# The contortions and convolutions of the "speculative turn"

One notable development in the theoretical humanities in the past few years has been the rapid rise of the "speculative turn," a counterpoint to the supposed anti-realism of continental philosophy and critical theory. Rather than recounting the tortuous trajectories of this loosely defined and heterogeneous movement, I will focus in this article upon the theory of object-oriented ontology (OOO), as initially formulated by Graham Harman, insofar as it represents the most forthright and indefatigable rejection of Kant's "Copernican Revolution" – the archetypical and perhaps most momentous of all philosophical "turns" – striving to broaden the scope of philosophical enquiry beyond the supposedly blinkered outlook of post-Kantian subjectcenteredness. Philosophy, declares Harman, "must break loose from the textual and linguistic ghetto that it has been constructing for itself, and return to the drama of the things themselves," for it is only in this embrace of the *unknowable* that this now-ossifying discipline might find the means for its reinvigoration.[1]

I wish to remark upon several issues that I detect within this system of object-oriented ontology: namely, the antinomy between speculation and realism; the extent to which this system remains covertly within the strictures of the Kantian paradigm it is supposed to supplant; and the way in which its attacks on anthropocentrism come into conflict with the desiderata of his project. My interest in OOO, which I regard as quite a compelling project, stems not from any animus, but from the way that it brings into relief the aporetic deadlocks that tend to accompany deliberate attempts to wind back the Kantian critique of dogmatic metaphysics.[2] In spite of its pretenses to a renewed engagement with the real, the speculative turn's emphasis (at least as Harman frames it) upon the novelty of its claims, and its preoccupation with reversing the purported hegemony of correlationism, result not in a genuine philosophical revolution, but rather in a perfect exemplar of the uroboric convolutions of the perpetual turnover of theory that we presently witness in the humanities.[3]

## Turning against the critical project

The term "speculative turn," which I draw from an edited collection of the same name – "the most influential anthology of early twenty-first century philosophy in the continental tradition," in Harman's estimation – can, for the purposes of this article, be regarded as basically synonymous with the term "speculative realism".[4] I utilize the former name in order to emphasize its self-positioning as a reaction against two prior "turns": Kant's "Copernican Revolution," which supposes that our cognition of objects is dependent upon *a priori* forms and concepts, demanding that reason itself become an object of critique; and secondly, the "linguistic turn" that arises from post-Saussurean structuralism in the mid-twentieth century, viewing thought and experience as conditioned by or homologous to the structures of language. Both of these turns, as interpreted within the narrative of this new speculative philosophy, are, in retrospect, wrong turns, not because they were necessarily erroneous in any factual or argumentative sense, but because in their conviction that the world cannot be known "in itself," independent of our own finite structures of knowledge, they had impeded the full flourishing of philosophical thought.

The speculative turn is thus positioned, in the introduction to said edited collection, as a corrective to these two prior turns, returning to philosophy its proper right to speak for the world *as it is*, not merely as it appears to us. The hegemony of anti-realism within continental philosophy, it is asserted, has "not only reached a point of decreasing returns," but is actively limiting "the capacities of philosophy."[5] The solution, then, is not simply to turn back to a pre-critical metaphysics, but to move "beyond" these two turns, recuperating "the pre-critical sense of 'speculation' as a concern with the

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[1] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 16.

[2] For a similar line of argument, see also my previous co-authored article "Michel Foucault, Friedrich Kittler, and the Interminable Half-Life of 'So-Called Man'".

[3] Over the past decade there have been extensive writings, both laudatory and castigatory, on OOO and the speculative turn more generally. Particularly noteworthy are Wolfendale's polemical *Object-Oriented Philosophy* and Gratton's more even-handed *Speculative Realism*. Harman responds to these and other critiques in his recent *Skirmishes*.

[4] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 227.

[5] Bryant et al., "Towards a Speculative Philosophy," 3.

Absolute," whilst at the same time acknowledging "the undeniable progress that is due to the labour of critique."[6] In doing so, we might save philosophy from its own impending stagnation. Although this metaphilosophical narrative is shared by a number of thinkers, its lasting impact has come principally via the popularity of OOO and its derivatives, which combine a constructivist metaphilosophy with a decidedly "dogmatic," pre-critical metaphysics; hence my focus in this article.

Of course, the perceived need to discard the tightly bound Kantian circumscription of metaphysics is not at all new. The jettisoning of any vestige of a "thing in itself" by philosophers such as Maimon, Schulze, Beck, and then finally Fichte (all of whom regarded this concept as illegitimately reinscribing causality within a sphere supposedly devoid of it) paved the way for the development of German Idealism. In the preface to the *Differenzschrift*, Hegel seeks to distinguish the *speculative* element of Kantian philosophy, located in the identity of subject and object, from its *reflective* element, whereby reason is turned in on itself, converted into an object of philosophical reflection, and the non-identity of subject and object is raised to the status of absolute.[7] Likewise, a number of modern philosophers (e.g. Nietzsche, Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze) have asserted a heterogenetic imperative, exhorting philosophers to create new concepts and new ways of thinking the world that do not conform to the established boundaries of metaphysical reason. But Harman's account remains notable in the extent to which it both denigrates knowledge in the name of speculation and perceives conceptual invention as an end in itself. "Ideas like fruits have moments of peak ripeness when they are best consumed, and later moments when their taste is less fresh and wholesome."[8]

Harman's initial gambit – that the Heideggerian distinction between *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* bears not only upon a relation between Dasein and the entities that it encounters, but a relation between any and all objects – deliberately flies in the face of the premise that all ontological enquiry must proceed from the Being of Dasein, as that entity capable of posing the very question of the meaning of Being. Refusing to accept that human existence has any privileged access to Being, Harman does not begin with the facticity of experience and then from this deduce the conditions of such experience; he instead begins by postulating a factum of *objectivity*, that we, and all other entities, are objects, and from the outset asserts his right to determine that the relation between Dasein and Being is, at a base level, no different than that between fire and cotton, pen and paper, or a fly and a windscreen. Harman maintains that "the *Kehre* is not a turn in Heidegger's career that can be dated on a calendar, but a turn that is already in play from the start," and "whatever this turn may be, it is not simply one 'from being to man,' but more generally from 'being to beings'."[9] Heidegger was always in the midst of turning, always harbouring a covert theory of the *real* existence of objects outside of any relation to human knowledge, but this was only ever a hesitant, partial turn. It is Harman who brings to light this once-furtive revolution.

Although this rejoinder to the alleged anthropocentrism of contemporary continental philosophy is often associated with Quentin Meillassoux's concept of "correlationism," Harman had actually been attacking this very same paradigm ("philosophies of access") for a number of years prior.[10] Harman worries that the Copernican Revolution and its poststructuralist offshoots, in their refusal to speculate on the nature of the absolute, have normalized a narrow-minded perspective, whereby the ontological status of other objects is disregarded, reducing them to mere appearances, or at best to beings deprived of any fundamental access to Being. "[W]hat is truly characteristic of Kant's position," Harman proposes, "is that the human-world relation takes priority over all others," such that there is little or no attention paid to the relations *between* things in themselves.[11] In affirming the autonomous existence of objects outside of any relation to the human subject, he has two basic aims: first, to remove a barrier to new, exciting philosophizing, opening up this discipline once again to the infinite horizons of the absolute; and second, to furnish his own new, invigorating philosophy, reinscribing the absolute once again in specific terms (viz. as a universe of autonomous objects which withdraw from all direct access). If

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Hegel, *Difference*, 79-81.
[8] Harman, *Bells and Whistles*, 100-101.
[9] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 144.
[10] See for instance Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 93-95.
[11] Harman, *Quadruple Object*, 45.

"present-day philosophy is beginning to suffocate" as a result of the Copernican dogma, "frozen in place on Kant's petrifying landscape," then OOO provides both a general call for a new kind of speculative philosophy, and a particular example of such philosophy.[12]

Hence why this is not the same kind of turn or revolution that we witness in Kant, for the latter wishes to find a solution to the lacklustre (or almost non-existent) progress of metaphysics, relative to other sciences, rescuing it from its seemingly unfailing vacillation and uncertainty by allowing it to "complete its work and lay it down for posterity as a principal framework that can never be enlarged," giving rise to a "form of a metaphysics that has been purified through criticism but thereby also brought into a changeless state."[13] Kant does not view his Copernican Revolution as setting the groundwork for further metaphysical developments yet to come; on the contrary, he believes himself to have fulfilled the ends of the entire metaphysical project, allowing for future progress in natural and moral philosophy without the hindrance of ungrounded metaphysical assertions. His is a singular, *ultimate* revolution – a turn to end all turns. He does not countenance the prospect that his system might be improved upon in some way, aside from in its presentation.

There is something odd, however, for Harman to complain about contemporary philosophy's refusal to attend to the question of the absolute, especially when framed in the context of a return to "realism," whilst simultaneously upbraiding such philosophy for its purported failure to spawn new ways of thinking about this absolute. On one hand, he often gestures toward the need for philosophy to abandon the injunction to *know*, embracing the disruptive potential of a love of wisdom that will never be able to entirely grasp the object for which it strives (and rejecting what he perceives as the false dichotomy between knowledge and ignorance).[14] On the other though, he also makes quite pointed claims with respect to the ontological value of his project, asserting that "there is no good alternative to the OOO model,[15] or that withdrawing "is what objects have always done, and it is our task simply to make better use of this fact in our theories and our actions."[16] These are no doubt intended as speculative propositions, rather than positive truth claims in any traditional sense, but their rhetorical power is nevertheless derived from their implicit appeal to a privileged knowledge regarding the nature of reality.

In other words, Harman frequently slides between evaluating philosophy in terms of its novelty, decrying the moribundity of the post-Kantian consensus, and in terms of its veracity, declaring OOO to be the only system faithful to the world of things, rather than merely the world of humans. In a sense, Harman's emphasis on novelty as the means to revitalize philosophy and overcome "[i]intellectual stagnation" tacitly confirms Kant's foremost contention: that any philosophy which tries to ground itself in the unconditioned (i.e. the absolute) inevitably gets lost in its own contradiction, forcing philosophers to endlessly retrace the same circular paths without making any forward progress.[17] Pre-critical metaphysics is, for Kant, a battlefield upon which "no combatant has ever gained the least bit of ground, nor has any been able to base any lasting possession on his victory."[18] And his solution, in the face of this interminable and unavailing conflict, is to call a truce, to "seek peace in some sort of critique of this reason itself, and in a legislation grounded upon it."[19] Harman, by contrast (like many other contemporary philosophers), wishes to prolong this conflict, calling on philosophers to "begin funneling arms and humanitarian aid toward some sort of guerilla realism," mounting a "fresh insurgency on behalf of objects themselves."[20] Relieved of any pressure to formulate a system actually adequate to the absolute, this form of speculative metaphysics is instead content to revel in the endless creative possibilities of such speculation – hence the various divagating currents united under the catch-all

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[12] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 105.
[13] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 114.
[14] *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 6-7.
[15] Harman, "I Am Also of the Opinion," 789.
[16] Harman, *Bells and Whistles*, 39.
[17] *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 89.
[18] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 109-110.
[19] Ibid., 649.
[20] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 216. Indeed, Harman envisions a scenario "in which the continental landscape of 2050 is made up solely of warring clans descended from the various branches of 2007-era speculative realism" ("On the Undermining of Objects," 22).

banner of OOO (e.g. Levi Bryant's "onticology," Ian Bogost's "alien phenomenology," Timothy Morton's "realist magic").

What this means is that in spite of an often vituperative (and not wholly unjustifiable) hostility to deconstruction as exemplary of the navel-gazing textualism of the linguistic turn,[21] the desire for a broader speculative turn that impels Harman's project can only be properly understood in relation to two tacit impulses largely derived from the deconstructionist project: the first is the notion that theory's primary function is to provide "interesting" readings of texts (the speculative turn, given its explicitly metaphysical register, extending this to "interesting" readings of the nature of *being* itself), whilst the second is the need to account for the occluded, marginalized, or repressed (which in this case, is a vaguely defined relation between thought and the absolute, which somehow bypasses the dreaded "correlationist" ligature). Against the professedly unquestioned hegemony of a post-Kantian consensus, Harman positions his ontology as the pretender to "the speculative verve of intellectual gamblers such as Leibniz and Whitehead" in the hopes of undermining an anthropocentrism that he views as suffocating his discipline.[22] The remarkable success of this speculative turn over the past decade or so surely reflects, at least in part, a desire to recapture the thrill of the poststructuralist or deconstructionist moment which dramatically reshaped the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century. At a time when the old theoretical stalwarts are seeming increasingly stale, it indicates a yearning for the sense of paradigmatic change that first accompanied these theorists' projects half a century earlier.

**The false problem of correlationism**
Central to Harman's project is the notion that correlationism stifles the philosophical endeavour: although it may not have ensured the eternal endurance of his metaphysical system as a whole, Kant's attempt to secure epistemological grounding by enclosing possible experience within the finitude of spatio-temporal intuition was nevertheless the harbinger of a more general turn away from the search for an absolute located beyond the capacities of human experience, imposing strict limitations on the scope and ambition of philosophical discourse. Of course, one might very reasonably reply that Kant's critical project imposes these limitations upon theoretical reason only, making much broader claims in regard to the knowledge furnished by pure practical reason, and that even the primary figures of the linguistic or post-structuralist turn often appeal to an exteriority or excess that lies beyond the threshold of language and yet remains paradoxically enfolded within it, implying a degree of porosity in their delimitation of possible knowledge. Harman's response, however, is that whilst it may be true that "to posit some unarticulated reality beyond experience is enough to escape idealism," such that these thinkers might "deserve the name of realists," if this is the case, "then there is little reason to be excited about realism."[23] To gesture toward this exteriority is evidently not enough; one must be able to speak of it in itself. But, peculiarly, one does not need *know* anything about this reality in order to speak of it in such a fashion.

What Harman strives for is not the "dusty, oppressive realism of yesteryear," whether naïve or transcendental, but a "*weird* realism that shows the human-world circle to be indefensibly narrow."[24] Accordingly, he is not really making a claim about the world as it is, but rather making a normative judgement about how the world *should* be – or more precisely, about why the world *could be* more interesting than any correlationism or scientific naturalism is capable of presenting it. OOO is indicative of a more general change in the meaning of the term "ontology," shifting the parameters of debate away from the nature of being as it truly exists (and presuming that it is ultimately possible to make such a determination), toward that of the nature of being in its most appealing form. Harman would surely not dispute Kant's statement that to focus on theoretical speculation regarding things in themselves is to listen to "frivolous curiosity rather than a solid desire for knowledge," the only difference being that

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[21] See Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 198-209. As Rita Felski notes, the epigoni of this linguistic turn have tended to "cast language in the role of a determining, even dictatorial, power" (*Limits of Critique*, 97) – a tendency to which we might quite reasonably object.
[22] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 252.
[23] Harman, *Quadruple Object*, 46.
[24] Ibid., 62, my emphasis.

Harman views such desire for a well-grounded knowledge as inimical to the overall philosophical project, hampering its more creative elements.[25]

Such a reversal is certainly not unique to OOO, and is in fact part and parcel of the broader ontological revival that has occurred over the past couple of decades – in particular, it is emblematic of the Deleuzian model of constructivism. Philosophy, according to this model, is defined by a "continuous creation of concepts," and holds the "exclusive right of concept creation."[26] It observes that "the most universal concepts, those presented as eternal forms or values, are the most skeletal and least interesting," for to presume that an idea is timeless and universally applicable is to hamper the possibilities for genuine invention, instead falling back into tired old traditions.[27] But this model is premised upon a complex and substantially articulated relationship between its philosophy and metaphilosophy, with the latter being a natural extension of the latter (whilst also remaining in productive tension with it). Deleuze's conception of philosophy stresses a principle that is shared across both aspects of his work: the equation between thought (as opposed to cliché) and creation, expressed in his philosophy through the notion of a transcendental exercise of the faculties pushing sensibility to its limit (the realm of pure sense) and in his metaphilosophy through the precedence given to conceptual heterogenesis insofar as it galvanises the potentialities of philosophical thought, providing consistency, and thus reality, to chaos.

Similarly, OOO's appeal to an overtly fanciful "weird realism" no longer beholden to subjective finitude is underwritten by a simultaneous appeal to a speculative mode of thought which rejects any common-sense view of reality.[28] Although Harman has a far less developed metaphilosophy than Deleuze, the constructivist underpinnings of his thought are readily apparent, arguing that "metaphysical concepts are *instituted* or *built*," and as such construct reality, rather than just unveiling it.[29] To be a genuine realist is to think speculatively, and vice versa.  And yet, whilst he frequently reiterates that his realism is in no way a "naïve" realism, premised upon a correspondence theory of truth, Harman nevertheless also vigorously defends OOO's capacity to tell us something fundamental about things in themselves. But because his peculiar metaphilosophical constructivism, combined with an almost total disregard for the socio-political concerns that impelled critical theory, bars him from grounding this purported capacity in anything other than assertion, he is forced to turn instead toward a kind of aesthetic and rhetorical realism, stressing the need for a system that can engage with the irreducible multitude of objects within which we are enveloped.

Harman objects to the "fundamental bookishness" of correlationist philosophy, which "makes little contact with the world itself," hence his unabating valorization of a particular type of a supposedly hands-on, almost tactile engagement with objects – a so-called "carpentry of things."[30] This specific rhetoric is mostly peculiar to OOO and its derivatives, but it serves the same ends as, to take just one example, Meillassoux's evocative description of the privileged domain of pre-critical metaphysics as the "*great outdoors*," – namely, it seeks to dissociate itself from the kinds of armchair philosophizing usually associated with the discipline by suggesting that a philosophy of the absolute has greater purchase upon the world itself. The logical endpoint of this performative extroversion, which at times borders on anti-intellectualism, is Bogost's observation that "the blinkered state of philosophy-as-access arrives on the coattails of a man who never strayed far from the Prussian town of Königsberg," such that "philosophy has remained mousy and reticent, a recluse," as if being well-travelled were prerequisite for metaphysical speculation.[31] But these are little more than tenuous analogies, given that they are used to bolster a metaphysics whose contact with the world barely extends beyond a kitschy, ostentatious cosmopolitanism that regards the mere acknowledgement of heterogeneous objects, and the

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[25] Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 184.

[26] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, 8..

[27] Ibid., 83.

[28] See Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 2.

[29] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 80. Harman is certainly correct in saying that Deleuze, who does not describe himself as a realist, could plausibly fit within such a category under these terms ("DeLanda's Ontology," 368).

[30] Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 75.

[31] Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 5.

conspicuous curiosity of the philosopher for said objects, as somehow synonymous with a more profound engagement with them.[32]

Harman refers often to "the ceremonial public beating of any reality principle in philosophy," positioning those such as himself who dare to speak of the real as a persecuted minority within the philosophical community.[33] But this isn't really true, even within continental philosophy. At the very least, it is misleading: although it is certainly the case that most twentieth century philosophers within the latter tradition have tended to deny the possibility of a direct correspondence between the finitude of human knowledge and the real in its totality, it does not follow that they *deny* the ontological status of reality itself distinct from human apperception. This shibboleth – that to foreclose knowledge of the absolute is to ontologically privilege or even isolate the human being, presupposing an "implausible taxonomy between human thought on one side and *everything else in the universe* on the other"[34] – is so essential to the rhetorical force of the speculative turn, and yet simply makes no sense: acknowledging one's finitude, and accordingly one's intellectual impotence in the face of a reality that is irreducible to the confines of metaphysical concepts does not afford human thought any undue entitlement; rather, it recognizes that said reality need not conform to the whims of human speculation, regardless of how egalitarian the latter might profess to be. Put simply, positing a finitude essential to human knowledge or thought, and concluding from this that metaphysical enquiry must conform to this finitude, in no way implies a claim regarding the ontological status of the human being itself. The *"basic ontological rift"* that Harman describes may well apply to certain philosophers (e.g. Heidegger), but it is not a necessary feature of correlationist philosophy.[35]

Even Harman himself still subscribes to the notion that there is, in the human being's relation to external reality, an inherent finitude, declaring quite bluntly that *"there is no direct knowledge of anything."*[36] But rather than deducing such a finitude from the specificity of human experience, he instead posits it as a universal property of *all* relations between *all* beings – objects "withdraw *from each other* no less than they withdraw from us."[37] In other words, he wishes to simultaneously uphold this finitude and ignore it: this *a priori* factum of universal withdrawal, one of the most fundamental tenets of his metaphysics, must be disregarded in order to be posited in the first place. OOO's particular version of realism then, beholden neither to any naïve correspondence theory of truth nor to any scientific naturalism, is at the same time tasked with both getting philosophy back in touch with reality *and* speculating about this reality without the expectation that such speculation might be derived from knowledge (be it *a priori* or *a posteriori*) – a rather perilous balancing act.

Perhaps this concern with correlationism is ultimately something of a red herring? For whilst Harman is no doubt perturbed by the foreclosure of unbridled access to the absolute inaugurated by the Copernican Revolution, this does not really account for his demand for speculation per se. After all, it seems quite unlikely that his favored pre-critical precursors (e.g. Aristotle, Leibniz, etc.) would recognize themselves in this aspect of his project: although they all seek to think outside the confines of the finite human knowledge, there is no sense in any of their projects that to think reality in itself demands a mode of speculative thought distinct from such knowledge – there is no untraversable transcendental *finitude* to the latter, it is merely empirically finite. Harman's admission that to think the absolute is to *"allude"* to that which can never be fully present to the mind is in effect an acceptance of the Kantian contention that speculative reason, once it ventures beyond the boundaries of possible experience, no longer has any purchase on knowledge as such.[38] More specifically, it implicitly adheres to Kant's distinction between *cognition* and *thought* – a distinction that is not present in pre-critical metaphysics.[39] What seems to really bother Harman is the combination of "ascetic conceptual rigor" and

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[32] The "repeated sorcerer's chant of the multitude of things that resist any unified empire," Harman contends, is the "best stylistic antidote" to the deadlock of correlationist exclusionism (*Prince of Networks*, 102).

[33] Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 68.

[34] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 56.

[35] Harman, *Quadruple Object*, 119.

[36] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 52.

[37] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 127.

[38] See Harman, *Quadruple Object*, 68..

[39] See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 115.

"lack of imagination" that he sees as the upshot of post-Kantian philosophy, and which can only be mended through a decidedly speculative investigation into the relations between objects themselves, independent of human thought.[40] And in a postulation that would have a profound impact upon the speculative turn as a whole, he views this as not only a means of enlivening philosophical discourse, but of disabusing this discourse of this anthropocentric preoccupations. We are "finally in a position," declares Harman, "to oppose the long dictatorship of human beings in philosophy," suggesting that if OOO has a politics, however rudimentary, it lies in the denial of any political reality that would take the human being as its locus.[41]

## The conflicting desiderata of speculative metaphysics

The nature of speculative thought proper to OOO can be characterized as a kind of suspended disbelief: we all know that we will never have unmediated access to the absolute, so OOO instead begins with the gambit that it might be more interesting, efficacious, and even *exciting* if we simply pretend that we do. But how exactly does such a goal square with Harman's aspirations to a non-*anthropocentric* philosophy of objects? After all, the biggest problem with the correlationist focus on the human/world relation, according to Harman, is that "[t]he collision of hailstones and ocean, assuming that no humans are there to observe it, is not granted the same ontological status as that between humans and ocean."[42] As noted above, I do not think that this is at all an accurate rendering of many correlationist positions. But nevertheless, it is central to the orthodoxy of the speculative turn, which seeks to not only decenter the human subject in relation to its discursive or material conditions, but to effectively excise subjectivity from the picture altogether, at least insofar as it might bear upon the philosopher's capacity to speculate freely on the nature of the real in its totality.

Kant himself, of course, does not at all seek to theorize any kind of situated knowledge. But twentieth century continental philosophy – from phenomenology, existentialism, and the Frankfurt School, through to (post)structuralism, deconstruction, and various feminist or postcolonial schools of thought – has tended to foreground the socio-historical embeddedness of knowledge formation. By forgoing the very question of knowledge, and instead making recourse to a speculative thought spared the necessity of knowing, Harman wishes to effectively bypass any such contingency. Again, he does not deny this contingency at an epistemological level (for it is inextricable from his theory of withdrawal), he simply considers it an unnecessary obstruction to ontological enquiry. We witness in this move the aforementioned suspension of disbelief: Harman relies upon a kind of metaphysical vanishing trick – the subject simply disappears, refigured as merely one object amongst a multitude of others. Or, one might say, OOO implies a kind of wilful, strategic ignorance, choosing to ignore the fact that to speak of things in themselves is to speak of them on our terms, and almost certainly to project our own qualities onto them. The suggestion that wisdom consists in showing "sufficient integrity to listen to the voice of the world instead of our own prejudice about the world," whilst a pleasant sentiment maybe, already demonstrates a certain prejudice, anthropomorphizing the external world through the presumption that it has a voice (conveniently lending it the privileged instrument of philosophical communication), and that we are inherently capable of understanding whatever it is that this voice might say.[43]

OOO's effacement of human subjectivity has two main aims: firstly, to show objects the respect that they apparently deserve, without reducing them to being mere objects *of* human experience; and secondly, to enliven philosophy, by breaking it out of its self-imposed durance within the boundaries of possible experience. But are these two aims actually compatible? The crucial issue here is that Harman seems to be under the impression that the relations between objects are only meaningful when accounted for within a metaphysical system. Which is, to put it bluntly, a very anthropocentric perspective on objects. For example, there is something deeply paradoxical in Harman's complaint that whilst deconstruction allows for "the minimal existence of traces from the otherworld," it still harnesses these traces "within a theory of human meaning rather than letting them battle it out amongst

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[40] Ibid., 235.
[41] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 3. Harman's main attempt at articulating a social theory deals with the not-especially-pressing question of the ontological substantiality of the Dutch East India Trading Company (*Immaterialism*, 35-126).
[42] Harman, *Quadruple Object*, 118.
[43] Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 239.

themselves in the caverns below."[44] Why do these subterranean traces, whatever they are, need us to allow them to "battle it out"? If they were truly autonomous, then their skirmishes would occur regardless of whether philosophers acknowledge them or not.

It seems inevitable that this imperative to ontologically account for the relations between objects actually just reinscribes them within the domain of "human meaning" (or the "structure of care," as Heidegger would say), and as such, one might wonder whether the Kantian foreclosure of such claims to human reason is in fact *far less* arrogantly anthropocentric, insofar as it is reluctant to speak of that which it cannot know, and does not regard its own thought as inherently capable of penetrating all boundaries. "Giving up power, relinquishing control, leaving objects alone," suggests Irinia Aristarkhova, "might enable them to become things, as in *things-in-themselves*."[45] Impelled as it is to involve itself with objects, to speak of and for them, OOO is incapable of such a gesture. It cannot simply leave its cherished objects to their own devices, reducing them instead to a fixed set of predetermined concepts.

There is a tension in OOO between two desiderata: wishing to grant objects an autonomy they have ostensibly been denied by prior philosophers, but *also* wishing to present these objects' autonomy in the most interesting, novel manner possible. It is at precisely this disjuncture that the conflict between the *realist* and *speculative* aspects of OOO is most apparent. What becomes clear is that OOO, by choosing to elide the position of the subject in regard to knowledge formation, is concomitantly incapable of reflecting upon the role of the philosopher in regard to the positions that they put forward – which is to say that OOO cannot account for the necessarily anthropocentric nature of the practice of philosophizing. Unless one is wedded to some form of scientific naturalism, there is nothing noticeably unprecedented or problematic in arguing that a philosophy's value should be judged on the extent to which it is "both compelling and fruitful."[46] But these are not categories that have any bearing whatsoever on the autonomy of objects; they are, conversely, about very much *human* interests and concerns. In the end, OOO is not really about elucidating some kind of inner life of objects; instead, it is about using this proposition as the means for proffering a more enthralling, exhilarating perspective on the world. OOO is fundamentally concerned with what is interesting *to us*, as human beings, and more specifically, with what would make objects most interesting for us.

OOO is a philosophy of enchantment, of *allure* – it seeks to bring the cosmic drama to us, to return a sense of wonder to the world.[47] Hence Harman's habitual recourse to exoticizing metaphors, which attempt to highlight the enticing or bewitching world of objects that apparently surrounds us. We are told that objects, as presented in OOO, "are as strange as ghosts in a Japanese temple, or signals flashing inscrutably from the moon,"[48] and that it is far better for us to "read of the properties of salt, or the love story of a buccaneer and an Indian princess, than the latest measurements of the walls of our human prison,"[49] underscoring the anthropocentric stakes of this speculative venture. Most strikingly, Harman argues quite explicitly that the same "charm" that we find in objects "is present in foreign cultures, and for all the endless diatribes against 'Orientalism,' objects themselves are a perpetual Orient, harboring exotic spices, guilds, and cobras," going on later in the same book to argue that "against all expectations, we often learn more about foreign things from Marco Polo or T. E. Lawrence than from the most vehement technical orations on colonialism."[50] OOO is intended to render all objects, even the most mundane or familiar, exotic.

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[44] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 123.
[45] Aristarkhova, "A Feminist Object," 58, my emphasis.
[46] Harman, *Quadruple*, 124.
[47] Harman's theory of relationality "betrays a preference for lively objects" (Behar, "Facing Necrophilia," 125).
[48] Harman, *Quadruple*, 6.
[49] Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 148-149
[50] Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 140, 236. Harman defends his system against accusations of orientalism, propounding that by "globalizing the exotic to cover all corners of reality, the object-oriented philosopher removes the exotic from the realm of imperialistic thrill-seekers" ("Objects and Orientalism," 137). This may be true in some sense, but it fails to account for the inclinations and designs of the philosopher who would desire such exoticism in the first place. At another time, he is quite content to justify Lovecraft's racism and orientalism on the basis of its affective, horrific power for the human reader, pushing back against what he regards as "bitter" postcolonial revisionism (*Weird Realism*, 59-63).

To be fair, Harman does not view this orientalism as an experience confined to humans; rather, the concept of allure is focal to his somewhat opaque theory of vicarious causation – a kind of *"touch without touching"* – which lies at the basis of *all* relationality between objects.[51] But its justification, in the absence of any clear proof of such causality, almost always comes back to its appeal for us as humans and as philosophers. The difference between humans and other animals, Harman argues, is that we are "more object-oriented, filling our minds with all present and absent objects," such that we "do not remain in the holistic prisons of our own lives where things are fully unified by their significance for us, but face outward toward a cosmos speckled with independent campfires and black holes."[52] And yet the latter claim does not logically follow from the former, for this object-orientation is quite evidently a form of meaning-making, an ordering of our experience of the world, however fanciful, into discrete units that are significant to us in some way. To acknowledge the heterogeneity of the things that surround us, of the world into which we are thrown, does not somehow elude the fact that this is a philosophical representation of the world, a signification centered upon *our* interests and concerns, and dependent upon *our* access to objects. It may well be true that such an ontology is capable of unleashing "a gold rush of further speculations," but of what benefit is this – philosophical prospectors staking claim to a territory over which they have no intrinsic right – to the objects themselves?[53]

To propose that objects are "like undiscovered planets, stony or gaseous worlds which ontology is now obliged to colonize" is to effectively establish a sort of metaphysical manifest destiny, an injunction to subsume the cosmos in its totality under its own concepts and categories – precisely the maneuver that Kant's critical philosophy was intended to prevent (albeit for reasons quite different from those that we might favor today).[54] As Katherine Behar argues, "the scent of seduction and conquest permeates [Harman's] terminology," capturing objects within the gaze of a perverse exoticism, seeing in them "a form of alterity that is meant to be *had* even if from afar."[55] OOO is, like any philosophy, a set of concepts that are used in order to represent the world in a certain way, and in its emphatic conviction that such concepts are applicable to *all* aspects of reality, it becomes a means by which reality is rendered most appealing to Harman's particular inclinations as a philosopher (viz. his fascination with the exotic qualities of objects). The *terra incognita* of the thing in itself is rapidly transformed into a *terra nullius* awaiting ontological colonization: OOO effectively seeks to teach objects of their own autonomy; an autonomy determined on this philosophy's terms, and for its benefit.[56] Paradoxically, in seeking to highlight this autonomy, OOO actually arrogates these objects for its own ends, striving to forge "new concepts that take on a life their own," but which have no meaning and serve no purpose for the objects that they claim to liberate.[57] Such an approach does not evade the human-centered perspective of post-Kantian philosophy, instead merely eliding the position of the philosopher who puts forward these claims.

**Turning on the spot**
The logical conclusion of Harman's emphasis upon the need for new, compelling philosophical systems – one of his primary justifications for abandoning the legacy of the Copernican Revolution – is that OOO cannot be regarded as the be-all and end-all of the speculative turn. Even just the eponymous *Speculative Turn* edited collection is expressive of this ambition toward a broad church of disparate but like-minded philosophies, including many thinkers whose hypotheses diverge considerably from those of Harman and his ilk (although the dearth of women within this collection also points to the limits of this ecumenicalism).[58] Whereas the Copernican Revolution is intended as a turn to end all turns, the

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[51] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 150. Cf. Harman, "On Vicarious Causation."
[52] Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*., 238.
[53] Ibid., 95.
[54] Harman, *Tool-Being*, 19.
[55] Behar, "The Other Woman," 30.
[56] Rosenberg argues that "the urge towards objects […] calls to mind any number of New-World-style fantasies about locations unmediated by social order" ("Molecularization of Sexuality").
[57] Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 140.
[58] The occlusion of the normative repercussions of its metaphysical postulations puts OOO at odds with otherwise sympathetic theoretical trends (e.g. feminist new materialisms). See Alaimo, "Thinking as the Stuff of the World," Åsberg et al. "Speculative *Before* the Turn," and Taylor, "Close Encounters of a Critical Kind."

speculative turn by contrast would presumably never stop turning – it is a permanent revolution, the catalyst for an unremitting cycle of metaphysical invention.

So often it is accepted at face value that this turn marks a return to a pre-Kantian, pre-critical metaphysics, a kind of ontological primitivism. On the contrary, however, the speculative turn is very much of its time. The presumption that genuine philosophy should not be workmanlike, but must continually renew itself, engendering new, exciting approaches without the shackles of transcendental deduction is symptomatic, and indeed emblematic, of a broader trend within the humanities, motivated as much by institutional pressures as by any genuinely intellectual pursuit, which has engendered an accelerating cycle of "turns," each offering a contrived radicality based upon the retrieval of a purportedly forgotten aspect of scholarly enquiry. In the increasing frequency of such turns, and the normalized expectation that they will occur, we are witness to a *planned obsolescence* of theory, a compulsive need to invent new paradigms, each of which is valued primarily in terms of its *contemporaneity*, its simultaneous *timeliness* and *untimeliness* (i.e. its relevance to the present moment insofar as it remains discrepant with that moment) and is thus liable to being rapidly outmoded.

Pre-critical metaphysics, and in particular, the kind of "dogmatic" metaphysics of which Harman is fond, is defined in large part by the weight that it places on the *proofs* of its claims: Leibniz, for example, does not merely view himself as wildly speculating as to the existence of God; he believes himself to have *proved* said existence as a necessary being, in a manner homologous with, say, the proof of his integral rule within his writings on calculus. There is a surety in this attitude, a firm belief that the ultimate questions of the universe are not merely interesting directions for enquiry, but are wholly answerable within the confines of metaphysical reason. Harman's philosophy, like so many of the speculative ontologies that have emerged in the last few years, does not evince such confidence, relinquishing any grounding of its judgements in subjective or objective validity, and instead justifying itself above all in its principled opposition to the illusory enemy of "correlationism." Thus, although it affects the stance of a re-turn to a pre-critical metaphysics, to an ontological grounding that the Copernican Revolution forecloses, this speculative philosophy is in practice capable of grounding itself *only* in its own speculative-ness – which is to say, its own groundlessness, its refusal of any appeal to epistemological correspondence (which would risk it falling back into positivism or naturalism), socio-political exigency (which would threaten the cachet it draws from claiming to think a reality external to human concerns), or logical exactitude (which would pull it back into the pedantic disputation of critical philosophy).

Indeed, for a movement which is so singlemindedly determined to escape the strictures of correlationism, the speculative turn, and OOO in particular, seems to find it quite difficult to actually move beyond this topic. In spite of his oft-stated rejection of critique as a mode of philosophical argumentation, Harman's writings remain curiously fixated on the alleged failure of correlationism to account for the rich world of objects. We witness in OOO a kind of repetition compulsion of the traumatic wrong turn of the Copernican revolution: the former's obsession with the horizon of philosophical discourse repeats, in a much more simplified form, the Kantian transcendental delimitation of the appropriate boundaries of metaphysics (albeit in this case effectively eliminating such boundaries; or, indeed, proscribing the very suggestion of such boundaries). In its aforesaid groundlessness, this speculative approach is instead forced to continually defend itself and justify its own utility in terms of its novelty, its radical departure from all prior philosophies. Paradoxically then, it can never truly escape the Copernican revolution, for it must always refer back to it, incessantly underscoring the break from this tradition that is its *raison d'être*.

Arguing that "every theory is separated from every reality by an unbridgeable chasm," and thus positing a bizarre realism that lays claim to reality as such, but asserts no knowledge of this reality, Harman ironically brings the speculative turn full circle, back to that most derided of deconstructionist creeds: the infinite and indefinite play of signification in the absence of any transcendental anchorage.[59] For although he himself remarks that "[t]he customary postmodernist jump from one truth to infinite truths misses the more interesting option of a finite plurality of them," this latter option is meaningless

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[59] Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 169.

if one is denied the means by which the limits of this bounded set might come to be known.[60] The real becomes a blank screen, upon which the speculative philosopher projects their own arbitrary reality, valued only insofar as it marks a rupture from what has come before. Purged of the critical imperatives that drove poststructuralism and deconstruction in their numerous deviations and derivations, the speculative turn ultimately comes to be justified in the mere fact of its turning, its differentiation from that which preceded it.

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[60] Ibid., 189.

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