

# Nomological Disputation

## Alain Badiou and Graham Harman on Objects<sup>1</sup>

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COMPARING THE OBJECT IN ALAIN Badiou's 'materialist Platonism' and Graham Harman's object oriented 'speculative realism' might at first seem an esoteric exercise in joining dots across great lengths. On the one hand, Badiou's approach to objects in the *Logics of Worlds* (*LOW*) operates through the Platonic codetermination of thought and being via axiomatically deduced mathematical structures—because what can be thought mathematically is, the object can therefore be fully deduced. On the other hand, Harman's theory is grounded in objects (cars, rocks, ice cream, Harry Potter, Gandalf, etc.) that withdraw in their compete reality from the thinking subject—or indeed any other object, including their inanimate cohorts. For Harman objects present us with an inaccessible, withdrawn reality which can never be fully exhausted; and, like black holes in astronomy, one can only circle around whilst speculating about the depths within. Thinking the object in Badiou's philosophy in contrast to Harman's thinking of the object thus seems to run aground at the very first hurdle: at the level of their fundamental decision regarding how ontology should be situated. Add to this the fact that Badiou identifies himself as a materialist and an atomist, whereas Harman rejects both of these paradigms, and we appear to have two philosophies

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that could work more as a differential heuristic than as a site of productive philosophical exchange.

Yet despite all these factors rendering a criss-crossed reading of these two thinkers seemingly unlikely, they also share some common ground. Both the atomic relationism utilised by Alain Badiou to secure objects, and also the securisation of the integrity of individual objects and their parts in Harman's philosophy, both rely on some sort of infinite relation to secure finite being; whether that is 'inaccessible' infinitude for Badiou, or the infinite regress for Harman. It will thus be argued that Harman's aversion to mathematisation has no obvious basis within his object oriented philosophy, but rather rests in the philosophy's ambiguity regarding 'ideal' structures; an ambiguity, which vice versa dogs *LOW* in its vast array of metaphors between its 'ideal' mathematical objects and its phenomenal examples. The similar trajectories of the two ontologies point, then, to the unresolved question of the nomological structure of the world. To proceed to this point it is necessary to first examine Badiou's axioms of materialism, noting how he secures (1) individual objects via the transcendental index; and (2) the way the infinite relation folds into the ontological realm of 'inaccessible infinity'. The next section compares this to Harman's aversion to relationism, in that for him there is always more to a withdrawn object than the sum of its relations. Harman rather shifts the problem to an infinite regress within the relations of the parts of the object to itself. The conclusion outlines some possible future avenues for thinking both objects and change.

### Badiou's Axioms of Materialism

Alain Badiou's *LOW* presents two axioms of materialism, which attempt to secure individual objects and their procedures for change in the onto-logical domain of being-there. They are:

1. Objects appear as ones in a world
2. The ontological closure of a world implies its logical completeness

(1) On account of Badiou's first axiom—*objects appear as ones in a world*; that is, where being is localised—it is important to place this somewhat strange understanding of materialism in distinction to how materialism is generally thought. Scientific materialism for the most part wishes to reduce reality to its smallest constituent parts, whether that be molecules, atoms, electrons, or sub-particular strings, thereby occluding thinking the reality of objects on different scales. On the other hand, for Badiou everything that “appears” as one—although it is important not to be fooled by the use of these “metaphorical” verbs; we are not talking phenomenology here—simply *is* one. For Badiou this is axiomatic not because of folk inferences from the phenomenal world as presenting singular objects, but rather because ones can be thought, for his Platonism they thus exist. To take one of his more perplexing examples, insofar as the neo-classical columns in Hubert Robert's painting can be *thought as one, they thus are one*—despite the fact that it is unlikely that any reductionist, materialist function could be assigned to the arrangement of colour and stroke. In the same way Badiou would also consider a star as a one, a helium atom in the star as one, and an anarchist in part of an anarchist collective as one. Their relations to one another assure the ascending and descending scale of objects that can be considered as ones. And significantly, in comparison to *Being and Event* (*BE&E*), the oneness of these atoms are not established through an act of counting against their ontological multiplicity (by their being simply *counted as one*<sup>2</sup> in a representative structure). Rather, the oneness of atoms in being-there is grounded via the ‘transcendental index’ of objects to one another: where one object inhabits a maximum intensity of existence, and one object the minimal, thereby placing a series of objects in relation to one another through an ‘envelope’ and simultaneously assuring their *existence* as individual objects. At this stage in the exposition identity and difference are given as part of the axiomatic of the appearance of ones, because *mutatis mutandis* without difference to determine identity ones could not exist. Exactly how their differences are determined is, however, left

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open at this stage. The transcendental structure he describes is thought in mathematics as a complete Heyting algebra.<sup>3</sup> And yet, the properties which allow this scale to operate—and he insists that this be thought in the absence of subjective evaluation—necessitates a theory of relation, which attains objectivity of its own accord.

(2) In the third part of the *Greater Logic on relation* Badiou presents the second thesis of materialism: “The Ontological Closure of a World Implies its Logical Completeness.”<sup>4</sup> Utilising sheaf theory, Badiou posits that all relations between two atoms can be observed from the standpoint of a third. And the relation between this third and another atom can then be evaluated from yet another third position, and so on and so on. Badiou makes this move to allow a relational guarantee in the absence of the gaze of a subject, whilst at the same time—like in *BE&E*—avoiding any recourse to something like the One of Aristotle’s unmoved mover, or similar theological premises. He argues that the sequence of relations does not just tend to infinity but *reaches actual infinity*. Since there is no temporality in the logics of being-there the relation whilst constructed linearly in its exposition can be thought of as immediately infinite. As such, in a familiar move for readers of *BE&E*, at infinity there is a partitive excess of belonging over inclusion. Once the relation reaches actual infinity, the parts within that infinite relation reach an excess over the elements and thus retroact (ontology → logical being) such that the necessity of any final gaze is made redundant by the folding of infinity upon itself. This ontological substratum of infinite multiplicity is “inaccessible” (or “forever withheld”<sup>5</sup> in John Milbank’s reading) because the infinite is the withdrawn determination of the world.

These ideas mark a return to various philosophical/theological speculations on the infinite as grounding finite being. But Badiou introduces an asymmetry into the relation, in that for him even though the One does not exist—ontology is infinite, *inconsistent* multiplicity—it still provides the conditions for the ones of atoms to ‘appear’. Or, at least, the conditions of how they logically appear,<sup>6</sup> with their inaccessible multiplicity

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lurking beneath the surface. But as this brief exposition has shown Badiou is a self-declared relationist, in the sense that for an event to locally actualise change the entire infinite network of relations has to retroact upon the situated world of those atoms. His insistence at the start of the *LOW* that worlds are only ever local<sup>7</sup>—thus avoiding the implications of totality, even in the logical realm—are not obviously concomitant with the infinite relation he posits; other than perhaps in the sense that after Cantor the infinite was pluralized.

If we were to imagine Harman checking a score sheet of Badiou's philosophy of the object, then, this is what I imagine he would write:

1. Badiou is a relationist in that individual objects are never more than their situation in a series of relations – CON
2. Badiou's 'atoms' bear more resemblance to objects than the reductionist notions of normal materialism, whether they be thought of as atoms, protons, quarks, or superstrings – PRO
3. There is an infinite withdrawal (inaccessible infinitude) in Badiou's theory of objects which forms the ontological heart of his theory – ??

It remains to be demonstrated how Harman also arrives at a similar infinite regress as the inaccessible/withdrawn heart of his theory of objects and how it differs from Badiou's.

### Harman Contra Relationism

In speculating about objects, Graham Harman extends Heidegger's analysis of the ready-to-hand and present-at-hand distinction of 'tool-being' to posit a system of vicarious causation between objects. Because for Harman all objects are withdrawn in their full being from one another, they cannot be exhausted by the relations in which they are entangled, such that—on the contrary in relationism—each individual could be defined fully by the total network in which it is embedded. Against his antagonist Whitehead he writes: "insofar as an object is more than its relations it must stand apart

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from any supposed monism of the world-as-a-whole, since a homogenous universe of this kind merely gives us the most radical form of relationism.”<sup>8</sup> Reacting against this tendency he observes: “The philosophical world has just spent an entire century nurturing everything that pertains to contexts and wholes. It is individual rocks and flowers that are now crying for our attention; this is now the more fertile cropland for twenty-first-century philosophy. And it is my view that Heideggerian tool-being, interpreted properly, is the swiftest vehicle to propel us toward a new theory of objects.”<sup>9</sup> A memorable example given in *Tool-Being* (*TB*) is of a washing machine sitting on the icy surface of a frozen lake. Although the two objects are touching, with the strength of the ice counteracting the gravitational pull of the washing machine sitting on top, neither realities of the objects are exhausted in the interaction. There is always more to the washing machine than the forces exerted upon the lake can detect. And vice versa there is more to the lake than the washing machine can detect; whose encounter with it remains at the level of its resisting surface. Harman writes: “the appliance reacts to some features of the lake rather than others—cutting its rich actuality down to size, reducing it to the that relatively minimal scope of lack-reality that is of significance to it.”<sup>10</sup> So, for instance, the fact that the water below might be poisonous to fish would not only be undetectable, but irrelevant to the washing machine.

Universalise this analysis and we have a general theory of the withdrawal and inexhaustion of all objects in the universe from one another. Rather than a uniform lump of matter constituting the homogenous substance of the universe, we are left with an invisible realm where there is always more to objects than can be detected by other objects. The ontological difference is rendered as immanent to objects: ontological being lurks behind the ontical appearance of objects. Yet Harman is also keen to remind his readers that “this is not a ‘two-world theory’ of the usual kind, in which a supposed real world inhabits one plane of reality and human images another. If we speak of a real hammer that withdraws from all

relation, this hammer is still the relational product of pieces that are still more deeply withdrawn; these hammer-pieces in turn are relational compounds of other withdrawn real objects, and thus presumably to infinity.”<sup>11</sup>

Harman’s criticisms of Xavier Zubiri are instructive here for understanding what he means by an object. For the examples of large scale, phenomenal objects such as washing machines, whilst not outside of his theory, at the same time are not totally representative of it. The question that arises in object-oriented philosophy, in which total relationism is rejected, is what constitutes an object, i.e. where an individual object’s limits lie and how composite objects are assembled to take on an integrative reality of their own? Harman criticises Zubiri’s notion of substantial unities between certain objects. For instance, where hydrogen and chlorine can be considered in a substantial unity as hydrochloric acid, or where two metals in a knife remain in a stable state; but whereas at the same time “the same thing cannot be said of the relation between a single person’s heartbeat and thumbprint, or between the large and small intestines.”<sup>12</sup> The question, then, is what constitutes a substantive unity which coheres an object as one? Rejecting the Aristotelian substance philosophy of Zubiri, Harman advocates a properly ontological solution in which *every relation forms a new autonomous object*. As he puts it: “two vicariously linked real objects do form a new object, since they generate a new internal space.”<sup>13</sup> As such, alongside the fact that any seemingly integral object such as a washing machine can be decomposed into an infinite regress of objects of which it is constituted (right down to its atoms), then, equally, relations between seemingly non-integral composites, if they have a relation at all form a new object. Even a human perceiving a tree forms a new object, which in itself constitutes a reality inexhaustible in its relation to any other object or observer. It thus transpires that object oriented philosophy is more relational than it first appears; if every new relation forms an object, it only resists the total relationism it rejects through the horizon of withdrawal it concomitantly posits, where there are ontologically necessary holes within the relational matrix.

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### Mathematising Relations?

In comparing Harman's theory with Badiou's in *LOW* the number of similarities, despite their obvious differences, is surprising. To take Badiou's example of the lone anarchist amongst the group of anarchists: that group can only cohere as a group inasmuch as their relation—a localised relation; in relation to other localised relations—coheres them as a single unity with which they can take on a rank of intensity according to the transcendental index. Obviously, this contradicts Harman to the extent that they have no withdrawn reality as objects; their ontological multiplicity that Badiou posits has no objective, localised existence, even if it can ambiguously retroact upon worlds. Nevertheless, on a fundamental level there seems nothing to stop Harman's philosophy of relation and objective withdrawal being thought through mathematical logics. Harman has written that he has "scepticism toward Badiou's program of a return to classical philosophy by way of mathematics."<sup>14</sup> And yet, scepticism or not, there is no immediately apparent reason other than a preference for certain types of philosophical pathways why Harman's theory could not be mathematised in much the same way as Badiou's logics of worlds. The Heideggerian commitments of Harman appear only as a launch pad for a philosophy that leaves Heidegger far behind.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty lies in the question of access to the withdrawn being of objects. For since Harman insists upon access to the withdrawn being of objects as only possible through some sort of metaphorical intuition, to what extent is this dependent on everyday language? Why would mathematics equally not be able to access the relations? Since there is a parallelism between relations—which we can think—and their withdrawn objects—which we cannot—mathematics would not be used to try and exhaust the withdrawn aspect of an object, which could be denoted in much the same way as the void in Badiou's philosophy: as a symbolic marker for nothing. Rather, more problematic would be the sense in which mathematics is thought and deployed, because intuitionist and other constructive paradigms would

not escape the injunction against correlationist thought. On the other hand, Badiou's Platonic conception of mathematics as having immediate access to being is more fruitful for avoiding the correlationist trap. Although it is the case that in Badiou's conception of the object there are no withdrawn objects—he saves this for ontological multiplicity—and his use of mathematics in his theory of being-there exhausts objects relationally, I cannot see any reason why this is consequent upon mathematics per se as much as upon Badiou's particular thinking through mathematics.

Perhaps a more convincing argument can be found by arguing negatively. If it really were the case that even a Platonic form of mathematisation was said to fail to access being, the alternative seems to be to endow the structures within everyday language with some privileged ability to intuit the meta-physical structure of reality. If this were the case, then Harman would be more Heideggerian than I read his theory as. Yet, equally, if it were true that in the next book there is a turn to using diagrams to explicate points then that alone would point in the direction of language not possessing unique access to the relations which form objects. Of course, there is large gap between mathematics being used to *model* a theory—in which case it is just an extension of it translated into a syntactically parsimonious form—and the use of mathematics proper, which should be judged, as it always historically has been, to undermine our commonsense understanding of the world derived through everyday language.

Whether Badiou starts with a decision in favour of axiomatic set theory, or Harman begins with the tool analysis does not seem to be critical. Rather, the final sticking point seems to be the extent to which a Platonic meta-physics is really actualised in contingent, phenomenal worlds,<sup>15</sup> and if/where its limits are? To a certain extent, the fact that Badiou can begin from mathematical axiomatics and Harman from phenomenology and both arrive at a relatively similar thinking of objects indicates that the gap—if there is one—cannot be all that great. There is surely a fruitful direction for future research lying somewhere at the intersection of these two thinkers.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared for the ‘Real Objects or Material Subjects?’ conference at the Philosophy Department of the University of Dundee, Scotland, March 27th-28th, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> “*The one* as such, as I said, is not. It is always the result of a count, the effect of a structure...It is thus necessary to distinguish the *count-as-one, or structure*, which produces the one as a nominal seal of the multiple, and the one as *effect*, whose fictive being is maintained solely by the structural retroaction in which it is considered.” Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), Meditation 7, §4, 90.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009). Book II, Greater Logic, 1, §3, 167.

<sup>4</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, Greater Logic, 3, Appendix, 345.

<sup>5</sup> John Milbank, “The Return of Mediation, Or the Ambivalence of Alain Badiou” *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities*, 12 (1), 2007: 127-143 (138)

<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Tzuchien Tho Badiou admits that in logic his choice of Heyting algebras and Sheaf theory are experimental and not final; other logical structures could be used; only ontology is fixed by Cantor’s discovery and its implications. Alain Badiou with Tzuchien Tho, “New Horizons in Mathematics as a Philosophical Condition: An Interview with Alain Badiou” *Parrhesia* 3, 2007 [available online] [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesiao3/parrhesiao3\\_badiou.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesiao3/parrhesiao3_badiou.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, Greater Logic, 3, §3, 335.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks* (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009), 152.

<sup>9</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2002), §24, 276.

<sup>10</sup> Harman, *Tool-Being*, §20, 223.

<sup>11</sup> Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 215.

<sup>12</sup> Harman, *Tool-Being*, §23, 253

<sup>13</sup> Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation” *Collapse II*, 2007, 191.

<sup>14</sup> Graham Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno and Radical Philosophy,” In: *The Speculative Turn* [forthcoming Melbourne: Re.Press, 2010]

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Johnston expresses this concern: “Overall, his [Badiou’s] mathematical materialist ontology results in a refusal to grant a properly ontological status to material contingencies, to the states of the Universe studied by the natural sciences.” Adrian Johnston, “What Matter(s) in Ontology: Alain Badiou, the hebb-event and materialism split from within,” *Angelaki: journal of the theoretical humanities* 13 (1), 2008: 27-46 (31).