

The Noumenon's New Clothes¹

(Part 1)

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ASPECTRE IS HAUNTING CONTINENTAL philosophy—the spectre of **Object-Oriented Ontology** (OOO). All the disciplines and groupings that have traditionally allied themselves with continental theory in the anglophone world are poised to greet its manifestation: aesthetic theory and artistic practice, political philosophy and heterodox geography, Francophile post-post-structuralists and Germanist neo-romantics. Who among them has not heard the siren song of OOO's litanies of inhuman objects (menageries of stock markets and stock cubes, quarks and clerks, etc.)?

¹ This paper has been a long time in development. It was initiated at the suggestion of Graham Harman, after previous attempts at informal engagement with his ideas (which can be found in the commentary section of my blog here: <http://deontologistics.wordpress.com/commentary>) became too extensive for him to easily respond to. In its long gestation it has benefited immeasurably from my discussions with Ray Brassier, Damian Veal, Robin Mackay, Daniel Sacilotto, Dustin McWherter, Nick Srnicek and Jon Cogburn, some of whom were gracious enough to provide comments on early drafts of the material that has come to make up this paper. It has also benefited from the comments of numerous more or less anonymous individuals who have read and responded to the informal engagements already mentioned. Finally, I owe an immense debt to Fabio Gironi, without whose incredible patience and careful encouragement this piece never would have appeared.

Who among them has not begun to shrug off the oppressive, anthropocentric legacy of Post-Kantian philosophy, bravely railing against the tyrannical correlationists of the continental academy, the dreary technicians of the analytic mainstream, and even the scientific fury of its Neo-Kantian heirs?

I will plead forgiveness for my bombast, but there is a certain grandeur to the pronouncements regarding the emergence of OOO as a philosophical movement that demands parody, and I hope this can be taken in good spirit, as a sort of gesture to clear the air. I have every intention of taking these pronouncements as seriously as possible, and perhaps even more seriously than they are intended. Graham Harman, the erstwhile leader of this most vocal faction of what was once, fleetingly, called **Speculative Realism (SR)**, has often expressed a preference for what he calls **hyperbolic readings** of philosophies.² The idea here is to imagine the relevant philosophy in a position of nigh-unassailable strength, so as to tease out what would be missing from a world in which it had become dominant. To imagine a given philosophical tendency actually *winning* the discursive battles in which it is engaged is to treat it with the utmost seriousness. It is to treat it as a genuine *contender* for truth, whose claims to truth are *sincere* enough to be taken at face value. This is the kind of *respect* that any serious philosophical position should be treated with, and this goes double for nascent philosophical movements that claim to have both wide ranging implications and applications. The aim of this paper is to take OOO seriously, and to treat it with at least this level of respect (my initial parody aside).

However, the hyperbolic method is surprisingly difficult to apply to OOO itself, given both the diversity and tentativeness of the commitments of its principal practitioners (canonically: Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Tim Morton). There is most definitely a common rhetoric binding these fig-

² “Delanda’s Ontology: Assemblage and Realism” in *Continental Philosophy Review* (2008) 41:3, 367-383; *Prince of Networks*, 121-122; Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 152-158.

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ures together—an insistence upon **ontological egalitarianism**, a rehabilitation of the concept of **substance**, and a pervasive metaphoric of **withdrawal**—but a deeper examination of each of these raises serious questions regarding the content of the shared commitments they purport to name. There are disagreements regarding just *how* egalitarian we must be (e.g., what it is to say that *everything* is an object), just what it means to return to a metaphysics of substance (e.g., whether it is permissible to conceive it in *processual* terms), and precisely *what it is* to say objects are withdrawn and thereby what we can *know* about them. There are obviously a number of common issues to which these ideas are addressed, but it's not clear that they represent *genera* of common solutions that could be neatly broken up into variant *species*. It is quite possible that this problem will be alleviated by time, but for now, at least, we must pursue another strategy.³

Given this problem, the aim of the current paper is to lay the groundwork for a proper engagement with OOO by focusing upon the philosophical system of its progenitor: Graham Harman's own **Object-Oriented Philosophy (OOP)**. As the oldest and most well-defined variant of OOO, this provides us with the best starting point for any wider engagement with the movement. However, to treat OOP with proper respect means to deal with it in its specificity, which in turn means outside of the context of the overarching rhetoric which binds together the different strands of OOO. This is particularly important, insofar as although it is often clear *what* the proponents of OOO think, it is often far less clear *why* they think it, which only exacerbates the problem of divergences between them. The first step of my approach will thus be to present as complete and concise a summary of the “what” of OOP as I can, breaking the metaphysical system down into three distinct aspects: **withdrawal**, **the fourfold**, and **vicarious causation**. The second step will then be to present

³ Some may think that this is a hasty conclusion. I would direct them to my more informal (but nonetheless extensive) attempts to engage with and understand the differences between Harman's and Bryant's variants of OOO, which can also be found in the commentary section of my blog (see fn. 1).

as charitable an interpretation of the “why” of OOP as I can, teasing out and reconstructing the possible arguments for each of these three aspects in as much detail as is feasible, before assessing them on their merits. The third step will be to make a number of overarching criticisms of the project of OOP on the basis of this assessment, pinpointing several key problems that run throughout it. The final step will then be to present the hyperbolic projection of OOP initially promised, and to draw some conclusions about precisely what OOP (and perhaps OOO) has to offer on these grounds. Carrying out these steps will be a lengthy process, and so the paper will be split in two: the first two steps will be carried out here, and the second two will be published subsequently.⁴

Before delving into the details (and wrestling with the Devil who hides in them), it's also worthwhile to explain the title of this paper, the meaning of which may not yet be evident. Although he is willing to admit that his philosophy amounts to a radicalisation of a certain kind of **correlationism** (the **weak** form), in similar fashion to Meillassoux's philosophy (in relation to the **strong** form), Harman nevertheless presents his work as both a trenchant critique and an important step beyond the menace of correlationism in contemporary philosophy. I do not intend to dispute the idea that there is such a correlationist menace (though I do take it to be more complicated than it is sometimes thought to be), but I will take issue with Harman's presentation of his own relationship to it. When it is properly understood, Harman's work should be seen not as a *critique* of correlationism, but a *consolidation* of its central tenets.

Harman essentially attempts to overcome the inconsistencies inherent within correlationism by sacrificing one of its core features—the prohibition on **metaphysics**—in order to construct a metaphysical prop whose purpose is nothing less than to bolster the rest of the calamitous edifice. He revives and transforms Kant's **noumenal** realm in order to preserve

⁴ This will of course appear in the next issue of *Speculations*. I must once again express my gratitude to Fabio, and the whole *Speculations* team, for making possible something as unusual as this piece.

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the most disastrous prejudices of the correlationist tradition he claims to break with. Far from being a truly “weird” realism, OOP is no more than the eccentric uncle of the correlationist family. The metaphysical spoils it claims to have liberated from the Kantian stronghold are so much ashes and rust. After all is said and done, it returns to us naked, claiming to be wreathed in the finest vestments. The only proper gesture of respect in this circumstance is to point out its immodesty.⁵

1. The Lava that Dares not Speak its Name

Before performing exploratory surgery on the beating heart of OOP, it is first necessary to present the customary compliments regarding the overall shape and style of its vascular architecture. Whatever else can be said about Harman’s presentation of OOP, it is certainly *compelling*. On the one hand, it attempts to reveal the inherent *oddness* of the world we live in, by painting us a landscape of a reality in which everything is radically individual, cut off from everything else in almost every respect, connected only by fleeting glimmers of phenomenal appearance. On the other, it attempts to *humble* humanity by seeing humans as just one more disparate association of objects within the universal diaspora, and the intentional terms through which they relate to one another as merely an expression of a more fundamental sensual connectivity in which everything may partake. We must applaud such willingness to countenance counter-intuitive metaphysical conclusions and to embrace ontological humil-

⁵ As this indicates, this paper is indeed a polemic of sorts. I will not preempt this polemic by endeavouring to outline its scope in advance, but I will attempt to pre-empt objections based on the idea that I violate my own principle of respect simply by adopting a polemical *tone*. Harman’s own words on this topic are eminently suited for this purpose: “Polemical writing in philosophy no longer enjoys its previous level of acceptance, and is now often dismissed as the product of incivility, aggression, even jealousy. Against this attitude, we should appreciate the clarifying tendencies of polemic—always the favored genre of authors frustrated by the continued clouding of an important decision, whether through fashionable cliché or dubious conceptual manoeuvres.” Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, (Open Court, 2005), 11.

ity wherever we find it.

Moving on, the central axis around which Harman's metaphysical system turns is the distinction between the **real** and **sensual**. He is fond of describing this by appealing to a volcanic metaphor: the reality of things consists in their "molten cores," the liquid specificities of which withdraw behind a "sensual crust" of visible features. On this view, the substantial *magma* at the heart of every entity is forever trapped beneath a rocky outer surface whose stillness is only occasionally interrupted by the tectonic forces it unleashes. However, these occasional eruptions always catch us unawares. We never glimpse the molten essence as it leaks through the fault lines in its phenomenal facade, but only catch it as it cools, already crystallising into new sensual continents. The metaphorical *lava* is nowhere to be found. To twist this metaphorical register for the purposes of summary: Harman's is a world of disconnected volcanic island nations floating in a cool sensual sea. A world in which you can travel as much as you like, but you'll always be a tourist. No matter how hard you try, you'll never see the *real* island, only beaches full of German holidaymakers and chintzy gift shops. You might get the occasional *taste* of it—a wiff of the exotic food the real islanders eat as you pass by, or a stolen glimpse of the real lives of the inhabitants over a whitewashed wall—but that's all you'll ever get.

In order to provide an adequate exposition of Harman's noumenal cosmology, I'm going to divide my discussion of the ways in which he develops and expands upon the split between the real and the sensual in three. I will tackle the relation between the real and the sensual under the heading of **withdrawal**, which is the most famous aspect of Harman's position. I will then tackle the way this is complicated by the introduction of a second axis—the distinction between **objects** and **qualities**—under the heading of the **fourfold**, which is the name of the structure Harman derives from their intersection. Finally, I will address the most prominent metaphysical problem that emerges from Harman's system under the heading of **vicarious causation**, which names its corresponding solution.

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a) *Withdrawal*

It is all too easy to say that Harman's world is divided in two: a celestial plane of intentional facades masking a hellish realm of machinic forces, an open space of sensual contact concealing the endlessly churning reality that makes it possible. The truth is that these two sides of his cosmos are folded into one another at every opportunity: there is no straight line from one sensual point to another that does not pass through a real one, nor vice-versa. What we have instead is a pluriverse of infernal engines that present themselves to one another so as to hide their internal machinations, each a realm unto itself, like the many hells of Buddhist lore, composed out of further layers of tortuous machinery, each part of which is available to its fellows only in outline, containing its own inexplicable depths, concealing further strange and sulphurous landscapes, evermore intricate and malicious economies of action, yet to be explored. This is the world of **real objects**. It is a world to which we ourselves belong, along with everything that has any real *effect* upon us—or indeed, upon anything at all. This is the site of everything that really *happens* in the world.

It's important to distinguish between two kinds of happening though: **execution** and **causation**. For Harman, a real object just is its execution, which is to say it's *being-whatever-it-is*, or rather, *doing-whatever-it-does*. This is to say that each real object is defined by some inscrutable **end** for which it is the corresponding **act**. The relation between every real thing taken as a whole and the parts that compose it is to be understood in terms of **functional relations**, like the relation between a machine and its components. The real object *consists* in the unitary action of its parts deployed towards the given end: it is its execution insofar as it is a *function in action*. There is more that could be said about this, but it's important to recognise that although this action is certainly a happening of sorts, it is the occurrence of *sameness*, or simple **persistence**. The various machinic arrangements of parts and wholes that compose the real are essentially *synchronic*. For Harman, causation is

the occurrence of *difference*, or **change**, and it emerges from *diachronic* relations of interaction between real objects. The paradox with which he closes his first book, *Tool-Being*, is that his characterisation of such objects as persisting unities seems to preclude the possibility that they could effect change in one another, implying an essentially static cosmic order, in opposition to the seeming reality of change that constantly assails our senses.

The reason for this is that the reality of persistence *qua* execution implies that real objects **withdraw** from one another, unable to affect one another by default. This withdrawal has two facets: the **excess** of everything over its presentations, and the **independence** of everything from everything else. Excess follows from the inscrutability of the end governing each object, insofar as it occludes its *internal economy* of action (execution) and thereby the *external capacities* for action (causation) that emerge from it. Execution is a pure act of persistence underlying every actual interaction, and a pure actuality underlying every possible interaction. This means that it *transcends* both interaction and possibility. We can never *know* the sheer execution of the thing that lies behind every possible encounter. Insofar as **ontological humility** demands that we treat the way we grasp the capabilities of objects, through either *theoretical* or *practical* engagement with them, as just one more instance of an encounter between any two real objects, we must conclude that our inability to grasp an object's veiled execution through any particular possible interaction is a deeper fact about the metaphysics of encounters. This is the fact that the world also contains **sensual objects**. Our own experience of the world is *phenomenologically* constituted by intentional relations directed at *unitary objects*, and this implies that objects' experience of one another is *metaphysically* constituted by something similar. If objects encounter one another as unities, and yet fail to encounter one another *directly*, then encounters must be mediated by unitary intentional facades or caricatures entirely *distinct* from the executant realities that project them. Independence follows from this, insofar as every real object is protected from

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every other by an honour guard of distinct sensual objects, forever precluding access to it, at least by default.

Finally, it must be emphasised that withdrawal does not merely occur *between* isolated real objects, like a non-aggression pact between the many hells, but also occurs *within* them, in the form of **mereological isolation**. It is easy to see how this involves the mutual withdrawal of the **parts** of an object from one another, insofar as they are real objects in their own right, but it also consists in the withdrawal of parts from the **wholes** they *compose*, and wholes from the parts they *contain*. Of course, the whole is dependent upon its parts, insofar as it cannot subsist without them, but it is equally independent of them in two senses: A) it is entirely possible for its parts to be replaced without significantly altering its internal economy, and B) this economy produces capacities which exceed the capacities of the parts taken in isolation. Similarly, although the parts may be reciprocally dependent upon one another to some extent, insofar as they require certain conditions in which to function, they are equally independent of their context in two senses: A) it is entirely possible for them to be transplanted into a different whole without dissolving their own distinct unity, and B) new contexts may reveal hitherto unexpressed capacities that were previously suppressed. A real object considered as a whole is a specific arrangement of parts that both transcends and fails to exhaust their specificity. Despite the fact that the real object consists in transcending this excess of specificity, it nevertheless plays an additional role, insofar as the whole draws upon it in generating the sensual objects it hides behind. The various inessential features of a real object's parts become resources for producing the phenomenal **accidents** that cloak its executant reality.

b) The Fourfold

Once we begin to talk about the features and capacities of objects as distinct from the objects themselves, we are stumbling upon the second fundamental axis around which Harman's system turns: the distinction between *objects* and their *qualities*.

Things are not just torn between their subterranean execution and its phenomenal effects, but between their persistent **unity** and its constituent **plurality**. This does not concern how a singular whole is *composed* by a multiple parts (e.g., the composition of an ice cube out of molecules), though this is a related issue, but how a single entity is *determined* in a various ways (e.g., the coldness, hardness, or translucency of the ice cube). The mutual withdrawal between parts and whole we've already seen consists in wholes having qualities their parts lack (e.g., the molecules are neither translucent nor hard), and parts having qualities their wholes ignore (e.g., the unique chemical properties of the trace amount of minerals in the water is usually entirely irrelevant to the ice cube). Qualities are not objects, even if the qualities a thing possesses somehow bubble up from the objects that compose it.⁶

These two distinctions are not merely parallel, but cut across one another. This produces a fourfold of terms: in addition to the distinction between sensual objects (**SO**) and real objects (**RO**), there is a distinction between **sensual qualities (SQ)** and **real qualities (RQ)**. The objects that appear in our phenomenal experience are **encrusted** with sensible features that may vary from moment to moment, but the latter are entirely distinct from the real features **submerged** in the silent execution they conceal. Here we begin to see the way the four poles interact with one another to form Harman's ten **categories**. The relation between a sensual object and its sensual qualities (SO-SQ) is the condition of the variation of its encrusted accidents, or **time** itself, whereas the relation between a sensual object and its real qualities (SO-RQ) is the submerged anchor around which this variation is fixed, or what Husserl calls **eidōs**. These two categories are the first of what Harman calls the **tensions** between object and quality. The emergence of sensual objects in our experience is dependent upon the sensible features the corresponding real objects allow them to present from perspective to perspective, and the distinctness of these underlying real objects is in

⁶ We will complicate this claim to some extent in section 2(A)(iii) and 2(B)(i).

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turn dependent upon differences between the features they can never present. This gives us the remaining two tensions. The relation between a real object and its sensual qualities (RO-SQ) is the condition under which it can relate to another object through a sensuous facade, or **space**, whereas the relation between a real object and its real qualities (RO-RQ) is its principle of uniqueness, or what Zubiri calls **essence**. Taken together, these four tensions provide the schema of *sameness* and *difference* between objects, both real and apparent, along with their *constancy* and *variation*.

Harman calls the changes that emerge within this schema **fissions** and **fusions**. This is because two tensions (time and eidos) have a persistent state of **connection** between object and quality for two of the tensions—so that change demands fission of this connection—and two (space and essence) have a persistent state of **separation**—so that change demands fusion of what is separated. It's important to recognise that the fissions take place within the sensual realm, insofar as they involve breaks in the connections between the sensual objects we experience and their qualities. In **confrontation**, it gets broken from its sensual qualities (time), such that its accidental features are somehow revealed *as* accidental. This occurs when we recognise something *as* something (e.g., a tree *as* a gallows), thereby separating those qualities irrelevant to this characterisation (e.g., height, branch structure, etc.) from those that aren't (e.g., colour, foliage, etc.). In **theory**, it gets broken from its real qualities (eidos), such that its eidetic features are somehow contrasted to its accidental ones. This occurs when we strive to grasp the constants that underlie the shifting surface variations all things are subject to (e.g., to analyse the tree's morphology, or its genetic structure). By contrast, only one of the fusions marks the emergence of the real object within the phenomenal sphere, so as to redraw its boundaries from within, whereas the other is entirely withdrawn, and so is only apparent in the ways it redraws these boundaries from without. The former is **allure**, where it interacts with the features of the sensible facades it projects (space), such that there is an apparent juxtaposition

between its accidental elements and its eidetic core. This occurs in various aesthetically significant experiences (e.g., *cuteness, beauty, humour, embarrassment, humility, disappointment, loyalty*),⁷ but is most prominently displayed in the use of **metaphor** (e.g., when we frame our experience of the tree by describing it as “a flame”). The latter is **causation**, where it interacts with its own real features (essence), so as to unlock its capacities to affect the withdrawn core of other things. As already indicated, the possibility of causation is thrown into question by withdrawal, and this necessitates the theory of vicarious causation to follow, which will turn upon its relation with allure.

Before getting into this though, we must examine the remaining six categories, which are divided into the **radiations** between qualities and qualities and the **junctions** between objects and objects. Much as there was a rift between one of the tensions and the other three with regard to their role in experience, there is a crucial difference between the roles that radiations and junctions play therein. On the one hand, the radiations cover the way that qualities are related *within* experience by the sensual objects that populate it: the relation between two sensual qualities (SQ-SQ) is their **emanation** through the same object of experience, the relation between two real qualities (RQ-RQ) is their **contraction** behind this same object, and the relation between the sensual qualities and the real qualities (SQ-RQ) is their **duplicity** in the way they differ from one another. On the other hand, the conjunctions cover the way that relations between objects constitute experience in relation to ourselves *qua* real objects: the relation between two sensual objects (SO-SO) can only take place as **contiguity** within our experience, the relation between two real objects (RO-RO) is the **withdrawal** of the corresponding real objects behind our experience, and the relation between a real object and a sensual object (RO-SO) is the **sincerity** that constitutes this experience itself. Together, the three radiations and three conjunctions provide the framework

⁷ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 212-213.

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in which the three experiential tensions can unfold. They give us an abstract map of the phenomenal realms that lie between infernal kingdoms of execution—the borderlands through which they smuggle causal contraband, or the embassies through which they communicate.

c) *Vicarious Causation*

We can now turn to the problem of *how* this communication occurs. The independence of real objects from one another demands such an explanation: how can mutually withdrawn objects possibly interact, so as to produce **real changes** in one another? These are quite distinct from the mere **phenomenal variations** that sensual objects undergo in experience, because they can reconfigure the intentional space in which experience occurs. Yet it is only within these intentional spaces that a real object can encounter the variable facades projected by other real objects, and only through these **sensual vicars** that any sort of contact can be established between them. The fact that all causal contact arises out of an **intentional relation** between an *experiencing* real object and an *experienced* sensual object that mediates between it and its real counterpart implies that the **causal relation** is not just vicarious, but also **asymmetrical** and **buffered**. It is asymmetrical because the relation has **direction**, proceeding from the object the vicar conceals to the object the vicar appears to. This means that causation can occur one-way between real objects, without reciprocation (e.g., when a bee is hit by an oncoming car, the bee may be destroyed while the car is entirely unscathed). It is buffered because there are many *contiguous* sensual objects present in the same experience, and this does not result in interactions between the real objects they hide (e.g., the bee may be drawn into the path of the truck by an enticing flower, but the truck and the flower may be entirely unrelated). This means that a real object's *sincerity* in encountering a sensual object is the condition of that object's **receptivity**.

However, we are not causally affected by every object we experience. The phenomenal realms that real objects find

themselves immersed in are filled to the brim with myriad sensual unities, many of which have no impact upon them at all. This means that intentional relations are not automatically causal relations. The question is thus what more there is to causal contact than mere sincerity. Harman responds by drawing the link between *causation* and *allure* mentioned above. Genuine change is *internal* to a real object, insofar as it only occurs when a real object becomes connected to its qualities in regenerating its *essence*, but this nevertheless requires an *external* trigger, which can only take the form of some variation within the intentional space it's immersed in. Harman proposes that the *confrontations* usually precipitated by such variation are insufficient to trigger causal contact, because the qualities encountered therein are still tied to the facade that hides the *triggering* object from the *triggered* object. It is only in *allusion* that these ties are broken, and the qualities are allowed to orbit the real object underlying them (e.g., when the metaphorical comparison of the tree with a flame highlights the relevant qualities in a way that makes them alien to it as we are familiar with it). Allure lets reality obliquely slide into appearance, striking the object that experiences it in a way that surpasses the sensual flux it is accustomed to, so that the accidental features of the *affecting* object catalyse the reshuffling of essential features within the *affected* object.

Nevertheless, the latter does not strictly *see* the former, even if it *feels* it in some specific **aesthetic mode** (e.g., as *humorous*) and to some specific degree of **aesthetic intensity** (e.g., as only *mildly* humorous). The brief suspension of *causal independence* that occurs in causal connection never really overcomes the corresponding *epistemic excess*. Allure may play an important role in enabling us to reconfigure the ways we think about entities, but it never amounts to knowledge of them. This is why Harman grants aesthetics a special philosophical privilege. In examining the varieties of allure and their relationships it gives us insight into the metaphysical structure of reality that forever escapes the stale practice of epistemology. With the tenfold categorical schema derived from the fourfold,

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Harman has provided a *general* theory of objects, which he calls **ontography**, capable of application to the various *specific* domains of objects that compose the cosmos. Yet it is only through extending of the sorts of aesthetic analysis indicated by his theory of allure that these domains can be fleshed out. Ultimately, Harman proposes an alliance of aesthetics and metaphysics that promises to lay bare the various regions of the cosmos to renewed philosophical inquiry. It now falls to us to assess this proposal, and its worth.

2. The Withdrawal of Arguments

Having looked into the “what” of OOP, it’s time to concern ourselves with the “why.” This means locating the various arguments that Harman presents for each of the different aspects of his metaphysical system that we’ve distinguished. As I hinted in the introduction, this is by no means an easy task. Although Harman’s work is peppered with phrases such as “I will show...,” “I have already argued...,” or “As argued repeatedly...,” these do not often refer to specific arguments as much as to the overarching dramatisation of a given idea that takes place throughout the work.⁸ There are a few notable exceptions to this, as we will see, but what arguments there are in Harman’s work tend to be blended together in ways that make them hard to tease apart—a task which is vital if they are to be properly assessed. To draw on Harman’s own preferred metaphors once more, the arguments often seem to *withdraw* into themselves, leaving textual vicars that tantalise one’s cognitive faculties by *alluding* to their real logical depths. Our current task is thus to draw them out of hiding and expose them to the light of reason.⁹

⁸ These examples are all taken from *Tool-Being* (Chicago and la Salle: Open Court, 2002), 19, 61, 70, but one can find many similar phrases in all his works. It is very rare to find such a phrase that is tied to a specific chain of inferences, such as by referencing the pages upon which the supposed argument takes place.

⁹ Harman himself looks down on this sort of critical engagement with the arguments underlying a philosophical position for various reasons (cf.

Of course, Harman also has his own (fairly derogatory) opinions about the role of argument within philosophy, as part of his wider concerns with the importance of philosophical style, and these must be taken into account.¹⁰ However, we will address these later on in the present essay. For now, our aim is to *delineate* and perhaps even *repair* as much as is feasible of the justificatory tissue holding together the skeletal structure of Harman's corpus which we've already revealed. This is a delicate operation that requires exegetical care, logical skill, and not a small amount of discursive charity. Returning to the medical metaphor opening the first section, we are about to move from *exploratory* to *reconstructive* surgery. In order to facilitate this, I'm going to draw a threefold distinction articulating the different ways in which Harman frames his ideas with an eye to their justification: **historical narrative**, **phenomenological description**, and **metaphysical argument**.

Historical narratives introduce an idea by reconstructing its *genesis* within a particular historical dialectic; usually constituted by a series of different thinkers, each of which makes some important contribution to the problematic in which the idea gestates, only to emerge fully formed in the author's own work. These rational reconstructions are an important philosophical tool deployed by many of the great figures in the history of philosophy.¹¹ The philosophies of Hegel, Hei-

Guerilla Metaphysics, §12A), some of which are curiously intertwined with elements of his own position. He would rather that, instead of systematically critiquing a position on the basis of flaws in its argumentation, we strove to present counter-narratives that construct *suggestive* alternatives to it. Even while Harman admits that "such debunking may be necessary work at times," he nevertheless maintains that "we should not forget that it is mainly the work of dogs (*cynics*, to say it in Greek)." (Ibid.) Even if we grant this, it cannot get in the way of the work that *respect* demands. Mere preference has no say upon when the dogs must be released. Woof.

¹⁰ Cf. Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 169-175.

¹¹ For an account of the logic of this process reconstruction, see Brandom's work on the historical dimension of rationality in the introduction to *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) and his own reconstruction of Hegel in *Reason in Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), ch. 3.

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degger and Deleuze would not be as compelling or even as accessible without the thematic vectors they trace through their forebears in the direction of their own work. Harman is thus to be commended for wielding this method of exposition with some skill. However, the danger associated with this method is that it can easily slip from licit *exposition* to illicit *justification* in the form of arguments from authority. Such arguments can be useful as shorthand forms of justification (equivalent to saying “you need to go read Aristotle/Hegel/Heidegger/etc. before we can talk seriously about this”), but they wither under more sustained forms of philosophical scrutiny. The issue is exacerbated if the readings of the figures in question are particularly controversial, such as Harman’s reading of Heidegger, which forms a crucial part of his own object-oriented history.¹² As such, in separating out these narratives from the other forms of exposition and argument in Harman’s work, my primary goal will be to ensure that they play no such illicit justificatory role.

Phenomenological descriptions play an important part in Harman’s work, insofar as his metaphysics is thoroughly influenced by an appropriation of the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger. His is a metaphysics of intentional relation, and his account of intentionality is fundamentally culled from the phenomenological tradition and its methodology of immanent description. However, the methodological questions regarding the *nature* and *status* of phenomenological description that were of such concern to Husserl and Heidegger receive little attention in Harman’s work. He is often all too eager to delve directly into phenomenological analysis without clarifying precisely *what it is* he is doing in doing so. Where Husserl devotes a enormous amount of time and effort to elaborating the various aspects of the phenomenological

¹² This is an area in which I can speak with at least enough authority to be taken seriously, given the fact that my PhD thesis (*The Question of Being: Heidegger and Beyond*) presents a synoptic reading of Heidegger’s work that, while diverging from both the standard analytic and continental readings much as Harman’s does, comes to radically different (and, I would argue, far more nuanced) conclusions than Harman’s own.

reduction, and Heidegger devotes a serious (if not necessarily comparable) effort to modifying this within his own existential-hermeneutic framework, Harman gives us little in the way of phenomenological methodology. This not only makes the precise content of many of his phenomenological claims unclear, but more worryingly brings into question the *metaphysical* conclusions that are leveraged on the basis of these claims. It is thus of the utmost importance to identify precisely which of Harman's claims are motivated by phenomenological analysis, and how they are deployed in the attempt to justify his more contentious metaphysical claims.

This brings us to the third form of exposition: metaphysical argument itself. Specifically, it raises the question of what qualifies either a philosophical claim or its justification as metaphysical. Put differently: just *what is* metaphysics anyway? This question should weigh heavily on the shoulders of anyone intending to engage in renewed metaphysical speculation regardless of their preferred method, but this weight becomes particularly acute when one intends to derive metaphysical *conclusions* from phenomenological *premises*. Although it is possible to find his account wanting, one can't say that Heidegger merely identifies phenomenology and ontology without addressing and attempting to justify this quite radical divergence from the metaphysical tradition.¹³ Heidegger's detailed historical and methodological work on the problem of metaphysics and the question of Being garners almost no attention in Harman's work, nor is it supplemented by any detailed alternative schema. Indeed, the most sustained engagement with the question I have been able to locate dismisses the possibility of even addressing the methodological task of clarifying the question of Being prior to answering it: "...the question of [B]eing cannot be elucidated until the meaning of [B]eing itself has already somehow been clarified, prior to any special description of Dasein."¹⁴ This sidelining of methodological issues is very

¹³ For details, consult my aforementioned PhD thesis (<http://deontologistics.wordpress.com/thesis>).

¹⁴ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 40.

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worrying given Harman's unapologetic calls to return to the problems of pre-critical metaphysics.¹⁵

All this indicates just how important it is to separate out the roles these different forms of exposition play in the more or less *explicit* arguments within Harman's work, and the way overlaps between them further complicate many of the *implicit* assumptions undergirding the latter. However, the critical purchase upon Harman's work this would provide requires an *exhaustive* approach that has some of its own problems. First, the ideal of exhaustiveness places *exegetical* demands upon a commentator (and critic) that are often unrealistic, and this can easily lead to accusations of impropriety. I have gone out of my way to read as much of Harman's extant work as I can, in order to forestall such accusations, but I expect them nonetheless.¹⁶ Second, it places *hermeneutic* demands on those who would read (and perhaps respond to) the commentary that are substantial, if not always unreasonable. Not only must they be willing to cover the same exegetical ground as the commentator, but they must keep track of

¹⁵ It is also helpful to note that despite using the term "being" quite extensively throughout *Tool-Being*, Harman never provides any generic definition or analysis of the term that goes beyond his own metaphysical account of it. If pushed to provide a quick analysis of his usage of the term, I would say that he uses it in one of two senses: A) in the *particular* sense to refer to the being of a given object (cf. 85), or B) in the *singular* sense to refer to the totality of objects (cf. 294). This almost entirely elides the *general* sense referring to the Being of objects *as such* that Heidegger himself is principally concerned with (as the subject of the question of Being). In addition, in accordance with his own metaphysical proclivities, the senses in which Harman does use the term are almost universally deployed in opposition to *seeming* (cf. 26), which is only one of the major oppositions that Heidegger outlines (and indeed, questions) in the course of his career (cf. *Introduction to Metaphysics* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000], 103-122).

¹⁶ I have read all published books and essay collections, but I have not read all of Harman's published papers, nor any unpublished material that may be circulating. I have also followed his writings on his blog (<http://doctorzemalek2.wordpress.com>) rather extensively, though I have refrained from referencing them in justifying any of the substantial points in this paper, for obvious reasons. I consider this to be an eminently reasonable level of work to justify the present essay, even if I cannot completely rule out the possibility that I have missed something crucial in the writings I have not read.

multiple different arguments and their intersection. I have endeavoured to organise the present essay in as accessible a manner as possible, but this can only ameliorate these problems to some extent. Third, it often has profoundly counterproductive *psychological* effects. It's an unfortunate fact that it is often easier to convince someone of the falsity of a theory or the wrongness of a policy by focusing upon a single objection to it, rather than aiming to present several equally serious objections. We all have a finite amount of attention, and thus a limited ability to cope with barrages of arguments, and these unavoidable limitations can often lead to us dismissing arguments that overload our attentional capacities. This phenomenon is a serious problem in many mainstream political debates, where certain multifariously flawed ideas often survive precisely because no unitary line of attack upon them is obvious. I will beg the reader to pay attention (ironically enough) to this phenomenon, and endeavour not to take the lack of a singular criticism as a point in favour of the position criticised.

This brings me to the last substantive point in the current prolegomena, regarding the nature of philosophical disagreement and its presentation. Harman has complained to me before that I fail to follow the proper procedure for engaging with a discursive opponent in my more informal debates with him: first outlining the areas in which one agrees with one's interlocutor, before proceeding to outline the relevant disagreements.¹⁷ My response to this criticism is that, sometimes, there simply aren't enough points of agreement to make this more than an empty gesture. My own commitments, which I have endeavoured to keep out of the present paper wherever possible,¹⁸ are quite radically different from Harman's, and this leaves little ground for praise on my part. Nevertheless,

¹⁷ This was written in private correspondence.

¹⁸ For an unpolished overview of my own position, I recommend reading the available draft of my *Essay on Transcendental Realism* (<http://deontologistics.wordpress.com/2010/05/essay-on-transcendental-realism.pdf>). This is a rough draft that has yet to be revised and expanded for publication, but it does a reasonable job of outlining the central themes of my work.

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I will mention six areas in which there is something resembling agreement between us: (i) we both think that **correlationism** is problematic; (ii) we both hold that **individuality** is an important metaphysical topic; (iii) we agree that there is more to **panpsychism** than is often thought; (iv) we each take it that **aesthetics** is an important philosophical field with wider ramifications than commonly accepted; (v) we are jointly committed to both the possibility and necessity of **metaphysics** in some form; and (vi) we strongly agree that **realism** is essential if it is to be pursued properly.

The problem is that once we begin to define what is meant by the core terms in each case (correlationism, individuality, panpsychism, aesthetics, metaphysics, and realism) the agreements are revealed as fairly superficial: (i) I agree with Meillassoux¹⁹ that the essence of correlationism is *epistemological* rather than *metaphysical*, and that it must be challenged on this terrain rather than dismissed as ontologically arrogant; (ii) I think that there can be no study of the *metaphysics* of individuality that does not begin with its *logic* (e.g., identification, quantification, existential commitment, etc.) rather than leaping headlong into intuitive speculation; (iii) the features of the history of panpsychism I am concerned with (e.g., Spinoza, Leibniz, Nietzsche, Whitehead, and Deleuze) consist in their generalisation of *non-intentional* features of thought (i.e., conation and sensation); (iv) I'm convinced that aesthetics, as the study of a certain kind of value, has less to do with the *sensations* and *feelings* that signal its presence than the *actions* this demands of us; (v) I predict that a return to metaphysical speculation without the *methodological* awareness accompanying an answer to the question "what is metaphysics?" is doomed to failure; and (vi) I think that there can be no viable "realism" without a *definition* of "real" more subtle than "that which is always other than our knowledge of it."

This is all I will say about these disagreements for now. The criticisms upon which they turn will be revealed as we

¹⁹ "Speculative Realism" in *Collapse III: Unknown Deleuze*, 445-446, in conversation with Peter Hallward.

look at Harman's arguments themselves. I will group these arguments on the basis of the aspect of his system that they underpin (withdrawal, the fourfold, and vicarious causation, respectively), such that the order of the following subsections corresponds directly to the order of those in the previous section. Each subsection will deal with a number of different arguments of varying strength and complexity, with varying degrees of reconstruction on my part. Each will also be smaller than the last, as the relevant arguments build upon one another. I will do my best to indicate exegetical concerns surrounding my reconstructions, but my aim is to present the strongest possible forms of each argument, so as to make the corresponding criticisms as strong as possible. This is the core feature of the respect owed to OOP discussed in the introduction.

a) *Tools, Knowledge, and Distinctness*

Harman has a several arguments for his account of withdrawal. By far the most famous is the reading of Heidegger's tool-analysis, presented in his first book: *Tool-Being*. However, despite the fact that the tool-analysis is referred to and summarised to different degrees all over Harman's work, it remains fairly opaque in its logical structure.²⁰ This is principally because, as much as it gets referred to as if it were a single argument, it is really a blend of a number of distinct arguments, mixing all three forms of exposition discussed above: historical, phenomenological, and metaphysical. Disentangling these expository and justificatory strands is difficult enough when focusing on one text, but its manifold presentation confronts us with some serious choices about how to go about doing so. I have decided to focus upon two presentations of the analysis: the original and most detailed presentation of it in *Tool-Being*, and a more recent and concise

²⁰ To give a representative example, in the collection *Towards Speculative Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 8 out of 11 essays contain truncated summaries of the tool-analysis.

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presentation of it in Harman's *Meillassoux* book.²¹ I highly recommend reading the relevant sections of these texts along with my reconstruction of the tool-analysis, so as to confirm the fidelity of my reconstruction. These preliminaries aside, I will break the tool-analysis down into two separate parts. I call these the argument from **execution** and the argument from **excess**. This will be followed by an examination of an additional argument that often accompanies them, which I call the argument from **identity**.

i) Harman's Heidegger

Before delving into the details of the tool-analysis, it's necessary to address the exegetical elephant in the room. I have already announced my disagreement with Harman's reading of Heidegger. Harman is very clear that his version of the tool-analysis is not one that Heidegger would himself endorse, and that as such it must be assessed on its own merits. This is precisely what I intend to do. However, in line with the earlier remarks about the role of historical narrative, it will be helpful to present the crucial errors of Harman's reading of Heidegger as I see them. On the one hand, this inoculates against any illicit slip from exposition to justification, and, on the other, it helps to situate many of the issues Harman is dealing with within their correct historical context. There are five principal aspects of Harman's reading with which I disagree: (i) he reads Heidegger's critique of **presence** as championing a complementary notion of **execution**; (ii) he takes the distinction between the **ontological** and the **ontic** to be equivalent to the distinction between the **ready-to-hand** and the **present-at-hand**, respectively; (iii) he claims that the "world" should not be understood as a **phenomenological horizon**; (iv) he holds that *Dasein* is not **central** to Heidegger's ontology; and (v) he identifies the encounter with the **broken tool** with the **as-structure**. I'm going to tackle these disagreements by addressing several characteristic criticisms that Harman

²¹ Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 135-136.

deploys liberally against other interpreters of Heidegger. If understanding these exegetical points is of little interest to you, you might wish to skip the rest of this section, though I don't recommend it.

To begin with, Harman repeatedly criticises other interpreters for mistaking the significance of the distinction between readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) for a distinction between *types* of entity. He zealously reminds his readers that ready-to-hand entities are not those specific things that happen to be used as tools by humans, but rather that any extant entity may be taken as ready-to-hand or present-at-hand.²² This point is certainly misunderstood by a number of interpreters. However, even when combined with his reading of Heidegger's use of the word "mere" (*Bloß*) to denigrate the status of *presence* (*Anwesenheit*),²³ this does not show that Heidegger is championing a complementary notion of *execution* (*Vollzug*) as the real meaning of "Being" that the metaphysical tradition overlooked. On the contrary, it is possible to view this as a distinction between different **modes** of Being (*Seinsarten/Seinsweisen*) without reducing it to a distinction between mutually exclusive **types** of beings. This is precisely how Heidegger describes the distinction, and it will connect to the other exegetical points still to be made.²⁴ Moreover, the fact that Harman develops this notion of execution into a new conception of *substance* (*ousia*), bemoaning the inability of Heidegger commentators to see the connection between *Zuhandenheit* and *ousia*,²⁵ indicates he has diverged from Heidegger somewhere earlier down the line.²⁶

²² Cf. Harman, *Tool-Being*, 38.

²³ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

²⁴ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 305; Martin Heidegger, *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 151-152.

²⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 270.

²⁶ Heidegger's criticism of presence is inexorably tied up with his critique of substance, at least in his most systematic presentations of it (Cf. *Introduction to Metaphysics*).

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Secondly, Harman claims that Heidegger's insights cannot be truly *ontological* ones if they are taken to be understood in terms of the *intelligibility* of entities to Dasein. The argument for this essentially boils down to the idea that intelligibility to Dasein is *seeming* for Dasein, and Harman defines "Being" as opposed to seeming.²⁷ For Harman, ontology is the study of beings as they are *in themselves*, as distinct from their appearances. This is almost the opposite move made by most orthodox Heidegger scholars, who define "Being" as the intelligibility of beings as distinct from any "metaphysical" conception of the underlying *grounds* of this intelligibility. For them, ontology is the study of *appearances* freed from the mistaken metaphysical search for *substantial* basis of these appearances. Both of these readings are seriously misguided insofar as Heidegger does not *define* "Being" in either way. However, each has an element of truth to it. In line with the orthodox interpretation, he tries to *argue* against the metaphysical tradition that Being is to be understood in terms of intelligibility (**unconcealing**). In line with Harman's interpretation, he also thinks that something must be said about that which resists or escapes intelligibility (**concealing**). His later work in particular attempts to show that the revelation of each entity to our understanding is tempered by its situation within a broader field of meaning (**world**) which is always in tension with reality in itself (**earth**). Every entity thus appears as a local modification of this global struggle (**strife/truth**).

Thirdly, this brings us to Harman's criticism that, in interpreting Heidegger's use of "world" as a phenomenological horizon within which entities appear to each given Dasein, Heidegger scholars have stumbled into a disastrous regress towards ever deeper unitary grounds (e.g., *Zeitlichkeit*, *Temporalität*, *Ereignis*, etc.). He even parodies this regress by way of a children's sleepover game.²⁸ However, again, as much as this is a legitimate lampooning of the stylistic and exegetical excesses of much Heidegger scholarship, this does not amount

²⁷ See fn. 15.

²⁸ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 27.

to a proof that there is no well defined regress of unitary grounds in Heidegger. Even if there is a certain overworn argumentative trope in Heidegger, this does not excuse us from examining the specificities of its instances. It is thus entirely possible (and desirable) to determine that there are only a specific number of steps in Heidegger's analyses, and that they actually have an end point in some more or less well delimited unitary structure (e.g., *Temporalität* in the early work, or *Ereignis* in the later work). Harman's alternative is to read "world" as a complete totality of entities rather than a phenomenological horizon in which they appear. This is a disastrous misreading, and is explicitly counselled against by Heidegger.²⁹

Fourthly, this sets the stage for Harman's attack on anthropocentric readings of Heidegger. Although Harman recognises that Heidegger himself grants Dasein ontological privilege, he takes this to be entirely unnecessary, insofar as every entity can be interpreted as a **for-the-sake-of-which** engaging with other things in terms of **projective understanding**.³⁰ Harman explicitly claims that although Heidegger uses the term "understanding" (*Verstand*) here, this can be interpreted non-anthropocentrically as covering all interactions between things. This is indicative of a really pernicious misunderstanding of Heidegger's project that underlies the other points addressed so far. To briefly summarise Heidegger's account of understanding: he thinks that Dasein relates to the things it encounters in terms of the possibilities for **action** that they provide it, and that what characterises Dasein *qua* Dasein (*Existenz*) is that set of conditions (*Existenziale*) without which Dasein could not count as freely **choosing**, and thus acting in any real sense. Harman is fond of ridiculing Heidegger's analysis of the mode of Being of *animality* as distinct from Dasein's mode of *existence*, precisely because he fails to see that Heidegger is describing entities that have similar be-

²⁹ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), §67.

³⁰ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 41-42.

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havioural capacities to Dasein (*drives*) that nevertheless lack the specific conditions of organisation that enable choice (as opposed to mere *disinhibition*).³¹

This ties back to the third point: Harman cannot see what it would be to be world-poor insofar as he does not see what it would be for something to have a world in Heidegger's sense: an internally articulated space of possible action (i.e., the *projection* of what is possible), involving a grasp of both **generality** and **particularity** (e.g., the possibilities of pens *as such*, and the possibilities of *this* pen, respectively), in **isolation** and **situation** (e.g., the possibilities of this pen in relation to paper *as such*, and the possibilities of *this* pen in relation to *that* piece of paper, respectively), organised in terms of a **hierarchy of ends** (e.g., the end of writing a letter, itself a means to maintaining a friendship, itself a means to... etc.) united by the **fundamental goal** of becoming oneself (i.e., Dasein as its own *for-the-sake-of-which*). Entities appear in the world for Heidegger insofar as they modify this space of possibility: their **actuality** consists in the way they *open up* certain specific possibilities for action while *closing down* others. This in turn ties back to the second point: Harman cannot see that differences in modes of Being (e.g., *Zuhandenheit*, *Vorhandenheit*, *Existenz*, etc.) are not simple differences between types of beings, insofar as he does not see the different ways they are supposed to be **individuated** as actualities within the world *qua* space of possibility. So, it is true that all spatio-temporally located particulars are *both* ready-to-hand and present-at-hand in some sense (even if the *space* and *time* in question are not straightforwardly identical), but this is a matter of the difference between our grasp of possibilities as tied to the everyday forms of activity we inherit from the culture we are *thrown* into (e.g., pens *qua* writing implements), and our grasp of possibilities as *abstracted* from these activities (e.g., pens *qua* ink-filled molded plastic), respectively.

Fifthly, then, this brings us to Harman's persistent criticisms of pragmatist readings of Heidegger in general, and of the

³¹ Cf. Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, part 2, ch. 3-6.

tool-analysis more specifically. These are inexorably bound up with the other criticisms already presented, but there is an important additional dimension here: his claim that Heidegger’s concern with the **use** of equipment has nothing to do with use as we normally understand it, but should be understood as a matter of **reliance** upon equipment.³² It is the fact that reliance is an essentially *causal* notion that underpins his claim that all interactions between entities can be described as entities “understanding” one another “as” something, and the development of this into the claim that all such interactions are analogous to the encounter with the broken-tool. We’ll return to the independent methodological problems with this claim, but for now it serves to point out the sheer extent to which this misunderstands Heidegger’s account of the as-structure and its relation to the broken-tool encounter. The crucial point is that Heidegger distinguishes between the **hermeneutic** “as” and the **apophantic** “as,” and associates these with the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand, respectively. The relationship between the former thereby circumscribes the relationship between the latter, and it is essentially a matter of the relation between **implicitness** and **explicitness**, respectively.

It is important to understand that the “as” is indicative of generality. We grasp something “as” something insofar as we grasp a particular as an **instance** of a general type. The idea behind the split in the as-structure is that the grasp of generality involved here can be articulated in two distinct ways, even if these forms of articulation are fundamentally inseparable and always combined in different degrees. We grasp the entities around us principally through the hermeneutic “as” insofar as the specific possibilities we are immediately presented with by them (e.g., writing a letter) are articulated by an implicit grasp of the general types of equipment they instantiate (e.g., pens and paper *qua* equipment for writing). This implicit grasp is the condition of **interpretation**, which is the process through which we reconsider these immedi-

³² Harman, *Tool-Being*, 18-21.

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ate possibilities, taking them apart and bringing forth the generalities that articulate them. However, this process of interpretation is not yet linguistic: it is the move to making **assertions** about entities that transforms the hermeneutic “as” into the apophantic “as.” These involve the use of special linguistic equipment to isolate and then re-articulate the general possibilities that constitute these types. This enables a process of progressive abstraction which extricates the **causal capacities** of entities from the **normative functions** through which our everyday understanding grasps them. The present-at-hand is nothing but the correlate of the limit-case of this process of abstraction. It is not constituted by *pure presence*, or actuality devoid of possibility, but rather by *pure capacity*, or possibility devoid of function. The exemplars of the present-at-hand are those entities posited by science independently of any role they could have in everyday practices (e.g., electrons, black holes, mitochondria, etc.). Science is thus hardly the domain of pure presence in this vacuous sense, but rather the forefront of our attempt to work out what is *really possible*, over and above the expectations implicit in our parochial forms of life.

The encounter with the broken-tool must be understood in terms of this complex interplay between causal capacity and normative function. The important thing to realise is that the tool cannot break unless it behaves in a way it is not *supposed* to: there is no **malfunxion** without proper function. It is the fact that we grasp equipment (e.g., pen and paper) in terms of a set of normatively articulated everyday activities (e.g., letter writing, drawing, doodling, etc.) that enables it to surprise us by *failing* to behave as it should in the context of those activities (e.g., the pen leaking ink all over the paper). This means that we must already encounter the equipment *as* equipment: without a prior hermeneutic “as,” nothing can break. This prior “as” forms the basis of the response to the encounter, insofar as the surprise malfunction incites us to re-interpret our grasp of the tool’s possibilities. This interpretation can then either stay at the hermeneutic level, or be developed apophantically by using assertions to draw

out the causal capacities the tool possesses independently of its functional role; or rather, independently of its status *as a tool*. It is in this sense that the encounter with the broken-tool amounts to a *transition* between the tool as ready-to-hand and the tool as present-at-hand: it is an *invitation* to a different form of understanding.

What all this reveals is that Harman's reading cannot be an interpretation of the substance of Heidegger's ideas, even one that Heidegger himself would disagree with. It is possible to read thinkers against themselves, but this requires that there is some essential element present in their work that the work itself fails to live up to.³³ The element that Harman tries to unearth in Heidegger's tool-analysis simply isn't there.³⁴ The only reason he can propose to extend the intentional relation between Dasein and its tools to cover all interactions between entities is that he has stripped this relation of everything that makes it recognisably Heideggerian. He has excised the structure of projective understanding wholesale, and thereby completely abandoned the semantic and epistemological framework within which the encounter with the tool is described. This becomes clear once we ask the question: just what would it be for a screen door to encounter a knife *as a knife*?³⁵ To say that this is for it to be affected by it in a way that is common to all knives is to say nothing that warrants using the word "encounter" in an intentional

³³ This is a hermeneutic strategy that Brandom calls *de re* interpretation, as opposed to *de dicto* interpretation: the attempt to be faithful to the subject matter, rather than the words used to express it (*Tales of the Mighty Dead*, ch. 1).

³⁴ Another point to make here about Harman's reading qua reading is that even if there were some evidence that Heidegger did see the tool-analysis in something resembling this way, then it would still be far fetched, given the extent of the other aspects of Heidegger's work it invalidates: theory, mood, space, time, etc. (cf. *Tool-Being*, §4-7) Harman gives us a long list of features of his thought that Heidegger can say nothing specific about despite his sincere and extensive attempts to do so. The sheer amount of Heidegger's work that Harman's reading disqualifies thus constitutes a pretty good *reductio ad absurdum* of it as a reading of Heidegger, even if we ignore the misunderstandings just discussed.

³⁵ This is Harman's own example (*Tool-Being*, 30-32).

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sense. The screen door has nothing that could qualify it as having anything like an **awareness** of generality. There is no hermeneutic “as” circumscribing its engagements with things. This leaves us saying that what it is for a screen door to interact with a knife *qua* knife is for it to be affected in the way that knives affect screen doors. This is an empty tautology unworthy of metaphysical scrutiny.³⁶

ii) *The Argument from Execution*

The principal argument derived from the tool-analysis in *Tool-Being* is what I have called the argument from execution. This argument aims to establish that the reality of entities consists in their execution (or tool-being), and on this basis to demonstrate that they withdraw from all *epistemic* and *causal* contact. Harman takes the method of the argument to be a matter of phenomenological description, insofar as it is a purported reconstruction of Heidegger’s own phenomenological analysis.³⁷ The point of this analysis is to reveal the **absolute invisibility** of objects *qua* execution, by presenting three interrelated characterisations of execution: as **causal capacity** (or “effect”), as **pure action** (or “impact”), and as **functional role** (or “reference”). However, as we’ve already noted, Harman provides no clarification regarding the nature of his phenomenological method, or how it can be expected to yield metaphysical results. This is complicated by the fact that many of Harman’s claims are patently more metaphysical than phenomenological. This raises the possibility that in some cases he has simply imported metaphysical assumptions instead of collecting phenomenological evidence. We will thus have to be very careful to keep all the elements of his analyses separate in reconstructing their logical form.

Harman’s take on Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis opens by specifying its object: our ubiquitous encounters

³⁶ For a further example of Harman’s attempt to universalise the as-structure in this way, see his discussion of tectonic plates towards the end of *Tool-Being* (221-222).

³⁷ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 18.

with the entities that we “use” in the course of living. His break with Heidegger’s analysis occurs already in this first paragraph:

Heidegger demonstrates that our primary interaction with beings comes through “using” them, through simply *counting on them* in an unthematic way. For the most part, objects are implements taken for granted, a vast environmental backdrop supporting the thin and volatile layer of our explicit activities. All human action finds itself lodged amidst countless items of supporting equipment: the most nuanced debates in a laboratory stand at the mercy of a silent bedrock of floorboards, bolts, ventilators, gravity, and atmospheric oxygen.³⁸

This break is subtle, and does not become completely apparent until a few pages later, when he explicitly substitutes the word “rely” for “use.”³⁹ The examples that Harman focuses on are indicative of this shift. Gone is the emphasis upon equipment *actively deployed* toward a goal (e.g., hammers, cars, signals, etc.), to be replaced with a focus upon “equipment” necessary to *passively sustain* a given state (e.g., ventilators, gravity, oxygen, etc.). It is not that Heidegger is not concerned with some examples of this kind—*sustaining* a state is as eligible a goal as *achieving* one—but rather that Harman narrows the scope of the analysis by collapsing *active use* into *passive reliance*, while simultaneously expanding its scope to include cases of dependence that lack anything that could be construed as *awareness* of the thing depended upon. This move both enables execution to take on the role of *persistence* we saw earlier, and facilitates the *universalisation* of intentionality to encompass all objects and the flaying of Heidegger’s account of intentionality that accompanies it.

We can already see the pretence of phenomenology slipping here. Harman has subtly shifted the focus of his analysis from our practical comportment toward things to our **causal dependence** upon them. We are invited to conclude that phe-

³⁸ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

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nomenological description is apt to describe my relation to my internal organs, the geological strata that I stand upon, or the delicate balance of environmental factors necessary for life on earth in a manner analogous to my relation to the various socially delineated props I passively engage in carrying out everyday tasks. Harman balances this shift upon a delicate ambiguity in the sense in which encounters with things can be “unconscious” or “unthematic.”⁴⁰ It consists in misunderstanding what Heidegger calls *circumspection* (*Umsicht*). Heidegger’s concern with this sort of “unthematic” understanding was to provide a phenomenological analysis of comportments that lacked a *specific kind* of awareness, rather than lacking awareness *as such*. He would not consider my relation to my internal organs to be an intentional relation unless it consisted in some *implicit grasp* of general ways in which they are involved within practical activities, either as obstacles (e.g. an awareness of my fickle digestive system) or resources (e.g., the metabolic control some yogic masters have achieved), or some *explicit grasp* of their general modal features (e.g., the theoretical understanding of a biologist or surgeon). Harman essentially substitutes Heidegger’s concern with the “unconscious” encounter as *awareness without attention*, for a concern with it as *dependence without awareness*.

Bearing all this in mind, we can turn to the first step in Harman’s analysis. This is his claim that *what* we encounter in relying upon equipment is its *causal capacity* to produce the specific effect that we rely upon. This is his first characterisation of the execution that constitutes the reality of the tool, and he vehemently opposes it to the idea that the tool consists in the ways humans expect to use it: “Equipment is not effective ‘because people use it;’ on the contrary, it can only be used because it is *capable of an effect*, of inflicting some kind of blow on reality. In short, the tool isn’t ‘used’—it *is*.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ It is also helped by an ambiguity in the sense of “reliance,” which can be read either as an intentional relation involving an *expectation* regarding whatever is relied upon, or as a matter of brute causal dependence.

⁴¹ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 20.

On the face of it, this is a perfectly good inference—successful reliance upon a thing demands that it possess the causal capacity to produce the effect relied upon—but the way it is introduced and used by Harman is questionable precisely insofar as it is metaphysical rather than phenomenological. Harman is already straying into metaphysics in describing the thing as *consisting* in this capacity, rather than simply *possessing* it, and he will stray further when he fleshes out his characterisation of this capacity *qua* execution. He does not linger in this register though. He rapidly returns to phenomenology when he insists upon the invisibility of this capacity.⁴² However, invisibility is apparent only insofar as we focus upon precisely those un-Heideggerian cases that Harman has smuggled in. This paradoxical **revelation of invisibility** essentially consists in our discovery that we *really* have no awareness of those things we depend upon without awareness—at least that is, until we turn our phenomenological gaze upon them. This has no force whatsoever, because there is no correlation between dependence and awareness either way. *Prima facie*, it is entirely possible for me to be aware or not aware of the things I depend on, to varying degrees.⁴³

Let us move deeper into the nature of execution and its purported invisibility then. The second characterisation of execution is its status as *pure action*, and it has two aspects. First, the equipment is never what it is simply because it is *capable* of an effect, but must also *enact* this effect at every moment: “Equipment is forever *in action*, constructing each moment the sustaining habitat where our explicit awareness is on the move.”⁴⁴ Second, this perpetual action is *unitary*, insofar as its effect cannot be broken down into subsidiary actions that might be held in reserve. It must be “an agent

⁴² Harman, *Tool-Being*, 21.

⁴³ No doubt some will claim that although there may indeed be *degrees* of awareness, this never amounts to complete awareness, and that this is sufficient to underwrite the putatively “absolute” character of invisibility. This is a entirely separate argument, which I will deal with in the next section as the argument from excess.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

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thoroughly deployed in reality, as an *impact* irreducible to any list of properties that might be tabulated by an observer.”⁴⁵ There are at least two distinct tensions inherent in this characterisation: a **modal tension** between *possibility* and *actuality*, and a **temporal tension** between *dynamism* and *stasis*. The former comes from the contrast between this and the first characterisation of execution in terms of capacity, insofar as it flattens whatever possible effects a thing might have into its current actual effects. The latter comes from the characterisation of the thing as *always already* in action, an act whose occurrence is such that we only encounter it in a state of *silent repose*, or *diachronic transition* so pure it is the very essence of *synchronic persistence*. These tensions are seemingly constitutive for the invisibility of equipment. Try as we might to understand any specific capacity, we never reach the unitary effect that silently whirs behind it:

Whatever is visible of the table in any given instant can *never* be its tool-being, *never* its readiness-to-hand. However deeply we meditate on the table’s act of supporting solid weights, however tenaciously we monitor its presence, any insight that is yielded will always be something quite distinct from *this act itself*.⁴⁶

Try as we might to understand the way an occurrence unfolds, the things it involves are events already past yet ongoing: “A tool exists in the manner of enacting itself; only derivatively can it be discussed or otherwise mulled over. Try as hard as we might to capture the hidden execution of equipment, we will always lag behind.”⁴⁷ Harman provokes us like a zen master wielding a koan: a pure act rests behind all superficial acts, a pure actuality grounds all potential actualities. One hand claps slowly.⁴⁸

It now seems we may have gone too deep after all. What

⁴⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁸ Before withdrawing into itself, and disappearing in a puff of *metaphysics*.

should we make of these tensions within the account of execution from the perspective of the split between phenomenology and metaphysics? At best, they constitute a brute phenomenological description of dubious plausibility. Despite the *general paradox* of the accessibility of inaccessibility, and the more *specific paradoxes* of modality and temporality it poses us with, we might simply have to throw up our arms and admit: “Well, things do *seem* this way, just like he says!” Even so, we would have to be receptive to any analysis that could dissolve these seeming paradoxes, as opposed to simply harnessing them. At worst, they constitute a series of strange and strained metaphysical assumptions extending the reification of capacity carried out by the first characterisation, assumptions we are given *anything but* good reason to endorse. Just what is really going on here? Harman seems to have transposed the phenomenological analysis of tools as deployed *in* actions—which he otherwise ignored in favour *passive dependence*—into a metaphysics of tools *as* actions. This has a peculiar effect that can best be described as **performative phenomenology**. The revelation of invisibility is an artefact of the way in which it is introduced. The general paradox is underwritten by the specific ones. We encounter the invisibility of equipment as the **ineffability** engendered by the impossible tensions in the ways in which it is described. The supposed demonstration of epistemic inaccessibility is actually an elaborate numbing of our epistemic faculties, performed by multiplying the incompatible aspects of the mysterious withdrawn tool. Single hands don't clap after all.⁴⁹

We now turn to the third and final characterisation of execution: as *functional role*. This builds upon the previous two characterisations by articulating the *effect* which the capacity produces in its pure action as a *means* to an *end* of some sort. This is how Harman cashes out Heidegger's account of *reference* (*Verweis*): he takes every entity to *refer* to those things the persistence of which *depends* upon its own persistence. The reference of a thing's execution is another thing whose

⁴⁹ It turns out to have been a puff of *logic*, after all.

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execution it *sustains*. Reference and dependence are thus unified into a single relation of **functional dependence**. This is responsible for Harman's machinic descriptions of entities, insofar as it underwrites his discussion of dependence relations in mereological terms, not merely as between *part* and *whole*, but as between *component* and *system*. What happens here is that the *causal capacities* actualised in composition get transformed into *normative functions* through being normatively underwritten by the whole they *actually* compose. The various girders, nuts, and bolts that compose a bridge are simultaneously depended upon by the bridge and captured in executing their functional role in sustaining the bridge as a systematic effect on which further things depend.⁵⁰ It is this interpretation of reference relations that collapses Heidegger's account of world into a simple totality, insofar as it takes them to hold exclusively between *individuals*, understood in terms of their *actual states*, rather than a complex horizon that involves relations between both *types* and *instances*, understood in terms of their *possible states*.

According to Harman, this characterisation implies the second fundamental aspect of Heidegger's tool-analysis: what he calls the tool's **totality** as opposed to its invisibility. To understand this, it's important to see that Harman takes functional dependence to extend beyond intuitive forms of *mereological* dependence (e.g., dependence upon my *internal* organs), to include things like *environmental* dependence (e.g., my dependence upon *external factors* such as gravity and oxygen), and even goes so far as to incorporate *negative* dependence relations (e.g., my dependence on a meteorite *not* falling from space into me). Moreover, although both dependence and reference are *asymmetric* relations, they go in opposite directions: if *x* depends on *y* then *y* refers to *x*, and each relation is *transitive*, meaning that: if *x* depends on *y* and *y* depends on *z*, then *x* depends on *z*, and therefore also that *z* refers to *x*. Given all this, the world becomes a network of functional dependence relations, in which each specific

⁵⁰ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 22-25.

entity is individuated through its location relative to everything else. The bridge is what it is in virtue of depending upon precisely what it actually depends upon, and supporting precisely what it actually supports; the same is true for every nut, bolt, girder, and environmental condition upon which it depends, which includes everything upon which they depend, *ad infinitum*, and for every passing traveller, supply chain, or local business it exists in aid of, and everything they in turn support, *ad infinitum*. This converts the world from a simple totality of disparate individuals into a unified individual in its own right: the plurality of *local* systems of execution become an integrated network of components in a single *global* system, or “world-machine.”⁵¹ The numerous ends at which execution aims are subsumed within a single system of ends, the ultimate purpose of which can only be to sustain the system itself.

This produces a **relational tension** alongside the modal and temporal tensions we have already uncovered, but it is more complicated insofar as it arises from a conflict between the relational **holism** Harman attributes to Heidegger and the radical **individualism** that he aims to derive from the principles on which it is founded. The tension consists in Harman's attempt to convert holism into individualism by transforming execution from something *individuated through* the functional dependence relations it is bound up in, to something *prior to* these relations which makes them possible. It becomes manifest in the way he connects totality and invisibility through the characterisation of execution as functional role. His attempt to derive invisibility from functionality is far more reminiscent of Heidegger than the other arguments for invisibility we've discussed: “The function or reference of the tool is effective not as an explicit sign or symbol, but as something that *vanishes into* the work to which it is assigned.”⁵² For Heidegger, our *attention* is inevitably drawn towards the immediate ends of our activity, rather than the

⁵¹ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 33.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 25, my emphasis.

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various subordinate tasks and the means they involve. We focus upon what we're doing with the hammer—putting up shelves—rather than the mechanics of the hammer and our use of it. Nevertheless, this phenomenological insight is not meant to preclude the possibility of turning our attention to any of these easily overlooked details. Our *awareness* of the task as an articulated whole enables us to shift our attention back to any aspect of it. We shift focus to our grip upon the hammer, thereby adjusting it to optimise the force we can achieve at the odd angle the space allows us. Harman's reading warps this insight: the *activity* becomes the *thing*, and the *focus* of our attention *upon* the end of the activity becomes the *vanishing* of our awareness of the thing *into* whatever it sustains. This mutates further when exposed to his totalising logic of reference: all awareness vanishes into the world-machine, as the unitary activity in which everything plays its sustaining role.⁵³

So far then, Harman appears to have derived the invisibility of everything but the world as a whole from his functional account of individuation. Perhaps the strangest move is still to come though, because he converts this claim about invisibility back into a claim about individuation: "Every being is entirely absorbed into this world-system, assigned to further possibilities in such a way that there could never be any singular end-point within the contexture of reference. *In the strict sense, the world has no parts.*"⁵⁴ It is not merely the *visibility* of the parts but their *distinctness* which collapses into the whole—*vanishing* becomes *absorption*. This is highly problematic, because it uses an account of the articulation of systems into distinct components to deny that there is any such articulation at all. It presupposes the fact that there are distinct entities with differentiated capacities that can be combined and configured in a variety of ways, only to interpret this combination and configuration in such a way as to deny the distinctness that it is predicated upon. We would be

⁵³ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 32-33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

forgiven for insisting upon a *reductio ad absurdum* of some, if not most, of Harman's premises at this point. He does indeed intend to perform a *reductio* of sorts, but it is not the one we might expect, and indeed, should insist upon.⁵⁵ He ignores the inconsistency at the heart of his account of functionality in favour of the contradiction between his account of invisibility and the "existence of objects as a glaring experiential fact."⁵⁶ He in turn allies this with a further apparent contradiction implied by the account: "If [it] were the case, physical causation could never occur, since there would be no individual objects, but only a single system, with no explanations for why this system should ever alter..."⁵⁷ The issues of *diachronic* causal interaction (as opposed to *synchronic* causal dependence) and the *appearance* of a multiplicity of distinct objects (as opposed to the *reality* of unitary execution) are hereby intertwined.

What is Harman's *reductio* then? What is it that converts Heidegger's purported holism into his radical individualism? The answer is the introduction of the break between the *real* and the *sensual*—which is to say, the core of the account of withdrawal. This emerges in his interpretation of the as-structure and the way he identifies it with the broken-tool encounter.⁵⁸ The principal motivation for this theoretical supplement is its ability to diffuse the live contradictions hovering in the background. However, it will only be warranted if it can integrate the three facets of the account of execution into the individualist account of substance, at least in outline, and thereby dissolve the relational tension between this and its functional foundations. How this is supposed to work, and whether it can also dissolve the accompanying modal and temporal tensions is now our principal concern. I'll tackle it one contradiction at a time.

On the one hand, Harman aims to resolve the contradiction between functional totality and apparent individuality

⁵⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, §4.

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by re-conceiving the very notion of appearance itself. Harman's concern with invisibility up until this point has turned upon an *implicit* conception of awareness, which, as we have seen, has not yet been made *explicit* through the provision of a phenomenological methodology. Nevertheless, the invisibility of things has been "shown" through purportedly phenomenological analyses of the scope of this awareness. What now changes is that the **phenomenal aspect** of this implicit conception is explicitly severed from the **epistemic aspect**: awareness is split in two, so that multiple individuals may *phenomenally appear*, even while the singular whole from which they appear *epistemically withdraws*. We can see the hammer, but we can never *know* the intricate system that harbours its hidden essence. This rift constitutes the difference between the hammer as *presence* and the hammer as *execution*, the hammer *as* hammer and the hammer *in itself*, and the *malfunctioning* hammer and the *functioning* hammer, respectively. It permits the conversion from invisible to visible in the encounter with the broken tool precisely because the underlying execution of the tool is not *really* made visible. The malfunction throws off an epistemically irrelevant husk that can at best hint at the silent reality of proper functioning.

On the other hand, Harman aims to resolve the contradiction between functional fixity and apparent change by uniting the question of causal interaction and the question of phenomenal presence. Although this is often hinted at, it only becomes completely explicit towards the end of *Tool-Being* itself:

the time has come to admit to the reader that I have been guilty of a deliberate over-simplification...In fact, it is impermissible to replace the tool/broken tool distinction with the difference between causality and visibility. For it turns out that *even brute causation already belongs to the realm of presence-at-hand*.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 221.

If we accept Harman's identification of presence with malfunction, then this makes a certain amount of sense. If the world is taken to have a fixed order insofar as it is constituted by a network of functional dependence relations, then any change to this order must amount to a break with these relations, and thus to a malfunction of some sort. This would make the question of interaction/presence a matter of explaining how components rebel against the systems in which they are seemingly subsumed, so as to generate the abundance of individuality in our phenomenal experience. This is not a question Harman takes the tool-analysis to answer. He simply takes it to have posed the problem in the correct terms. Nevertheless, he insists that the analysis implies that any solution must move beyond the *appearance* of individuality to the *reality* of individuality, because entities can break with the functional order in which they are enmeshed only if they hold something in reserve that is not determined by this order.⁶⁰ This is where the relational tension becomes most acute: just how is the account of execution that implies holism to be modified so as to permit the individualism it seemingly demands?

The tension is more serious than might be initially apparent. This is because Harman extends the identification of presence with causality beyond diachronic interaction to include the cases of synchronic dependence upon which his initial characterisations of execution were built. This can be seen in his example of a bulky metal appliance sitting upon a frozen lake: "When the lake supports the appliance, this act of supporting unfolds entirely within the as-structure, not within the kingdom of tool-being."⁶¹ It is this move that enables Harman to convert the distinction between *execution* and *presence* into the distinction between **substance** and **relation**, insofar as it enables him to treat all causal relations in the same way. Whatever is held in reserve in order to change

⁶⁰ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 229-230.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

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the relations of functional (and thus causal) dependence that entities are bound up in withdraws from all current relations, as the substance that underlies them. However, as Harman continues: “This raises the following question: if the fact that the frozen lake supports an object is *not* its tool-being, then *what is it?*”⁶² As he puts it slightly earlier: “In short, tool-being is not at all what we have thought it was up till now. It must lie at a still deeper level than that of force or relation. It is no longer an effect as opposed to an appearance, but rather an executant *being* that is neither of these.”⁶³ We are once more told what execution *is not*, but we are still none the wiser about just what it is.

Here is where we stand then. The relational tension consists in the fact that Harman’s individualist conception of execution as *substance* is incompatible with the holistic conception of execution as *functional role* from which it is derived, but he does not make clear which aspects of the latter conception are abandoned, and thus precisely how the former differs from it, apart from its purported individualism. He does not stop characterising execution in terms of function.⁶⁴ He continues to think of objects in terms of systematic unity.⁶⁵ When he needs to talk about the substantial reserve that necessitates individuality, he simply turns to his earlier characterisations of execution: it stands independent of all relations as an actuality “richer than all possibility”⁶⁶ and prior to all effects as a “real execution, silently resting in its vacuum-sealed actuality”⁶⁷ Far from dissolving the modal and temporal tensions discussed above, he intensifies them, and he nowhere provides us an account of how the functional character of execution is to be curtailed, let alone how it is to be integrated with its status as capacity and act. When they are acknowledged, the three

⁶² Harman, *Tool-Being*, 223.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁶⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

tensions we have located (modal, temporal, and relational) are presented as paradoxical intuitions that open up room for further metaphysical speculation, but, at best, they are an argument left hanging.⁶⁸ Harman has not yet succeeded in discharging the contradictions that arise from his assumptions. He has failed to provide us with a good reason to adopt his partial reconstruction of what he takes to be Heidegger's inconsistent system, rather than simply rejecting its core presuppositions.

How does this reflect upon the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics? Let's take one last look. I think the core methodological issues emerge from the attempt to provide an account of **modality**. Here it is useful to contrast Harman's approach with the brief summary of Heidegger we provided earlier. Heidegger provides us with is an intricate **modal epistemology**. He builds a phenomenological framework within which he analyses both our understanding of the entities we encounter in terms of the *normative features* they acquire through the practices we are socialised into, the unthematic understanding of the *causal features* of these entities that is implicit in this, and the various levels of thematic understanding that can be developed out of this. His analysis of the encounter with the broken-tool is a subtle demonstration of the interface between these levels of modal understanding.

By contrast, Harman's approach can only be described as **modal mysterianism**. It begins with *phenomenological descriptions* of our experience of things, from which it derives a pseudo-Heideggerian functional vocabulary, but almost immediately converts this into a *metaphysical inquiry* into our causal relations with things, in the process hypostatizing this functional vocabulary into a **metaphysical teleology**. It is important to emphasise how contentious this move is. There are deep and divisive arguments about the reality of functions running from Plato and Aristotle, through Leibniz

⁶⁸ Harman explicitly presents two unresolved paradoxes at the end of *Tool-Being* (287-288), but they are not the tensions I have outlined here, which emerge more sporadically throughout the work.

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and Spinoza, Kant and Hegel, all the way to contemporary debates regarding the correct interpretation of Darwin. Harman makes this move not by providing a compelling reason for it, but by simply ignoring an important methodological distinction. As we have seen, the other claims he makes about the metaphysical basis of causal capacities are equally methodologically suspect. Where Heidegger does his best to delineate the modal relations between normative functions and causal capacities, showing both how they connect and pull apart, Harman systematically conflates them under the single heading of execution, which he then fails to sufficiently integrate. His purported justification of epistemic inaccessibility on the basis of these modal features (excess) is thus stuck halfway between a questionable attempt to *phenomenologically delimit* phenomenal access (the revelation of invisibility), and a dubious *metaphysical reinterpretation* of phenomenal access itself that simultaneously undercuts his phenomenological pretensions (the split in awareness) and fails to provide a coherent account of the inaccessible (the unresolved tensions). The philosophical framework he builds in *Tool-Being* leaves us with no grasp of what tool-being is, and simply decreeing “that’s the point!” is to lapse into mysterianism.

iii) *The Argument from Excess*

The other argument that Harman associates with the tool-analysis, which I have called the argument from excess, can be found intermingled with elements of the argument from execution at several points in *Tool-Being* and elsewhere,⁶⁹ but it becomes the dominant strain of the analysis by the time of his presentation of the tool-analysis in his book on Meillassoux.⁷⁰ It is fairly brief, and its conclusion is more often

⁶⁹ Cf. *Tool-Being*, 96, 98, 223; “A Fresh Look at Zuhandenheit,” in *Towards Speculative Realism*, 54-55; “The Revival of Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy,” in *Towards Speculative Realism*, 116-117.

⁷⁰ Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 135-136.

simply asserted than properly derived from its premises, but it is possible to reconstruct a reasonably concise version of it on the basis of these examples. I will first quote the relevant sections from the Meillassoux book, to provide a basis for reconstruction:

In Heideggerian terms it is true that phenomena in consciousness fail to do justice to the full depths of things, to their inscrutable being withdrawn from all presence. Yet it is *also* the case that the practical handling of entities fails to do them justice as well...human theory and human praxis are both translations or distortions of the subterranean reality of [tool-being], which is no more exhausted by sentient action than by sentient thought.⁷¹

He thus opens with an outright assertion of the thesis of withdrawal, but he frames it in two important ways. He articulates it as a matter of the **inexhaustibility** of tool-being, and he identifies theoretical understanding and practical use in terms of their inability to exhaust it. The framing of withdrawal in terms of inexhaustibility will form the centrepiece of the argument, whereas the identification of theory and praxis paves the way for the more controversial identification of knowledge and causation. This is followed by a sort of retroactive argument for withdrawal that works from within this frame:

All of these activities could possibly be linked under the term “intentionality,” but whereas the intentionality of Brentano and Husserl is a matter of *immanent* objectivity, we are now concerned with a transcendent kind of object. It is true that the hammer takes on a specific configuration both for the construction worker and for the scientific specialist on hammers (assuming the latter person exists). But what is most relevant here is the *transcendent* hammer that startles us with surprises, shattering in our hands or rotting and rusting more quickly than expected. The present-at-hand hammer cannot explain these sudden surprises, and hence by subtraction we arrive at the notion of

⁷¹ Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 135.

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a withdrawn, subterranean tool that enters into relation with me and other animate and inanimate entities as well.⁷²

What we have here is an argument that aims to proceed from the *obvious fact* that the causal capacities of an object can exceed our understanding of them (and thereby “surprise” us) to the *contentious claim* that we cannot encounter the real objects in which this excess consists, but only the distinct sensual objects that they withdraw behind.

What follows is my best attempt to reconstruct the transition between the two. I’ll begin by splitting the obvious fact into two fairly uncontentious claims:

- i) Our knowledge of things does not exhaust all their features. There is more to them than we *actually* know.
- ii) Our causal interactions with things do not exhaust all their capacities. There is more to them than we *actualise*.

The example of something’s causal capacities exceeding our grasp of them is obviously taken from the analysis of the broken-tool, but its real import comes in straddling the divide between (i) and (ii). Although other presentations will emphasise one or the other, the justification of the thesis of withdrawal depends upon equivocating between these two claims in some fashion, be it by leaning upon aspects of the argument from execution (e.g., interpreting praxis as reliance) or simply treating the identity of intentional and causal relations as a given. This equivocation exemplifies the collapse of phenomenology and metaphysics into one another discussed earlier. What is important is that the combination of (i) and (ii) gets interpreted in a somewhat more contentious way than either of them:

- iii) Our knowledge/interactions can *never* exhaust all the features/capacities of things. There is more to them than we could *possibly* encounter.

⁷² Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 136.

This move converts a **factual excess** of features/capacities into an **essential excess**. The move is strictly illicit, but, although it leads to a stronger claim than either (i) or (ii), it is still not all that contentious. There are many who would agree with (iii) for independent reasons, or simply because it is reasonably intuitive. The really contentious claims are those that get inferred from (iii):

- iv) Our knowledge/interactions can never exhaust *all* the features of a thing, because there is *some* feature of every thing *qua* thing that we can never encounter.

This move aims to explain the necessity of excess by locating it in a feature common to all things, as opposed to something which varies from thing to thing. It holds that excess is essential because there is an essential feature of entities that is excessive. This makes sense if one demands an **intrinsic** explanation of excess, which locates the reason for the excess in the *encountered object*, as opposed to an **extrinsic** one, which locates it in the *encountering object*. When the latter is understood as a *knowing subject*, the extrinsic explanation of excess has traditionally taken the name of **finitude**. This posits an internal limit upon the cognitive abilities of the subject that precludes it from knowing objects in full. This limit needn't be interpreted in terms of some common **qualitative excess**, but could be seen as a disparate **quantitative excess**. It could simply be the case that the subject can only grasp a finite number of the infinity of features belonging to each thing, but that there is no particular feature that is in principle ungraspable.

Harman insists upon an intrinsic explanation, as can be seen in the above quote, but it's important to recognise that this is underwritten by the equivocation between knowledge and causation: "I am convinced that objects far exceed their interactions with other objects, and the question is both *what* this excess is, and *where* it is."⁷³ In other words, he takes the

⁷³ Harman, "The Revival of Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy," in

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issue of essential excess to be equivalent to the issue of *substantial reserve* discussed in the argument from execution.⁷⁴ The localisation of **epistemic excess** is thus predicated upon the localisation of **causal excess**. This sets the stage for the final (and most contentious) inference:

- v) Our knowledge/interactions can never exhaust a thing, because we can never encounter the *essence* of the thing. We only encounter the (*sensual*) *appearance* of the thing, never its (*real*) *being*.

This move converts the essential excess into an **excessive essence**. Harman takes the common essential feature of all things that cannot be encountered to be *what things are in themselves*, or *essence as such*. This is supposed to warrant the absolute distinction between the real and the sensual, insofar as it implies that whatever epistemic/causal contact there is with a thing must be contact with something *other* than what it really is. It thereby moves from *localisation* to *isolation*. However, this exploits the same equivocation as (iv), albeit in reverse, insofar as it makes sense of **causal isolation** in terms of **epistemic isolation**. While it is easy to understand withdrawal as the impossibility of *direct epistemic access*, it is much less clear how we are to understand independence as the impossibility of *direct causal contact*. There is a clear quantitative line from *some* access to *no* access, because we can intuitively grasp what it would be to completely fail to know anything about a thing despite seeming to, but there is no such clear line from *some* contact to *no* contact, because we cannot intuitively grasp what it would be to completely fail to activate any of a thing's capacities, despite seeming to. Of course, this is not how Harman conceives of independence. He bypasses quantitative considerations involved in (i) to (iv) by treating that which underlies causal interaction as a unitary execution as opposed to a multiplicity of distinct

Towards Speculative Realism, 117.

⁷⁴ This is precisely how the arguments intertwine in *Tool-Being*, 223.

capacities. The actualisation of capacities through causal contact is then treated as something qualitatively distinct from the *independent substance* which underlies them, much as the appearance of features through phenomenal access is treated as qualitatively distinct from the *withdrawn essence* which underlies them. This qualitative break is what divides execution and causation into distinct forms of actuality (modal tension) and activity (temporal tension). The equivocation between knowledge and causation thus disguises an illicit leap from quantitative to qualitative excess, along with the mysterian tensions it invokes.

The overall shape of this argument is thus another *reductio ad absurdum* of sorts. It begins by assuming that there is **partial** contact between objects only to try and demonstrate that its essentially partial character implies the impossibility of any contact at all. It slides easily from quantity to quality on the back of Harman's characteristic universalisation of intentional relation, but as with the argument from execution, this conceals problems that warrant rejecting the terms in which it is framed. However, there is a further aspect of the move from quantity to quality worth considering:

But the following objection to this theory often arises: why exaggerate and say that things cannot touch at all? Does it not seem instead that things *partly* make contact with each other?...The problem is that objects cannot be touched "in part," because there is a sense in which objects have no parts.⁷⁵

Harman is very insistent withdrawal is complete. Our knowledge of things is not merely limited, but entirely inadequate. Objects are foreclosed to us. But here he presents the mereological missing link in his reasoning from quantitative excess to qualitative excess. It seems that he takes the idea that a whole is *more* than its parts to imply that the whole is *entirely distinct* from its parts, such that to know the parts is not to know the whole, not even partially, as it were. This is

⁷⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Zero Books, 2010), 73.

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somewhat questionable, but it is not the whole story, as it only works if we treat the features and/or capacities of objects as if they are parts. This provides a path between (iv) and (v), but it is highly dubious.

iv) The Argument from Identity

The final argument, which I call the argument from identity, will require even more reconstruction than the argument from excess. This is because, although it is frequently invoked, it is usually presented without a detailed analysis of how it is supposed to work. Though it does appear in the context of the tool-analysis,⁷⁶ usually in conjunction with some form of the argument from excess, it also appears independently,⁷⁷ as the snappiest and most condensed statement of the case for withdrawal. The most explicit presentation it has so far received is in Harman's criticism of James Ladyman and Don Ross' *Every Thing Must Go*, which I will quote at length:

Let's imagine that we were able to gain exhaustive knowledge of all properties of a tree (which I hold to be impossible, but never mind that for the moment). It should go without saying that even such knowledge would not itself be a tree. Our knowledge would not grow roots or bear fruit or shed leaves, at least not in a literal sense. Even in the case of God, the exhaustive knowledge of a tree and creation of a tree would have to be two separate acts. Now, it has sometimes been objected to this point that it is a straw man. After all, who confuses knowledge of a tree with an actual tree? The answer, of course, is that no one does, since no one could openly identify a thing with knowledge of it and still keep a straight face. Yet the point is not that people defend this view openly, which they do not. Rather, the point is that many people uphold a model of the real that *entails* that knowledge of a tree and a real tree would be one and the same, and hence their views are refuted

⁷⁶ Cf. Harman, *Tool-Being*, 224; Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 136.

⁷⁷ Cf. Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 83, 103; Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 132; Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 28, 73.

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by *reductio ad absurdum*. Namely, if someone holds that there is an isomorphic relationship between knowledge and reality, such that reality can be fully mathematized, then it also follows that a perfect mathematical model of a thing should be able to step into the world and do the labor of that thing. But this is absurd.⁷⁸

The essence of this argument is the attempt to derive the impossibility of **complete knowledge** of a thing from the **ontological distinction** between a thing and our knowledge of it. Although it sometimes appears that this invocation of non-identity is an argument for withdrawal proper, it is really an argument for the epistemic component of premise (iii) of the argument from excess. The rejection of *complete* knowledge must then be leveraged into a rejection of *partial* knowledge, as is clear from the article just quoted, which finishes the above section with a short appeal to the mereological component of the argument from excess discussed above.⁷⁹

The inference from ontological distinction to the impossibility of complete knowledge once more takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. The principle that underlies it is the claim that complete knowledge of a thing would somehow have to be identical to the thing, thereby contradicting ontological distinction. It is this principle which is nowhere given a detailed analysis, and which we must therefore reconstruct. The major problem we face here is that Harman’s use of the term “knowledge” is never really backed up by an **epistemology** that could answer questions about the distinction between *completeness* and *incompleteness*, how this relates to the distinction between *correctness* and *incorrectness*, and whether knowledge of an object is *composed* of distinct representations. I have thus endeavoured to reconstruct the argument on the basis of reasonable assumptions about what Harman means by knowledge, the most important of which is that although Harman tends to simply talk about knowledge of an object

⁷⁸ Harman, “I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed,” in *Society and Space*, volume 28 (2010), 788-789.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 789.

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as a unitary phenomenon (e.g., knowing a tree), the notion of completeness/incompleteness implies that this must be composed out of correct representations of distinct features of the object (e.g., its species, size, shape, colouration, location, etc.). I'll thus begin with some premises that codify this implicit epistemology:

- i) For any representation of an object to be *correct*, the object must in some sense be *the same* as it is represented as being: I know the tree is an elm only if I represent it as being an elm *and* the tree is actually an elm, or if the *tree-for-me* and the *tree-in-itself* are the same in the relevant respect.
- ii) For a *composite* representation of an object to be correct, every distinct *piece* of it must be correct: my representation of the tree will not amount to knowing the tree if I misrepresent its structure, despite correctly representing its species, or if there is a *difference* between the *tree-for-me* and the *tree-in-itself*.
- iii) For a composite representation of an object to be *complete*, it must be both *correct* and *exhaustive*: I know the tree completely only if there is no feature of the tree that is not accurately represented by some component of my representation of it as a whole.

From these premises it is then possible to infer the following claim:

- iv) For any knowledge of an object to be complete, the *object-for-us* and the *object-in-itself* must be *the same in every respect*.

We now only require Leibniz's principle of the **identity of indiscernibles** to reach the principle from which our contradiction is derived:

- v) For any knowledge of an object to be complete, the *object-for-us* and the *object-in-itself* must be *identical*.

This means that as long as we have good reason to think that the object-for-us and the object-in-itself must be ontologically distinct, the *reductio* will work. Harman's argument depends upon the obviousness of this fact.

However, if we dig into this obviousness, we'll find that all is not as straightforward as it might initially seem. I take the intuitive basis for ontological distinction to be the conjunction of two ideas: what I'll call the **possibility of error** and the **necessity of identity**. The former is the idea that for any representation to *be* a representation there must be the possibility that it could be incorrect, because correctness makes no sense without the possibility of incorrectness. The latter is the generally accepted principle that if two things are identical it is not possible that they could have been distinct. If we add these to (v) we can derive ontological distinction by *reductio ad absurdum*. This is because, if the object-for-us and the object-in-itself were identical, then our knowledge of the object would be necessarily complete, and therefore its component representations would have to be infallible, thereby violating the possibility of error. However, the fact that this demonstration includes (v) should give us pause for thought. It indicates that there is something fishy about the connection between (v) and ontological distinction that should be pursued further. What it indicates is that (v) already has some ontological content. Some potentially questionable metaphysical assumptions have been snuck in via the back door.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ It should be noted that to reject these questionable assumptions and the hasty proof of ontological distinction given above is not necessarily to reject the brute fact of ontological distinction. Another way of looking at the issue is to say that our knowledge (or its *representational content*) and its object are distinct by *default*, insofar as, *pace* Harman, the question of their identity simply cannot arise. To give a parallel example, Julius Caesar is distinct from the number 9, because, although we have procedures for determining whether numbers are identical, and whether people are identical, we have no procedures that cross the number/person divide. We have similar ways of determining whether representational contents are identical (e.g., whether you and I are saying *the same* thing in speaking the same sentence), and these need not be compatible with our procedures for identifying the objects they represent.

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However, there is an illicit assumption concealed in (i) that only becomes explicit with the invocation of the identity of indiscernibles in inferring (v) from (iv). It all comes down to how the notion of *sameness* is interpreted. In order for the inference from (iv) to (v) to work, the uncontroversial idea that a correct representation must somehow *represent* the object as being the same as it actually is needs to be converted into the much more controversial idea that a correct representation must somehow *be* the same as the object is. This means that correctly representing some feature of an object is interpreted as standing in some relation to *another* object that also possesses that feature. Knowing that the tree-in-itself is an elm involves standing in some curious relation to a tree-for-me that is an elm *in precisely the same sense* as the tree-in-itself. For the principle of the identity of indiscernibles to work, the object-for-us and the object-in-itself must not only be able to have the same features, they must also possess these features in the same sense. What this shows is that the argument from identity can only contribute to the proof of withdrawal if Harman is allowed to base his epistemology upon a metaphysical distinction (object-for-us/object-in-itself) closely resembling the distinction between the sensual object and the real object it is intended to demonstrate. The *fact* of a distinction between types of object is already given, even if its *character* is not.⁸¹ To call this epistemology idiosyncratic would be an understatement.

b) Heidegger, Husserl, and Kripke

Harman's fourfold obviously emerges from the combination of the real/sensual distinction provided by the arguments

⁸¹ This is an interesting contrast to the way the distinction between types of object emerges in *Tool-Being*, which sees it as a consequence of his reconstruction of the tool-analysis, rather than something already implicit in the analysis (258-259). However, the argument of this particular section is suspect (essence must itself have essence, *ad infinitum*) and does not seem to be repeated in any of the subsequent work.

for withdrawal with the object/quality distinction. There are a number of different ways in which Harman introduces the latter distinction and thereby facilitates this emergence. However, the fourfold lacks an obvious counterpart of withdrawal's tool-analysis: there is no single argument which stands out above all others. Rather, there is a mix of the three forms of exposition, which although it can be broken down into two core arguments: the argument from **eidōs** (taken from Husserl) and the argument from **essence** (taken from Leibniz, Zubiri, and Kripke), is principally organised by Harman's interpretation of Heidegger's famous fourfold (*das Geviert*) of **earth** (*Erde*), **sky** (*Himmel*), **gods** (*Göttlichen*) and **mortals** (*Sterblichen*). As such, we must once more preface our examination of Harman's own arguments with a brief analysis of his reading of Heidegger.

i) Harman's Heidegger Revisited

Harman's reading of the fourfold is to be praised for refusing to either sideline it as an unimportant feature of Heidegger's work, or deny the numerical specificity of the categories constituting it. Moreover, it is to be commended for interpreting these categories as the result of the intersection of two distinctions that it basically gets right: **cleared/concealed**, and **multiple/unitary**. It is in the interpretation of these distinctions that everything goes wrong. The most serious problem is that he identifies the more famous fourfold discussed above with another fourfold schema found earlier in Heidegger's works—in his course during the Freiburg Emergency War Semester of 1919. This is the intersection of a distinction between the **pre-theoretical** (*vorthoretische*) and the **theoretical** (*theoretische*) and a distinction between the **generic** and the **specific**, producing these four categories: the **pre-worldly something** (*Das vorweltliche Etwas*), the **world-laden something** (*Welthaftes Etwas*), the **formal-logical objective something** (*Formallogische gegenständliche Etwas*),

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and the **object-type something** (*Objektartiges Etwas*).⁸² This is complicated by the fact that Harman also misreads the 1919 schema, reading its concern with the “something” as a matter of **singularity** as opposed to **universality**, or a matter of beings as opposed to Being.

It is understandable that Harman takes the pre-theoretical/theoretical distinction to correspond to his own real/sensual distinction, but, as we’ve already shown, this is a misreading of Heidegger’s concern with the difference between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand. It is not a distinction between that which is understood (the sensual) and that which exceeds understanding (the real), but a distinction between theoretical (apophantic) and pre-theoretical (hermeneutic) modes of understanding. The more serious error is that he confuses the distinction between beings considered *generically* (beings *qua* beings) and beings considered *specifically* (e.g., this pen, that piece of paper, etc.) with the distinction between the *unitary* bearer of qualities (e.g., this pen, *qua* this) and the *multiplicity* of its qualities (e.g., this pen *qua* pen, *qua* plastic, *qua* blue, etc.). Although in considering something as a generic something we are indeed abstracting away from its specific determinations, we are not thereby moving from multiplicity to unity: the object-type something is already unitary, it is simply a unit of a specific type (e.g., a pen) with many other specific features (e.g., it is made of plastic, it is blue, etc.). The point is not to investigate the *singularity* of each being as distinct from the *plurality* of its qualities, but to investigate the *universality* of its Being as distinct from the *particularity* of its type and its other features. In essence, the 1919 schema is an early articulation of the connection between projective understanding and the question of Being: it circumscribes the relationship between the general structure of our theoretical understanding of beings (formal-logical objective something) and the primordial source

⁸² Theodore Kiesel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (University of California Press, 1992), 21-25.

of our understanding (pre-worldly something). This is just what Heidegger will later characterise as the relationship between Being and time.⁸³

The later fourfold most famously appears in an essay entitled “The Thing” in Heidegger’s analysis of the conditions under which a humble jug appears to us, but the themes that compose it are hinted at at least as early as his masterful “On the Origin of the Work of Art” and run rampant across the jumble of musings that compose *Contributions to Philosophy*. Harman overlooks these for the most part, in favour of his attempt to read a continuity with the 1919 schema. It is ironic then that his interpretation of the twin distinctions that constitute the fourfold gains more traction here. This is because it is essentially a modification and extension of the account of the strife between earth and world briefly discussed earlier. The important differences are that: a) world *qua* projected space of possibility is renamed *sky*; b) Dasein’s role in the projection of this space is made explicit in the form of *mortals*; and c) the enigmatic *gods* are added as a counterpart to mortals. This leaves us with a split between a unitary *horizon* of appearance (*sky*), multiple agents who *clear* this horizon (*mortals*), a unitary locus of *resistance* to this clearing (*earth*), and multiple foci where this resistance is *hinted* at within the horizon itself (*gods*). The **mirror play** between these four is then nothing but an extended account of strife: the process through which we attempt to negotiate a **coherent** and **comprehensive** grasp of reality by wrestling with that reality itself.

Harman underplays Heidegger’s version of the cleared/concealed and multiple/unitary axes in order to draw a

⁸³ Of course, Heidegger never provided a complete account of his analysis of Being in terms of time. The third division of part one of *Being and Time* which was supposed to contain this analysis was never published, although we have fragments of the ideas that would have made it up in the form of *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, which provides the most extensive version of the analysis, along with the best account the projection of Being upon the primordial source of temporal understanding (*Temporalität*).

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continuity with his own fourfold.⁸⁴ The crucial difference between them is that Heidegger interprets the multiple/unitary axis as a distinction between beings *as such* (the plurality of beings) and beings *as a whole* (the totality of beings), whereas Harman interprets it as the distinction between the multiplicity of a being's *qualities* and its singularity as *bearer* of these qualities. This reflects their differing interpretation of the other axis, insofar as the later Heidegger understands concealing principally in terms of the whole (earth), of which particular concealings (gods) are derivative, whereas Harman takes particular concealing to not only be primary, but to be the only real form of concealing (withdrawal). Harman does not think the whole conceals itself as much as that it doesn't exist. It is nothing but the mutual withdrawal of every being from every other.⁸⁵ This raises the issue of the relation between the multiple/unitary distinction and the part/whole distinction. Harman's rejection of the whole turns on interpreting it not merely as the totality of beings, but as a single being composed out of all other beings. As we have seen, this is precisely how he interprets Heidegger's account of totality. This makes Heidegger's position into a variant of what he would call **onto-theology**, insofar as it comprehends Being in terms of a single privileged being. This misinterpretation reveals a deeper issue though, insofar as Harman seems to blend these two distinctions in explaining his own schema. Specifically, the multiplicity of a thing's real qualities and its unity as bearer of these qualities is often exchanged for the distinction between the thing's real parts and its unity as the whole these parts compose.⁸⁶ This conflation sometimes

⁸⁴ I say "underplay" here because there are points at which he seems to recognise that Heidegger's later schema simply does not fit his own. This is somewhat implicit in *Tool-Being* (266), but it is explicit by the time of *The Quadruple Object* (87-88).

⁸⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 294-296.

⁸⁶ This is most explicit in the section of *Tool-Being* where he explains the distinction between real objects and real qualities by way of Zubiri's account of essence: "The object lives with a dual tension in its breast. On the one hand it fluctuates between the vacuum of its tool-being and the power of

comes out into the open, only to disappear once more.⁸⁷ We must be careful not to let it pass without notice.

ii) *The Argument from Eidos*

It is clear that any argument Harman presents for his four-fold schema and the categorical structures he derives from it will inevitably depend upon the arguments for withdrawal we have already presented. Beyond this, Harman does not really need to argue for the distinction between objects and qualities, at least insofar as it is a correlate of the intuitive distinction between **subjects** and **predicates**. Rather, what must be argued for is his interpretation of the way this distinction intersects with the distinction between the real and the sensual to create a divide between two kinds of quality. The first such argument we will consider, from *The Quadruple Object*, attempts to reverse engineer this distinction by independently deriving one of the categories that emerges out of it. It aims to demonstrate the divide between kinds of quality from within experience itself by appropriating Husserl's phenomenological analysis of *eidos*. Harman is fond of remarking that despite the avowedly *idealist character* of Husserlian phenomenology, it nevertheless has a distinctly *realist flavour*.⁸⁸ He finds this flavour concentrated in the analysis of *eidos*, where he attempts to separate it out from the bitter overtones of Husserl's idealism.

Harman begins by introducing Husserl's theory of **ad-**

its impact on neighbouring beings. *On the other hand it is itself a systematic empire swarming with interior parts.*" (266, my emphasis).

⁸⁷ The sheer extent of this is dramatised across *Guerilla Metaphysics*, in which the distinction between parts and qualities finally becomes evident, as if suddenly discovered, only to metamorphose through a number of different forms (cf. §7B, §10, §11) before finally settling upon a rejection of the plurality of qualities in favour of the plurality of parts (228-229). A detailed commentary upon these convoluted transitions is beyond the scope even of this extensive essay, but the need for one is ameliorated by the subsequent fading of this bold position in the formulation of the object/quality distinction presented in *The Quadruple Object* (cf. 88).

⁸⁸ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 20.

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umbration (*Abschattung*).⁸⁹ The basic idea underlying this phenomenological concept is that in ordinary perception we encounter things from different perspectives, and that the way the thing is presented may vary between them, highlighting some features and concealing others, despite the object remaining the same. We can stand outside a house and view it from various angles, and even walk within it, touching its walls and smelling its scents, but we are always encountering the same house, even if the encounters themselves are distinct. From this, Harman draws the phenomenological insight that the object is distinct from the qualities that it presents in these adumbrations, not because it is *more* than them, but because there is some sense in which it is *less* than them. This is because it is possible to *subtract* them from the object without it ceasing to be the same object. However, there is a limit upon subtraction, because if we could subtract all of a sensual object's qualities there would be nothing to distinguish it from other such objects.⁹⁰ There are some *essential* features without which the sensual object cannot be what it is, and it is possible to compare different adumbrations of the same object and strip away the *inessential* features they present, in order to leave these behind. Husserl calls this process **eidetic variation** and its result *eidos*.

Harman then claims that, according to Husserl, eidetic qualities are never revealed in perceptual adumbrations in the way that accidental ones are, but only through the process of eidetic variation, or the **categorial intuition** that arises from it. Harman then criticises Husserl, and amends his account in the following way:

Husserl is wrong to distinguish between the sensual and the intellectual here; both sensual and categorial intuition are forms of intuition, and to intuit something is *not the same as to be it*. Hence the eidetic features of any object can never be made present even through the intellect, but

⁸⁹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object* §1B.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, §1C.

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can only be approached indirectly by way of allusion, whether in the arts or in the sciences.⁹¹

The argument from identity thus makes a reappearance here to invoke the split between the real and the sensual. However, what is more important is the way this is configured in relation to the analysis of eidetic variation. Harman draws a distinction between sensual and intellectual modes of engagement with a thing's eidetic features only to collapse it, and thereby insist that these features must lie beyond both. He thus converts the distinction between accidental and eidetic features into his distinction between sensual and real qualities: "For the qualities of its eidos are also withdrawn from all access, and 'real' is the only possible name for such a feature."⁹² Here we once again encounter the strange interface between metaphysics and phenomenology in his work. Just what is eidetic variation if the features it was supposed to reveal can never actually be revealed?

The truth of the matter is that Harman has parted ways with Husserl long before this move is made. Husserl's concept of eidos is an account of **general essence**, as opposed to the account of **individual essence** that Harman is attempting to develop. Husserl principally talks about eidetic hierarchies of *genus* and *species* (e.g., the eidetic features of trees as opposed to those of elms) which eidetic variation and its corresponding modes of intuition allow us to traverse on the basis of our intuitions of individuals.⁹³ He insists that all eidetic features "*belonging to the essence of the individuum another individuum can have too*,"⁹⁴ in contrast to the idea that eidos could be *unique* to a given sensual object. However, this claim is not just in conflict with Harman's take on essence, but with his take on the qualities that compose it: "qualities

⁹¹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 28, my emphasis.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982), 8-15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

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as described in this book are always individualised by the object to which they belong.”⁹⁵ Harman not only thinks that the process of eidetic variation aims at what makes a sensual object the unique individual that it is, but he thinks that it does so by considering qualities that are unique to it *qua* individual. This dearth of generality means that there is no basis for the process of comparison, insofar as there are no qualities that could possibly be shared.⁹⁶ This makes the basis of the process of subtraction entirely mysterious, as there are no criteria for sorting accidents from eidos.⁹⁷

In essence, what Harman does here is capitalise upon this mystery, in a manner similar to that we’ve seen in the arguments from execution and excess. He converts the absence of criteria for *differentiating* between essential and inessential qualities in any given case into an *absolute difference* between essential and inessential qualities in all cases. That there are no conceivable features that could be the end point of the process of determining eidos so described is used as a reason to treat eidetic features as inconceivable. Ultimately, the paucity of Harman’s account of eidetic variation is actually best indicated by the way he appeals to *allusion* to fill it in. Not only does this bear no resemblance to the Husserlian phenomenological method on which the argument is supposedly founded, but it raises difficult questions about the categorical schema derived from the fourfold, insofar as it

⁹⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 30.

⁹⁶ We have already seen this dearth of generality in Harman’s interpretation of Heidegger’s phenomenology (cf. *Tool-Being*, 84–85), but it is equally present in his reading of Husserl’s. For instance, the example of the phenomenological reduction he presents in *Guerilla Metaphysics* (§10B) never moves beyond the level of the individual, but simply decomposes sensual wholes into sensual parts and explores the relations between them.

⁹⁷ Going further than this, in “On Vicarious Causation” Harman claims that Husserl’s method is superficial, because it cannot analyse eidetic qualities without turning them into “something like accidents” (214). He even goes so far as to claim that, not only are qualities individualised, but there is really only one quality—the singular eidos. He thus sees eidetic variation as a sort of frantic scabbling to unwrap a present in which we never reach the gift itself, only ever more layers of wrapping paper.

seemingly conflates *allure* (space-fusion) with *theory* (time-fission).

iii) *The Argument from Essence*

The second argument for the distinction between sensual qualities and real qualities is less localised. It must be reconstructed out of two components that are liberally spread throughout Harman's work, one associated with Kripke's work on **rigid designators**,⁹⁸ and one associated with Leibniz and Zubiri's work on individuation and essence.⁹⁹ When taken together, these components allow for a reverse engineering of the distinction similar to that of the argument from eidos, by deriving the corresponding category of *essence*. Also like the argument from eidos, it depends upon the distinction between sensual and real established by the arguments for withdrawal. This is because it needs to conceive the relation between the sensual object and the real object in terms of **reference**. This does not mean that it must be described in terms of Heideggerian functional relations between *things* and *things* (*Verweis*), but rather that it must be described in terms amenable to the debates regarding how *words* relate to *things* inaugurated by Frege's theory of sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*). This is facilitated by the fact that the Husserlian terms in which Harman couches his theory of sensual objects were developed in dialogue with Frege. It is this concern with the *intentional basis* of reference that connects his work with the issues that Kripke raises for the theory of **names**.¹⁰⁰

To explain further, Harman draws on Husserl's concept of **nominal acts** to explain the relationship between the sensual

⁹⁸ Cf. Harman, *Tool-Being*, 124, 213-215; Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 28-29, 108-110, 197-198; Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 175; Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 67.

⁹⁹ Cf. Harman, *Tool-Being*, §23-24; Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 82-83, 147, 162, 192; Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 48-49.

¹⁰⁰ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

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object and its real counterpart.¹⁰¹ He interprets Husserl's claim that all other intentional acts are founded upon nominal acts as saying that in any intentional relation we are **acquainted** with an immediate "this" (sensual object) that in turn *refers* to a shadowy "this" (real object). Names are attached to the former as if they are the *senses* that determine their referenc-
es. This means that *distinct* sensual objects can refer to the *same* real object insofar as one thing can have many names. The crucial point is that, although Harman thinks that we can become acquainted with a sensual object by means of a **description** of the object that would draw our attention to it, and thus that we can learn how to use names through using descriptions (e.g., "Pete' refers to the person who wrote the paper you're currently reading"), he does not think that this is necessary for acquaintance. As he explains in his reading of Ortega y Gasset, our acquaintance with the sensual object is a sort of **feeling**, and the object a sort of **feeling-thing**, which any particular description can never completely capture.¹⁰²

However, this inability of descriptions to capture the *feel* of sensual objects is not yet the inability to capture the *meaning* of names that Kripke reveals. Harman takes the latter inability to consist in the relation between the name and its reference rather than the name and its sense: "For Kripke, names are 'rigid designators' that point to (or stipulate) realities beyond all possible descriptions of them."¹⁰³ Whereas the immediate "this" is something *more* than the *particular descriptions* that give us purchase upon it, the shadowy "this" is something *other* than every *possible description*. It's helpful to quote Harman at some length on this point:

Kripke's "rigid designator" is meant to serve as a proper name pointing to something that remains identical even when all known features of the thing are altered, so that the moon remains the moon even if we turn out at some future point to have been catastrophically wrong about all its properties...However, the question for us is whether the invio-

¹⁰¹ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 28-29.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 108-110.

¹⁰³ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 67.

late “this” beneath all apparent properties is something lying within perception, or is instead a real object lying somewhere beneath it.¹⁰⁴

Harman obviously answers this question in the affirmative, but it is important to see that he does so for *epistemological* reasons. He thinks that because we can use names to talk about the same thing regardless of any *possible disagreements* about how we should describe it, every name must therefore refer to a mysterious “inaccessible ‘x’ lying behind any descriptions that might be given of it.”¹⁰⁵ What this means is that because Kripke shows that the *reference* of names is somehow independent of our beliefs about their qualities, the *individuation* of the objects they refer to cannot have anything to do with these beliefs. This is the first component of the argument.

The second component is much simpler. It amounts to a rather straightforward claim about the nature of individuation, which enables us to draw consequences regarding how the individuation of real objects does work from the above claim about how it doesn't. Harman discusses this in relation to Zubiri's work, but his simplest statements of it are always his remarks on Leibniz: “[Leibniz] observes that even though each monad must be one monad, each also needs a multitude of qualities to be what it is, to differ from other monads rather than being interchangeable with them.”¹⁰⁶

For real objects to be distinct from one another they must possess some qualities that distinguish them. There can be no individuation without qualities. This claim interacts with the Kripkean component in the following way:

The basic point is that we can no longer simply distinguish between a sensual world of properties and a deeper hidden core of the essential “this”...The “this” may be separable from all sorts of specific and falsifiable features, but it is never separable from a specific essence, and is therefore no “bare particular.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 197-198.

¹⁰⁵ Harman, *Tool-Being*, 213.

¹⁰⁶ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 197-198.

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Real objects must have *individual essences* that distinguish them from all other things, even if these cannot be adequately described in terms of any sensual qualities whatsoever. Therefore, if sensual qualities are unable to compose these essences, there must be an entirely distinct type of quality capable of doing so. The need for essence thus demonstrates the need for a distinction between real qualities and sensual qualities.

The issue with this argument is that, much as we saw with Husserl in the argument from eidos, Harman's attempt to integrate Kripke's insights into his metaphysical framework ends up seriously warping them. We could focus on the fact that Kripke would not endorse the account of indirect reference that Harman's division between sensual and real objects implies, but this is a tortuous point, given the intricacies of neo-Fregean attempts to account for names as rigid designators.¹⁰⁸ A more salient point is that although Kripke also develops a conception of individual essence out of his account of rigid designation, it is remarkably different from Harman's. Kripke does not take his account of rigid designation to imply that the essential properties of things must be of a completely different kind to their inessential ones.¹⁰⁹ For him, it is entirely possible for one thing to possess a property *essentially* (e.g., a living cell's salinity, which must remain within a narrow range for it to function) and another to possess the same property *accidentally* (e.g., a cooked piece of pasta's salinity, which can vary well outside of this range without dissolution). Of course, he might simply have failed to recognise the implications of his own theory, but it should give us pause for thought. As such, we should take a look at his argument against descriptivism.

Kripke claims that the meaning of a name such as "Aristotle" cannot be composed out of descriptions such as "the most

¹⁰⁸ I have in mind the work of Gareth Evans, John McDowell and Robert Brandom. I personally endorse Brandom's own anaphoric approach to integrating the Fregean sense/reference distinction and rigid designation, which he calls "tactile Fregeanism," cf. Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Harvard University Press, 1994), ch. 7-8.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Naming and Necessity*, 39-53, 110-115.

famous student of Plato,” “the tutor of Alexander the great,” or “a Greek philosopher with an impressive beard,” even if these descriptions *uniquely* pick out the relevant object, either individually or in conjunction. Put in its simplest form, the argument for this claim is that we would otherwise be unable to make sense of statements such as “Aristotle *might not* have been the greatest student of Plato,” “Aristotle *could* have died before Alexander was born,” or “It was possible for Aristotle to shave off his beard and abandon philosophy.” For any descriptive feature that is supposed to belong to the meaning of a name, we can construct a seemingly reasonable **counterfactual** statement involving that name in which the object lacks it, thereby producing a contradiction. The important contrast to draw with Harman’s presentation of the argument is that this is straightforwardly *modal* rather than *epistemic*: it involves differences between the way the world *actually* is and ways it *could* have been, rather than differences between the way the world *really* is and ways we *take it* to be. What Kripke means when he says that names are rigid designators is simply that they pick out the same thing in all counterfactual scenarios. Moreover, he does not think that the name successfully refers to an object in every proposed scenario. He holds that some counterfactual statements (e.g., “Aristotle could have been a pig”) are false precisely because there are some essential features (e.g., humanity) that could not be absent from a scenario without the object being absent. He thus does not think that grasping the *essence* of a thing is impossible, but simply that it is distinct from grasping the *meaning* of a name that refers to it. There may be independent reasons not to endorse Kripke’s essentialism, but they are not necessarily reasons to endorse Harman’s alternative.

Harman’s account of rigid designation has thus mutated into **stubborn designation**, insofar as names not only refer to the same thing throughout counterfactual variations, but across *all* possible appearances. For Kripke and those who attempt to incorporate his insights, there is still at least some role for descriptions of the features and history of the objects our names refer to in determining whether two dif-

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ferent names refer to the same thing. There can be entirely separate causal histories (or anaphoric chains) determining the reference of different names (e.g., “morning star” and “evening star”) and yet facts about these can help determine whether they have been referring to the same thing all along (e.g., “the morning star is the evening star,” as both are names for Venus). For Harman, we can at best use descriptions to determine whether the sensual objects our names are attached to are the same, but never whether distinct sensual objects might refer to the same real object. This makes the boundaries between real objects as mysterious as their qualities.¹¹⁰ The sensual chair I am sitting on and the sensual tree I am staring at are *sensually distinct*, but they might not be *really distinct*. The sun, the sea, and the strudel I had for breakfast may *really* have been the same thing all along. The messy business of working out just what it is we’re talking *about* can only be given over to allure in the same fashion that the *theorisation* of eidos seems to have been. It therefore seems as if the whole issue of reference from which the argument begins has gone out the window.

Even more worryingly perhaps, we are left wondering why we must affirm the reality of discreteness at all, rather than some singular *Apeiron* underlying a plurality of discrete appearances. Harman’s own analysis of appearance cannot but dissolve the “glaringly obvious fact” of discreteness that he himself held up against Heidegger’s purported holism. His radical dissociation of the individuation of sensual objects from the individuation of real objects precludes appealing to apparent discreteness to prove real discreteness, and thereby undermines his seemingly radical individualism. If we cannot know anything about the criteria of individuation of real objects, then we are left with the real possibility that there might just be one.

¹¹⁰ I owe this point to Daniel Sacilotto.

c) *Occasionalism, Independence, and Supplementation*

In considering the arguments for the final aspect of Harman's system, we are put in a similar position to our examination of the arguments for the fourfold, only more so. Though Harman devotes a considerable amount of space to elaborating his account of allure,¹¹¹ and presents some additional reasons why we should want such an account of causation, the principal motivation for the account is provided by the arguments we have already considered and rejected. Harman issues the following challenge to those who would assess his account of causation in *Guerilla Metaphysics*:

Once it was conceded that the world is made up of withdrawn objects, utterly sealed in private vacuums but also unleashing forces upon one another, all the other problems follow in quick succession. Let anyone who does not agree with the strategies of guerilla metaphysics specify clearly which of its initial steps is invalid.¹¹²

This is precisely what I have done. None of these initial steps has proved valid, let alone all of them. This seems to rule out vicarious causation by default. Still, there are some more probative reasons that Harman presents for his account of causation. He provides a further historical narrative regarding the tradition of **occasionalism** about causation, which is meant to suggest that the problem his theory responds to emerges from a broader range of concerns than his own. He also suggests that the scientific account of causation demands **supplementation** by a metaphysical theory of causation of precisely the kind he provides. I will now address both of these, but will divide them with a final statement of the core of Harman's argument for vicarity, on the basis of the **independence** of objects from one another. This provides a proper contrast with the motivations of the occasionalists as well as contextualising the demand for supplementation.

¹¹¹ Cf. Harman *Guerilla Metaphysics* §8-12; Harman "On Vicarious Causation."

¹¹² Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, p. 97.

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i) Harman's Occasionalist Tradition

According to Harman, the problem of how distinct things can causally interact has a long lineage.¹¹³ On the one hand, he sees it being raised within explicitly metaphysical terms in the Islamic occasionalism of the Ash'arite school, the modern occasionalism of Descartes, Malebranch, and Leibniz, and in the more contemporary occasionalism of Whitehead. All of these thinkers invoke **God** as a mediator capable of overcoming what they see as the causal gap between entities, be it as the source of all causal power (the Ash'arites), the source of the connection between different kinds of substance (Descartes), or the medium through which entities are able to encounter one another (Malebranch, Leibniz, and Whitehead). On the other, he sees it being raised implicitly in the epistemological skepticism/critique of Hume and Kant. He reads these thinkers as invoking the **mind** as a mediator which provides the causal connections between appearances, be it through mere habit (Hume), or through transcendental necessity (Kant). Harman criticises both of these trends for advocating a **global occasionalism**, insofar as they require all causal relations to be mediated by the same thing, be it God in the former or the mind in the latter, and proposes, along with Latour, a **local occasionalism**, in which causal relations between entities are mediated by further entities.

Now, although this strikes me as presenting a somewhat perverse reading of Kant and Hume, insofar as it reads their epistemological concerns in metaphysical terms they would abjure, there are definite continuities here. There are overlapping themes that seem to motivate similar accounts of causation, insofar as they all demand some form of **causal mediation**. However, this demand does not arise from a single problem held in common between the various sub-traditions that make up this narrative. For instance, Islamic occasionalism did not only provide a *theological solution*, but was motivated by a *theological problem* about the power of God. This is

¹¹³ Cf. Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 188, 202, 218-219; Harman, *Prince of Networks*, §5c.

remarkably different from Descartes' problem concerning the split between thought and extension, Leibniz's problem concerning compossibility, and lightyears from the concerns with the nature of explanation that motivate Latour's occasionalism. If we do not share any of these diverse concerns, then this problem has no hold on us. Harman hardly takes the theological concerns of the Ash'arites to be pressing, so he cannot lean upon them to motivate his own theory of causation. In short, we still need some good reasons to accept the problematic status of unmediated causal relations above and beyond this narrative.

ii) *The Argument from Independence*

Harman's own reasons for taking unmediated causal relations to be impossible all stem from his claims about the independence of objects from their relations to one another. These turn up at various different points in the three arguments for withdrawal we've considered, but they are never motivated independently of claims about the excess of objects over our grasp of them, be there an explicit connection between them or an implicit conflation of them. This should be unsurprising given the dominance of phenomenological themes throughout these arguments, even when they are illicitly intertwined with metaphysical ones. My aim is now to make this tangle of claims about epistemic access and causal interaction a bit clearer, not by reconstructing a further argument, but by unearthing a non sequitur underlying the other arguments. This amounts to a final attempt at cutting the Gordian knot of methodological issues underlying Harman's project before we consider his ideas about the relationship between philosophy and science.

I think the key here is Harman's offhand remark that "despite its various degrees of efficacy, [physical causation] must ultimately either work or fail to work."¹¹⁴ This is made in the context of displaying the parallels between causation and allure, which he similarly takes to either succeed or fail

¹¹⁴ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 176.

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in this binary fashion. This adds an extra layer of depth to the picture of vicarious causation presented above, insofar as not only is sincerity insufficient for causal interaction, but that allure is sometimes insufficient too. Successful causation requires successful allure. However, what is really interesting is the claim that causal interaction should be understood in terms of success *at all*. If the problem of how one object can *affect* another is actually the problem of how one object can *successfully* affect another, then this tells us something more about the implicit motivations of the problem. This is because knowledge can be understood in terms of representational success. If one conflates representation and causation by treating causation in intentional terms, then one can seemingly infer the impossibility of successful causation (causal independence) from the impossibility of knowledge (epistemic excess). This conflation can only be held together by the sort of functional language that Harman refuses to abandon at the end of the argument from execution, as it lets us treat things as *striving* for ends. We can say that things *try* to affect one another, even if they always *fail*.

Of course, there still must be some way in which causation can succeed. The absolute ban upon causal contact is thus qualified using the notion of **directness**: all *direct* access fails, therefore all *direct* causation fails. The hope of an *indirect* form of access (if no longer strictly epistemic in character) thus holds open the hope of an *indirect* form of causation. This hope is answered in both cases by allure. It provides a supposedly non-representational way for us to *access* the real, and in doing so provides a way for the real to *affect* us. However, the fact that these relations proceed in *opposite* directions should give us pause for thought. The object that tries to affect is the object hiding behind the sensual object, whereas the object that tries to access is the object encountering this facade. What's going on here then?

The crucial question is this: in precisely what way can allure be said to *succeed* where representation *fails*? It is the equivocation between the standards of representational success and causal success that allows us to convert epistemic excess into

causal independence. If there is no sense in which allure is held to the former standard, or to some deeper standard that it shares with representation, then there is no good sense in which it can overcome causal independence. The problem is that the only concrete standards of success that Harman ever deploys in his discussions of allure concern how the allure *affects* the one who experiences it.¹¹⁵ Does the joke make me laugh? Does my mistake embarrass me? Does the metaphor make me think? The fact that these are the questions that determine the success of allure indicates why successful allure is a model for successful causation. These allusions can only succeed or fail insofar as there is some *effect* they are *supposed* to produce upon us. They are thus more like access to *narcotics* than access to *information*. It doesn't *seem* to matter that there is no substantive comparison with representational success, only because it is *already* understood in causal terms. The non sequitur is hidden by blatant circularity. Harman's aesthetics is an introspective theory of **emotional affection**.

iii) *The Argument from Supplementation*

Finally, we come to Harman's defence of the importance of his theory of vicarious causation by way of his thoughts on the relationship between philosophy and science. Let's jump straight in at the deep end:

For several centuries, philosophy has been on the defensive against the natural sciences, and now occupies a point of lower social prestige and, surprisingly, narrower subject matter. A brief glance at history shows that this was not always the case. To resume the offensive, we need only reverse the long-standing trends of renouncing all speculation on objects and volunteering for curfew in an ever-tinier ghetto of solely human realities: language, texts, political power. Vicarious causation frees us from such imprisonment by returning us to the heart of the inanimate world, whether natural or artificial. The uniqueness of philosophy is secured, not by walling off a zone of precious human

¹¹⁵ Cf. Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, §8-9, 211-213.

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reality that science cannot touch, but by dealing with the same world as the various sciences but in a different manner.¹¹⁶

He thus sees his metaphysical system as an attempt to return philosophy to its rightful subject matter. He defends philosophy's right to tackle the same topics as the sciences by claiming that it can approach them through other means. Given the difficulties we've had in determining Harman's methodology up till now, we are entitled to some curiosity regarding just what these means are, and how they are supposed to differ from those of the sciences. This is where the theory of vicarious causation is supposed to shine, by providing us with an exemplar of the divergence between the scientific and philosophical approaches:

From the naturalistic standpoint, ignoring for now whatever complications one might wish to infer from the quantum theory, causation is essentially a physical problem of two material masses slamming into each other or mutually affected through fields. One object becomes directly present to the other, whether through physical contact or some other form of intimacy. But there is also a *metaphysical* problem of causation.¹¹⁷

The initial problem with this is that all of the contrasts Harman makes between the supposed scientific understanding of causality and his own metaphysical one present an incredibly crude version of the sciences.¹¹⁸ Although he pays lip service to the implications quantum mechanics, he entirely ignores the advanced mathematical techniques (e.g., phase space modelling, statistical analysis, information theory, etc.) that the sciences have developed to model phenomena since Hume talked about billiard ball dynamics, along with the intricate theoretical questions regarding the nature of causation that these have spawned, both in the sciences and

¹¹⁶ Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," 190.

¹¹⁷ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 18.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Harman, *Tool-Being*, 19, 209 ; Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 79.

the philosophy of science (e.g., emergent capacities, statistical causality, information transmission, etc.).¹¹⁹ However, on second thought, the real problem is that Harman's approach precludes him from paying any attention to these things anyway. As far as he is concerned, the sciences don't tell us anything about *reality*. They only talk about it as it *seems*, whereas philosophy can talk about it as it *is*. This isn't to say science is useless, but simply that the truth is entirely inaccessible to it. Maybe this truth will be relevant to the sciences, maybe it won't, but there's no real debate to be had here, even if there might be mutual inspiration.

There is a tremendous irony in this, insofar as the strange methodological hybrid of phenomenological description and metaphysical argument that Harman adopts amounts to the practice of **introspective metaphysics**. It is important to understand that this is different from what is often called "armchair metaphysics" insofar as it has nothing to do with the *a priori* as traditionally understood. It is not a matter of retreating from observation to contemplate and reason about the fundamental concepts that underpin observation, but a matter of seeking out a special kind of intuition unknown to the sciences. Harman claims to get at the reality that the sciences can never describe by closely describing the structure of seeming. Far from challenging the retreat of philosophers from the world into the bastion of consciousness, he has simply extended the domain of consciousness into the world. On this basis, he provides us with an introspective theory of causation modelled upon emotional intensity. This theory is independent of the sciences insofar as it is based on a form of evidence entirely alien to the sciences, but it strikes me as equally alien to the proper practice of philosophy. The phenomenological trappings in which Harman's metaphysical introspection is clothed are at best a bad disguise, like a tasteless rubber Nixon mask, only formed into a bizarre

¹¹⁹ This is evident in the way he approaches the work of Ladyman and Ross in "I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed," where he all but explicitly refuses to consider the scientific issues that motivate many of their crucial metaphysical choices.

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caricature of Husserl's face instead. What they hide is a series of questionable assumptions and sometimes outright misunderstandings regarding important epistemological and metaphysical issues. Our next task must be to peel back this mask and bring these assumptions into the open, in order to better understand why one might be tempted to endorse OOP despite the convoluted and deeply flawed arguments presented for it.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ This argument will be continued in a second part which will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Speculations*.