Since its inception in 2006, the online community which speculative realism sparked has rapidly grown and established the internet as the movement’s home. The beauty of this is that the content is readily and regularly debated online as its thinkers have embraced the free publishing format the internet offers. Though such freedom creates an open atmosphere, the various blogs, comments, and email attachments flying about also give it a somewhat sprawling nature. With each post, it becomes increasingly difficult for any newcomer to break into the trend let alone to keep track of new developments. Graham Harman’s Towards Speculative Realism seems to answer this problem, as the author has published a collection of writings spanning his own career which are geared towards bringing the reader unfamiliar with speculative realism into the fold. The book not only represents a sustained attempt to widen the audience via print, but also a move towards systematizing the movement (or at least his ‘object-oriented’ section of it).

For the title is an endorsement not only of his thought, but of speculative realism’s nature as a diverse school. As is well known by now, the four founders regularly contradict each other, but they are united by a common position: tak-
ing realism with the counter-intuitive speculative angle in mind—in some ways all four are vying to be the Nikola Tesla of philosophy. If this was to be determined by the prose, Harman would easily win: his writing delivers all concepts with a considerable degree of concision, clarity and lightness. The various essay and lectures fall over two categories of Harman’s style, with some threading both waters: first as a reader of other philosophers and then as a thinker in his own right. To newcomers (the audience at which the author seems to be aiming), the readings chosen seem to ease one into Harman’s own views, with his task to give objects back their autonomy and not have them dependent on being freed from their environment by some privileged feature of humans alone (be that Dasein, consciousness, etc.).

Philosophically, the first three chapters are more a mark of honesty than anything else: they each show Harman as a student working out and clarifying contrary ideas coming from Heidegger and Whitehead. It is in “A Fresh Look at Zuhandenheit” that we get a concise summary of his views on Heidegger and a sharp introduction to his thought, so it will serve us to dwell on it for a short while. For despite the fact that Harman’s analysis of the Heideggerian tool gradually takes a back seat in his thought, it nevertheless forms a foundation upon which much of the book’s ideas are based. At its core, ‘tool-being’ is a rejection of the world-view that entities are there just for our projects, and not subsisting as independent objects in their own right. In approaching the ‘tool analysis’ found in Being and Time, Harman is quick to denounce the traditional view of privileging the practical as more primordial: instead, he holds that the practical is but another mere ‘present-at-hand’ (vorhanden) way of approaching the object.

In the famous ‘breakdown’ situation, Harman takes an entity to not become vorhanden upon losing its functionality for us (such as a hammer’s handle breaking), because he holds that a tool’s being does not lie solely in its practical use; rather,

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1 Throughout, Harman uses ‘objects’ and ‘entities’ interchangeably.
it is a mistake to apprehend the object as casually moving between a zuhanden or vorhanden state from time to time as Harman holds there to be an ‘unbridgeable gulf’ between them.² With this we reach his first big claim: contrary to the object traditionally being exclusively zuhanden or vorhanden, it occupies both states simultaneously at each moment of time, i.e., every entity is constantly in ‘a global dualism.’³ Not being meshed to the practical, the zuhandenheit of the object refers rather to its inexhaustible inner reality—importantly, its independent reality. So where does that place vorhandenheit? To state an object as present-at-hand is to refer to a particular finite aspect which has been broken off its reality by our (or another object’s) encountering it. For example, when a car hits a gate, each colliding object comes into contact with certain aspects of the other: though the car perceives the hardness of the wrought iron and the gate perceives the flexibility of the aluminium as it crunches under the exerted pressure, neither encounters all the aspects of the other.

No matter how many attempts, on Harman’s view each object has a wealth of aspects which can never be entirely dug out. Instead, what is turned up in each instance is a particular vorhanden aspect. With each object laying claim to a zuhanden in its own right, Harman can thus reach his central claim that every object which is, is already a tool; to put it in his own words, “the tool isn’t ‘used,’ it is.”⁴ By distinguishing the idea of tool from the finite aspect of ‘use,’ he maintains that we cannot bridge the gap between the aspects we come across in our pedestrian acquaintances with objects and the reality of their domestic interiors. Our perceiving the object ‘as a means,’ i.e., in terms of the ‘as-structure,’ is no longer even a privileged type of encountering but a garden variety type along with all the other encounters between autono-

³ Ibid. 47.
⁴ Ibid. 46 his italics.
mous objects.\(^5\) For ‘use’ of them can only come about if the objects form an independent structure already—i.e., one not dependent on Dasein—as Harman later states that ‘they are real, because they are capable [autonomously] of inflicting some sort of blow on reality.’\(^6\)

From this analysis, two consequent claims bear on the rest of Harman’s thought: the first leads one down a road of Heideggerian scholarship, and thus it is not followed up; in contrast the second frames each chapter of the rest of the book. They are, respectively, 1) all philosophical concerns of Heidegger can be reduced down to some form of the global duality found in entities; 2) despite Heidegger’s wishes, the ‘tool-being’ analysis places a metaphysics back into his system, one in which entities, through perception, objectify each other—regardless of whether Dasein is around or not. Harman thus takes his ‘object-orientated’ project to be a revival of metaphysics within the tradition of Continental philosophy. But before starting, he notes in his piece on Latour that Continental Philosophy is haunted by its own two dogmas which must be overcome: the first is anti-realism, an inaccessibility caused by a supposed (and somehow privileged) human finitude; holism comes second, particularly the type whose outlook relegates the independence of individual objects within a larger system (or context).\(^7\)

Taking his cue from Latour, Harman holds that objects are comprised of relations between other objects. Crucially, all relations comprise an object. However what is put forth is not meant to resemble a type a hierarchy—instead it is stressed that all relations are equal in significance and on the same footing. The key point is that, when in a relation, both objects ‘objectify’ each other, though not in any conscious way. Relation becomes the means by which objects \(A\) and \(B\) encounter the finite properties of each other, but Harman still holds that object \(A\) never comes into contact with, i.e., never bridges the gap to, the withdrawn reality of \(B\), or what

\(^5\) Ibid., 56.
\(^6\) Ibid., 111 his emphasis.
\(^7\) Ibid., 85-87.
he now calls the ‘substance’ of object b. Harman is quite clear-cut that substance, a concept long-shied away from by Continental thinkers, is nothing but the unknown withdrawn reality of the object which is inexhaustible “by any perception of it or relations with it.”8 The system which he is trying to put forward, particularly in “The Revival of Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy,” is that the key opposition of the universe is between substance and relation.9

Now, having substances with unbridgeable gaps may seem reminiscent of a dogmatic Leibnizian outlook complete with pre-established harmony but, with a bit of help from Husserl, Harman dodges this with his own novel conception of causation—an indirect type he calls ‘vicarious.’ If real objects are separated by a chasm, then how does one account for interaction between them, or, to put differently, how can causation happen in reality? Even causation cannot bridge the gap between objects, so Harman concedes that causal interaction must take place on the interior of an object. Yet when I grasp an intentional object I enter into a relation with it: the intentional act is a new object, as it is constituted by a relation. For Harman the real table ‘perceives’ me, by relating, as an intentional object to it. Thus the table and I find ourselves duelling in the withdrawn interior of another object and any interaction between us must happen as parts constituting that third object. So in order to hang on to substances, causation between two objects cannot be direct; instead, it must operate ‘vicariously’ through a third object which opens an interior space for action.10

Harman’s thoughts on objects and his revival of metaphysics drive him to a position which could be called a Husserlian reversal, as it is from the foregoing analysis that he concludes it is not horizons that form a major element of the world, but ‘objects and their interiors.’11 But as well as giving an introduc-

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8 Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 118.
9 Ibid. 114.
10 Ibid. 132-133.
11 Ibid., 160.
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tion to the main ideas of object-oriented metaphysics, *Towards Speculative Realism* also provides the reader with writings that discuss other philosophers. Though some of the early ones do seem to be placed in order to buttress the thesis of ‘tool-being’ their inclusion also serves to point one in the direction of authors with whom the reader may be unfamiliar. Throughout, Harman is clear and concise in his exposition of whoever he takes as his focus. And as mentioned before, he makes no secret about the source of his inspiration: from Whitehead, interior reality of objects and from Lingis the autonomy of objects. It is with the more substantial “Bruno Latour, King of Networks,” however, that we see Harman come into his own. He does well to include it, as Latour’s influence presses itself upon the rest of the book and his witty exposition serves to ease one into the more complex essays.

Though brevity has now revealed itself as my enemy, I feel it important to note a certain change in Harman’s style in his more recent work. Post-2006 there is a clear vibrancy in his writing, as one can see the effect of dialogue with the other speculative realists cropping up in his work. Along with the Latour lecture, the essay on DeLanda proves to be one of the best: in the nine years between the Latour piece and “The Assemblage Theory of Society,” we see the author operating with a great deal more finesse in analysing his topic. In tackling DeLanda’s thought, Harman is no longer drawing on ideas of his target, but positions them in dialogue with his own: we see a critical appraisal through his own object-oriented system, something which marks the emergence of a ‘Harmanian’ line of thought against the others. Though there is a definite ‘work in progress’ feel throughout *Towards Speculative Realism*, it is heartening that one does feel there is a sense of progress. Although this review has been somewhat restrictive in its scope, we can summarise this collection as being one which shows the author, both as reader and as thinker, shifting into a mature stage of thought. The reader is thus invited to trace this shift towards the current edge of speculative realism.