forms of New Materialism can become useful apologies for corporate power, as Robert Proctor (2006) has analogously demonstrated how post-modern historians provided testimonial cover and alibi for Big Tobacco’s perpetuation of disinformation (everyone knew smoking killed but it was not proven, etc.).

The dehumanizing relativism of OOO serves (un)wittingly as an apology for many of the great crimes of ecocide and the billionaire technological delusions of escaping their ruined Earth for Mars. AI machines and the pollution involved in creating them get thrown into the same basket of “things” as everything else (Hao 2020), rendering responsibility inscrutable. OOO is the great equalizer.

The elision of “the human” as an empty category to making humans a throwaway species (whether the wish is to deploy technology to upload us to the singularity (Kurzweil), replace us with AI (Bostrom), convert us into alloanimal-human chimeras (*à la* Haraway), or fantasize about becoming an otherwise alien-human hybrid), self-species denigration too easily turns into the disposability of the historical and cultural aspects of other species as well. If objects are equal, then time is reversible, as evidenced in the research agenda of deextinction. Instead of preserving existing biodiversity, we will just engineer back whatever species we wish to repopulate, according to our domesticated genetic algorithms (Persson and Savulescu 2012; Jones 2014). Posthumane indeed.

In making everything into “objects,” we take as given our state and condition. We reify, making historical accidents and transients into substances. Instead of identifying epiphenomena as such, everything simply gets thrown into the dust bin of stuff. By not paying close attention to differences in matter, as molecular biologists do, for instance, we overlook the species-specific differential needs of actual lifeforms, and end up denigrating living beings of all sizes for the sake of reductionist convenience or provocation. By calling the meaning-making processes of living organisms just “qualities” or ancillary aspects, rather than constitutive of their being, we bracket everything that matters for the sake of a denuded aesthetics.

A simple counter-example to object individualism is look at plant philosophy, or fungal rhizomatic ontologies, which reveal how anthropocentric it is to impose fixed essences or discretely circumscribe the boundaries of “objects.” The lives of plants and fungi are promiscuous and ever interpenetrating; where one begins and the other ends makes it impossible to carve nature at its joints—an animal-based ontological representation if there ever were one. So the entire notion of the existence of objects is a thoroughly anthropocentric (animalcentric), unitary way of imposing order on the world, even and especially if speculative realist proponents intend to achieve the opposite. Part of the theoretical gains made by posthumanism, which should be retained is the attention to—rather than obliteration of—difference and the attending plural ways of attending. It is ironic that objectifying everything was meant to decenter the human, yet ends up reaffirming anthropocentric bodily categories of separateness.

PROCESS PHILOSOPHY WITHOUT PROCESS

It is one thing to ask about nocturnal, social, flying mammals, which use ultrasonic echolocation to navigate their world, as philosopher Thomas Nagel assayed in “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” Bats enjoy an inner world, a way of actively relating to their environment, which is both species-specific and individual. It is quite another thing to ask “what is it like to be a toaster?” as the proponents of OOO wish us to do. A toaster is a

mechanical heating device—an artifact of industrialization mass produced, often built to fail under a planned obsolescence economic model (Dorow 2020). While these quibbles in philosophy have previously been pegged by Daniel Dennett amongst others as the difference between an “intentional stance” and a “design stance” or “physical stance,” something more fundamental is at work in eliding these differences of kinds. To level the differences between a bat and a toaster, a living creature and an artifact, neither provides a service to the toaster nor the bat, and it obscures real and important differences between creatures and things, as well as the possibility of getting to know them.

To believe that we can ever escape our species-specific perspective is facile. But to announce that objects are immune to our relating to them also makes little sense. The conundrum occurs: how can we say anything about withdrawn objects if they are in fact withdrawn? And if we follow OOO’s Kantian distinction between thinking and knowing (experiencing), then what good does thinking objects accomplish when they show up in our experiences as relations? While certainly we can aver that we never *exhaustively* understand everything there is to know about bats, or the first-person experience of batness, certainly blind humans have adapted to learn more about what it is like to be a bat (phenomenologically) than able-sighted people. And what about communities that revere bats (i.e., for their life-giving fertilizer guano), and who live in intimate proximity with them? Certainly they know—whether their knowledge is articulable or tacit—something about bats that those of us who have never lived amongst bats do not. These particularities, what Ana Tsing (2012) calls nonscalability—the diversity of human experience, and the kaleidoscopic methods we use to get to know certain entities illegible to universalizing metric—matters in the world (more on methods below). In this sense, objects are asymptotically knowable, *ceteris paribus*, to those willing to sacrifice parts of their human ego in order to know them.

Being able to draw distinctions such as Gregory Bateson’s between *creatura* and *pleroma* allows us to take approaches adequate according to the objects we encounter. Such differentiations made dialogically—what I here call *dialogical speculation*—are forms of respect, not merely transients of a biased culture. Bateson names *pleroma* that slice of the world of things that react equally to forces without distinguishing the different types of forces with a map of different territories, while those beings belonging to *creatura* interpret as agents in response to perturbations. Biosemiotician Don Favareau (2010, 511) explains Bateson’s distinction:

We can study and describe the *pleroma*, but, always, the distinctions which we draw are attributed *by us* to the *pleroma*. The *pleroma* knows nothing of difference and distinction; it contains no “ideas” in the sense in which I am using the word. When we study and describe the *creatura*, we must correctly identify those differences which are effective within it.

This semiotic approach not only attends to differences that make a difference, but also contains an embedded ethics of non-anthropocentric respect missing in speculative realist theories. Things matter to beings. To things, events are *only* matter.

What is needed are dangerous diversities of perspectives and interpreters, not just the universalization of monolithic animal-body based atomistic structures. What OOO offers is a reproduction of Enlightenment shadow sides for interpreting, building a metaphysical universe on Kant, Plato, and other bifurcators of reality. This is a far cry from the porous relational cosmologies still present in many animist and indigenous communities, which can distinguish between beings and things, while holding reverence and even kinship with all objects, as appropriate. Perhaps sometime in a future less fraught with unfinished dehumanization, OOO could offer a helpful perspective for resparking our humility for cosmological mysteries beyond our possible knowledge. But, we live in a politically fraught age. We have not even gotten to the point of achieving basic existential recognition for all people as humans, let alone from this secure basis then founding non-extensionist models to value other lifeforms in the face of capital's exigencies. The political and ethical implications of OOO homogenizes humans fighting for recognition into objects at the very moment we require renewed attention to these differences. It is hard to see the pluralizing potential in OOO's metaphysics.

If OOO reproduces Enlightenment anthropocentrism by closing off the weirding of humans to become more like the other beings and things they care about (claiming to nonetheless be able to say something about the nature of these withdrawing objects), perhaps *enlivenment* could serve as an alternative. Ecophilosopher Andreas Weber (2019, 29) writes that beyond the false dichotomies of (a) an excess of obsession for "controlling the world in the name of humanism" as a rational-objective pursuit and the (b) dismissal of the scientific and social value of subjective experience due to the relativist "constructedness of all perception" exists the embodied experiences of organisms never fully translatable but no less real. Enlivenment as "Enlightenment 2.0" "reclaims for every being the right to expand its own aliveness-in-connection, the right to feel, to see, and to perceive, to be aware of one's own needs, and to stand for the truth of one's own experience" (Weber 2019, 30). Note that Weber does not say *thing*.

By trying to do away with subjectivity rather than diffusing it according to the actual ability of specific organisms, orienting to the lowest common denominator of objects not only rejects the agencies of humans, but of all living beings. Pretending that my computer has wants or needs at all, let alone in a similar way to a bacterium, algae, or me, begs the bounds of commonsense, and fails to attend to the actual ways that the stupendous diversity of organisms grasp their environment. Cory Doctorow (2014, 139) hammers on this point: "Information is an abstraction, and it doesn't

‘want’ anything. Information doesn’t want to be free—people do.” My laptop is useless. It is only of use to me, or someone else who *understands* how to make use of it and what its digital contents *mean*. Otherwise, it might as well be a paperweight or a hammer. This realization is slowly dawning in information studies. Hopefully the speculative posthumanities (i.e., Bogost’s variety) will internalize it soon, too.

OOO AS IDEALISM

The idealism of OOO cloaks everyday experience with the distance of “thing power”—not only noting the ability of things to impact our lives, but also setting up an aura of inexorable otherness denying scrutiny. Between Enlightenment’s fool’s errand of total knowledge and OOO’s self-contradicting claim of total obscurity, lies the ability to triangulate experience. Just as with color theory we can say that no object inherently is one color or another (every species’ visual field is slightly or greatly different), color neither resides in the object itself or in the perceiver. Instead, it arises in the interplay of object and interpreter.

But for OOO, the real resides in a world of Platonic Forms: “An important feature of object-oriented philosophy is its insistence on the unpopular thing-in-itself as a crucial ingredient in intellectual life,” Harman (2016, 27) writes. Bryant (2011, 25–26) also “staunchly defend[s] the autonomy of objects or substances, refusing any reduction of objects to their relations, whether these relations be relations to humans or other objects.” OOO focuses on a “gap” between all beings/objects (Bryant 2011, 27), unassailable and untraversable. Perhaps it is the focus—and obsession—with gaps (and by implication, purity), which is the problem. Hermeneuticists of biology and many indigenous cosmologies are less concerned about gaps, and more interested in what Buddhism calls *Pratītyasamutpāda*—mutual coorigination or interdependent causation (Macy 1991). OOO’s Parmenidean approach leaves us suspended, hypostatized in a realm of pure abstraction, unable to touch ground, making even our own selves foreign.

OOO’s “ontological flattening” of all life (e.g., humans, rhinoceroses, orchids, amoebas), things (artifacts and ecological features), ideas and fantasies into one lumped group of “objects” inexorably involves an *ethical* flattening. It is one thing to say that Linnaeus’ taxonomy is wrong, or only one of many ways of classification; it is quite another to say that any classification is arbitrary, and that the category “primates” does nothing to further our evolutionary understanding of the connection between *Homo sapiens*, *Pan troglodytes*, and *Pan paniscus*. Applying a philosophical trolley problem in an OOO world with random objects and beings provides no compass for deciding if an animal life is more valuable than a light bulb.

A major critic of the movement, Peter Wolfendale's *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes* conceives of OOO as an extreme version of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Wolfendale (2014, 334) forwards that "what [OOO] takes for freedom is in truth mere caprice, what it takes for self-consciousness is in truth pervasive self-deception, and most importantly, what it takes for sincerity is in truth nothing but a sense of entitlement to mean whatever one wants." In this view, OOO appears as a form of nominalism, which places essence, being, and the salient properties of experience beyond reach of any probing. Harman (2018, 70) references José Ortega y Gasset's work:

Neither the first-person nor the third-person standpoint gets us any closer to the true inwardness of things beyond all description: what Ortega seeks instead is something I once called the "zero-person" aspect of things, meaning its reality apart from any observation or introspection. In the course of his argument, Ortega gains the important insight that each of us is an "I" not because we each have a special zoological apparatus called "consciousness", but because each of us is something, and that something can never be exhausted by conscious introspection any more than by outward description. It follows that every non-human object can also be called an "I" in the sense of having a definite inwardness that can never fully be grasped.

We can agree with Harman that the aspects or depth of objects—their possible ways of showing up to themselves and the world—is undefined, or in Quentin Meillassoux's terminology, infinite. Simultaneously, we can acknowledge that Harman draws two unnecessary assumptions. First, he places even our own beingness beyond possible comprehension; we cannot know ourselves (this is given as a blanket statement). I become an it, and it is the it beyond any meaning in my life that gets deigned as what is truly "real." Second, Harman parlays Ortega y Gasset's notion of (almost Freudian) bottomless interiority from humans not only onto all living beings (which organisms of all sizes probably have to a degree, what Jakob von Uexküll calls an *Innenwelt*, less according to their complexity), but onto all things. This "inwardness," however, does not appear to be variable—more-or-less—according to the object (or being's) reflexivity or other attributes. Instead, bottomless interiority is posited as an attribute equally applied to all objects, material and fictional.

Environmental humanities scholar Wendy Wheeler (2016, 50–51) indicates that environmental consciousness has been fighting the "nominalist turn of mind" for a long time, noting that "[u]nder a nominalist dispensation there is no morality or ethical principle discernible in the world that is distinct from human impositions of fictions, not even the principle of natural and cultural flourishing or the obviously telic behaviors of living things." Ironically, much of new materialism demotes matter to *the effect it has on us*—as if that were a straightforward and uniform process. It is precisely this solipsism of disclosure—that without embedding

ourselves in a web of relations objects just continue existing unperturbed and we unperturbable—which is so strange about OOO. Rather than liberating objects from human domination, objects become removed from each other, their entanglements and evolving histories. Focusing instead its research program on generating novel dialogical forms of scientific studies of life and living beings—and then speculating *with* those beings and things we wish to engage with—would provide posthumanism with a much-needed anchor bringing OOO back to earth.⁵

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2016) describes “diatopical” hermeneutics as taking into account the processual element of interpretation nodding to our implication in reality’s process. OOO on the other hand objectifies objects, while simultaneously making human minds and perception into this god-like power, and thus withdrawn objects “show up” insofar as we pay attention to them. If we are interspecies beings from the getgo, however, with bacteria, viral, amoeba, and other microbiological actors puppeteering us to a large degree *internally*, and are cued by affordances and signals *externally*, it really is a panoply of agents and objects that are creating and guiding our consciousness to a large but not total extent. Being able to hold synchronously our thread of free will and the overwhelmingly determining elements together takes us into a much more dynamic and careen-stable phenomenology, where our environment, politics, and cultural histories matter.

Reflecting on competing stories, at the fore must be the political dimensions (or lack thereof) of competing worldviews; querying if an ontology leads to a more caring, connected world, or not. If we need to tack on ethics as a result, this is problematic for reasons that Karen Barad outlines in her analysis of the diffracting nature of perception, touch, and becoming. Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of the ineluctably bound up movement of *ethico-onto-epistemologies* takes ethics as inextricable, not ancillary. According to Barad, if we pull on the string of ethics, the entire ball of knowledge and existence associated with that ethical shift also changes.

In contrast, OOO’s Bryant (2012) stresses that just because *ontologies* are flat does not mean that *ethics* are too. It is not that speculative philosophers do not have any conception of ethics, but that they need to *add* an ethics because their flattened ontology provides no orientation. Bryant demurs however in offering an ethical theory: “I’m not even sure what a non-anthropocentric ethical theory would look like,” he writes. In proposing an ethical theory for OOO, Bryant (2012) falls into the familiar dichotomies of non-relational ontologies:

Maybe I’m missing something, or maybe it’s just a failure of imagination on my part, but it seems to me that for an ethical philosophy to be truly flat it would 1) have to begin from how *nonhumans* value, and 2) evaluate *humans* from that standpoint. I suppose that there are some ways in which

we might do that already as in the case of Temple Grandin exploring the world of cows to develop kinder ways of treating them.

Rather than flipping anthropocentrism on its head, remaining stuck in a narrow *Aufhebung* (supercession) where humans become suspect, but still remain the Archimedean point around which all ethics gyrates, there are ways for us to relate with others beyond instrumental self-interest. Bryant later modifies his claim to approach a basic non-anthropocentric stance of true alterity (explicitly *not* Kant's Categorical Imperative, because different beings have different needs and desires diverging from ours).⁶ Yet, the more Bryant and other OOO theorists address the ethical and political aspects of their philosophy, the more they veer into relational, rather than OOOs. Are we then left with relational ontologies for ethics, OOOs for speculation?

Claiming that an OOO ethics cannot be developed because “methods of non-human value are inaccessible” is a copout (Bryant 2012). We might not be able to understand a rock's value system (because, perhaps, it is different in kind from living beings), but we certainly can and *do* query about plant, fungi, animal, and even bacteria value systems on a regular basis—this is what cognitive ethology, participatory action research, and the work of evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis (exemplified in Myra Hird's (2009) excellent bacterial ethnography *The Origins of Sociable Life*) and its allied fields are all about. Humans can become more-than-human partly through living our lives queerly, renouncing full citizenship in the human world and dedicating our inquiry, curiosity, patience, and attention painstakingly to the more-than-human world and its micro-quirks. No easy path is this—just think of the lore of the outcast yet fulfilled “green man”—but such a path does allow transformative insight and dialogical speculation in counterpoint with actual more-than-human interlocutors.

Positing that the real is hopelessly inaccessible provides no incentive to try to get to know other beings and ways of seeing. Thus OOO unsuspectingly demotivates pursuing personal transformation and queering through becoming-with (nonhuman) others. It encourages armchair philosophy rather than vulnerable engagement with the world.

In contradistinction to nominalist–realist debates of representation, taken up by OOO, which see the world as fundamentally inaccessible but nonetheless fair game for speculation, these self-appointed realists have *enough* access that they can write about and describe it—with the aim of transcending or at least transgressing these limits—the alternative I suggest here is a *semiotic* one. Or better, a *biosemiotic* one. Rather than being able to draw boxes around objects, I suggest that a more scientifically based and socially ecologically useful model of reality is that everything subtends. All cells exist in relation to their environment, which subtends and infiltrates membranes. Membranes are porous boundaries,

not gatekeepers of ontological individuation. Charles Sanders Peirce triadic semiotics, as well as Jakob von Uexküll's theoretical biology, suggest that there are objects, interpreters, and ways of representing objects. Cornelis de Waal (2003, 9) explains Peirce theory of mediation between two objects: "even if a relation can be successfully reduced to the properties of the objects related, we still need to ask the deeper question of how those properties are related to the objects in which they are said to inhere. In short, the need for a third category remains wholly in place."⁷ This third category is precisely the object-connecting interaction of relational ontologies.

This hermeneutic circle is never complete or done, as each interpretation creates new ways of representing objects, so the process of interpretation itself has a history, never quite resolved but always extending novel future possibilities. In other words, while we can never fully understand anything in an objective or final way, we can triangulate our perception of objects with others, and with ourselves over time, thus providing a more three-dimensionally substantial perspective, even if such understandings do not hold the status of an authoritative or solitary truth.

This alternative trajectory resonates with the tradition of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*, where *Verstehen* (understanding) and *Erklären* (explanation) are not seen as divorceable aspects, but rather, each informs and composes the other. I suggest that there are limits to knowledge that must be acknowledged, but such restrictions do not prevent us from getting closer or further away from knowing things, especially living things that can "talk back" in various ways. OOO, including many of its posthumanist variants, often misses the gradations of conversation we can have with others. Failing to acknowledge the dialogical nature of reality makes it all too easy to fall into solipsistic speculation, where that speculation cannot help but end up as privileged access to the world of essences through the back door.

THE OBJECT WHISPERERS

While OOO takes itself to be humble versus interpretation, claiming that we cannot know objects in themselves, that we cannot appeal to supernatural entities to get divine messages, in the same breath proponents of OOO tells us what objects are, with minute detail. Harman (2011b, 108) tells us, for example "a number of different kinds of relations are possible in the cosmos: ten of them, to be exact." Under OOO's framework, we must simply accept Harman's descriptions—or not—as there is no common ground, no overlapping *Umwelt* or *Lebenswelt* to prove or disprove such knowledge through experimenting ourselves with the world. Taking another's word for truth on the basis of authority alone has generally grown out of favor in our era, and without some form of verification or common understanding about the nature of the inscrutable (triangulation

through dialogical speculation), we risk returning to revelation—the mediated truths of a priest class of object whisperers.

OOO contradictorily describes the intricacies of objects while claiming that objects withdraw and defy our apprehension. Rather than opening up the world to the scrutability of all lifeforms, as the *Umwelt* theory of the theoretical biologist Jakob von Uexküll does, OOO closes off understanding and access to objects except via the special dispensation of the philosopher priests interpreting the arcane ontologies of withdrawn objects. While every organism is inextricably trapped in its species-specific sensorial world (it is *Umwelt*, without access to reality proper, the *Umgebung*), every organism nonetheless makes sense of the world it can perceive in order to act in it according to its drives and needs. Thus, bacteria disclose the world in ways we cannot understand. But in understanding bacteria (say, biologically), we can catch glimpses of its world-disclosing work. When we become aware of the agency of other organisms and how this expresses in detectable changes in ecosystems and organisms that humans can (via multiple methods) grok, this opens a host of intriguing issues about whether all parts of the environment are signaling all the time, or only intermittently; about the indirect, second, and nth order communication that takes place, permitting a molecule or an organism to respond to signals that it cannot sense for lack of the necessary receptors. (A signal sent by the environment that is undetectable by A may be received by B and converted into a different kind of signal that A is properly equipped to receive—so that B serves as a relay/converter, and A responds to an environmental change that has been signaled to it via second-order communication.) (Toffler in Prigogine and Stengers 1984, xxiv)

This sort of pattern hunting and careful attending in many ways accessible to all willing to do the work, is quite the opposite of OOO methods of disclosure.

As Mulhall (2018) mulls: “If real objects and their properties are essentially inaccessible to us, how could we grasp—let alone articulate—an object-oriented ontology that not only posits their existence but delineates their turbulent four-fold nature? Harman never addresses this worry directly; but his defense can’t be that OOO is itself an exercise in metaphorical rather than descriptive language use.” The oroborous of object withdrawal while positing description brings us to an epistemological paradox: is special philosophical insight or access required to allow us to understand and articulate the inaccessibility of objects? If so, who are the initiates? And through what process does one become initiated?

This methodology of revelation suggests OOO theorists, similar to Kant’s earlier philosophy, are granted special access to speculating about how things are and that they exist, even as they proclaim the inscrutability of objects. Such exegetical descriptions are not team reasoning, but a specially granted insight into objects and their inaccessible and withdrawn

ontologies. How can we be shown that we do not know, if objects are ontologically inaccessible for us to even learn this? Such a knowing is not based on empirical method, or logic, conferring with the wise, or any other known method. It is this exceptionalism of knowing amongst the unknown that gives an untoward theological tint to this philosophy.

Here, certain strands of posthumanism dovetail with the (unwitting) recursive solipsism of OOO, which only takes as real, important, or formative what shows up to particular human interpreters (often, occupying similar privileged cultural roles). I argue that despite its primacy of objects over relations, knowledge of objects and engagement with them always requires interpretation from somebody, so to pretend that objects remain monolithic despite all interactions fails to provide a philosophy that travels beyond the conceptual. Because of this, OOO conveniently buttresses the more techno-escapist elements of posthumanism, overlooking the need to diversify our attunements by breaking free from technocultural givens and the way their sameness traps us further in humanism. For example, instead of Donna Haraway (2016) acknowledging the ways in which many indigenous people through traditional practices already have important positions in their tribes for feral individuals to bridge and heal the human-more-than-human divide, she wants us to use technoscience to infuse animal DNA forcibly in individuals. There are other (and better) ways of becoming interspecies and breeding out our human exceptionalism than technoscientific Western medical procedures of moral perfectionism (even of a posthumanist variety) (Persson and Savulescu 2012). Speculative varieties of posthumanism, while professing to decenter the human, in heaping attention on the self, tragicomically recenter humans as the Archimedean point around which objects become relevant in the first place—far too much responsibility for any person or species.

DECOLONIZING THE ANTHROPOCENE, DECOLONIZING POSTHUMANISM: DIFFERENCE WITHOUT HIERARCHY

OOO is a monological fabrication rather than a dialogical vulnerability. One can little imagine Graham Harman being attacked by a crocodile, as befell ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (2000), and writing about the debilitating event in such stoic and compassionate terms. Rather than leaning too heavily on disembodied wonder or the convenience sample of one's status quo perception, as OOO does, other environmental philosophical strands of posthumanism see their project of relational ontology not as some metaphysical power grab, but instead as an offering of their own bodies and minds to the places and nonhuman people that comprise them. This continual gesture of surrender, sacrifice, and solidarity, deflates presumptions that one is the arbiter between mind and materia. In taking

a more pantheist approach, one is a mind amongst minds, a body amongst bodies, humble with humor at how often we get things wrong.

Oscar Wilde's parody in *The Importance of Being Earnest* of treating "trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality" situates OOO as the philosophy of the Anthropocene. Long since giving up hope in meaning-making with other humans, more-than-human creatures, and our habitat ecological and built, OOO's hipster aesthetic of nihilism (untouchable withdrawal) leaves us with little to hope for in terms of relating.

We can agree that no amount of insight or relating can ever access an object in its entirety without forswearing the task to get to know things and beings on their own terms, in the way that they like to be interpreted. Relating is always asymptotic. We can never control our environment. But we *can* be involved in design permaculture.

The Anthropocene is a hegemonic concept precisely because it assumes in its naming that all humans are equally responsible and equally affected by the climate crisis. The overwhelming criticism of this assumption leads to the positive project of recognizing those indigenous peoples who have lived sustainably and continue to protect the earth through getting to know and foster their ecosystems (Geniusz 2015).

OOO seeks an antidote to scientism, the attitude that "things themselves have a sort of barcode on them that tells us immediately—that is, without the mediation of humans interpreting them—what they are" (Morton 2018a, xxviii). But it is looking for hermeneutics in all the wrong places. It has created a cold world of withdrawn objects, untouched and impenetrable to the coaxing warmth of relating. At its extreme, OOO in its structural varieties leaves us with a solipsistic hermeneutics, where life is opaque except to initiates that can tell us how opaque life is. Precisely in the move to rehabilitate objects' autonomy, by hiding them behind an infinite set of veils, the possibility for relating becomes doubtful. Why bother? It appears as if essence and relatability are inverse variables.

The radical activist approach of some indigenous cultures, declaring that "we are not defending nature, we are nature defending herself," repositions these human beings as spokesbeings for the interspecies world based on their everyday lifeways and actions (Deloria, Foehner, and Scinta 1999). Interspecies solidarity exists not as some virtue-signaling act of largess or feel-good ethics, but as a fundamental political act of self-defense. Since the self is relational, material, and interdependent, and the Earth and the organisms we evolved with are the bedrock for our health, meaning, and culture, redefining the self as relational rather than as ontologically individual, circumscribed, and alienated, enables us to wed our animal drives with planetary politics. The pragmatic approaches needed now exceed perhaps what posthumanism has to offer. Above all, we need to figure out collectively how we can use our knowledge and action

to create a sustainable earth for all life. And this requires categories and concepts of relation and interpenetration, not of dark interiorities that can never touch each other. The concepts we use *are* real, as object-oriented ontology suggests, not because they take on a parallel-world life of their own, but because we cannot sandbox our theory from our practice.

Dreaming, imagining, and speculating are useful (Thompson 2017). But there are better ways to do speculation and vitalism than free-floating academic aesthetics alone. Microbiologists such as Lynn Margulis and Barbara McClintock, ethologists such as Barbara Smuts and Jane Goodall, architect-anthropologists such as Julia Watson, or conservation biologists such as Robin Wall Kimmerer all have spent enough time with the organisms they research with to start *becoming* like the organisms. They have done the most objective thing possible—to give up their feigned objectivity or culturally sanctioned grasp on reality, and have surrendered their identity attachments in order to grow and intertwine with the research subjects they longed to know. These scientists who understand that there is no touching without being touched in return are rewarded by becoming with those organisms and places they care about and love.

We can only have object-orientation through interpreters, and every organism is a different interpreter. While humans have certain ways of accessing the world unlike those of the other organisms we know, even these are not monolithic, and our exceptional abilities are not necessarily the most useful in these times.⁸ The same object over time even shows up differently to the same interpreter, as the sensory abilities and conceptual frame of an organism shifts over its lifetime and its situatedness. It is precisely this ecological, communal, and temporal-historical aspect of being that is missing in object-oriented philosophies. And in missing these elements, it misses the slow, deliberate intimacy with others that come with acknowledging our own interspecies and worldly constitution.

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NOTES

1. The Great Chain of Being is a Christianized Greek concept that sets up a hierarchical structure of superiority and inferiority between different species, with humans at top (angels above) and (allo-)animals below, descending to plants, and then minerals. This idea not only had devastating consequences in colonialism (with other populations, and women, seen as ontologically inferior to European men), but also found its way into Linnaeus' treelike vertical taxonomical orders, which placed humans at the pinnacle. Lakoff and Turner (2009, 167) de-

scribe the Great Chain of Being as placing “beings and their properties on a vertical scale with ‘higher’ beings and properties above ‘lower’ beings and properties.”

2. Posthumanists, speculative realists, speculative materialists, OOO, OOP, and other variants generally play down their connections and affinities. Rather than getting lost in the weeds of indulgent self-appointed labels, this article waives aside what particular micro-streams of this movement are called, and instead focuses on the theoretical and entailing real world effects of these orientations. I argue that no matter how divergent or even seemingly opposed their posturing, the core beliefs of this cornucopia of thought nonetheless collectively share the problems listed at the end of the introduction.

3. While Haraway is reluctant to perceive herself as a posthumanist (see *Manifestly Haraway*), her work, including the groundbreaking “Cyborg Manifesto,” transparently sets the path for posthumanism and to a certain degree speculative realism. Haraway breaks down anthropocentrism, but because of her biology background, references ethologists such as Grandin and Smuts to ground her storytelling in phenomenological science. Such weaving of science and storytelling could be seen as a key difference between certain strands of scientifically grounded posthumanism and scientifically unmoored posthumanism (a more purely critical project). However, Haraway ambiguously both decenters the human and aims to destroy any special characteristics of the human (e.g., her celebration of chimeras). She dives deep into ethology and then leaps to speculative science-fiction conclusions and confabulations. This gap between careful analysis of interspecies activity and complete abandonment of our own phenomenology as humans, is problematic. Instead of the ecophilosophical calls of phenomenology and cognitive science to regroup ourselves in the expanded body (our endosymbionts and our external surroundings which cue our behavior), Haraway wishes to contort our bodies into technoscientific mutants (seemingly without consent). This overlooks a crucial step: if we wish to call into question and evolve our culture, this doesn’t require us to torture our bodies, but rather in the spirit of Horkheimer and Adorno, to liberate our inner nature through recognizing our already inherent (but covered up) animality. Thus even Haraway’s (or Bennett’s) “muddling” forward seems to not quite produce a generative philosophy that is political, ethical, and pragmatic. Like OOO scholars, Haraway fails to notice how applying technoscience (genetic engineering) to human bodies to de-human them, engages in a certain *jouissance* of the caprices of technoscience for technoscience’s sake. This is technoscience’s fallacy: we should because we can (Haraway 2016; Ott 2019).

4. As Žižek (2016, 392–93) has similarly critiqued the question of access: “A somewhat simplistic transcendental argument against OOO would have been: where does Bryant speak from when he elaborates his ontology? If all objects are autopoietically constrained, is then his own description of the pluriverse of objects not also constrained by the system-specific perspective proper to human objects?” That is, if objects withdraw without exception, then how is it that those espousing this philosophy can say so much about them?

5. Stengers’ (2018) “slow science,” Kimmerer’s (2015) “becoming indigenous to a place,” Nora Bateson’s (2017) “warm data,” or participatory action research for the life sciences (not just with human subjects) (Merskin 2010), all come to mind.

6. Nassim Taleb’s Silver Rule “Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t want them to do to you” allows for diverse needs and desires while still setting a threshold for good manners.

7. De Waal (2003, 9) continues, “According to Peirce, you cannot have a first without also having a second, and you cannot have two without also having a third. Even when you conceive of something purely in isolation (i.e., as a first), you are already also conceiving of something else, namely that which it is not (and which is a second to it) that stands in a particular relation to this first, namely, the relation of negation (which brings in a third).” For OOO, this begs the question of *relata* in their schemata.

8. In Hendlin (2019) I identify *surreflection* and play as the most effective approaches to deprogram our socially-grooved addictions and unhealthy patterns.

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