

Object-Oriented Ontology and Commodity Fetishism: Kant, Marx, Heidegger, and Things

Abstract:

There have been several criticisms of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) from the political Left. Perhaps the most frequent one has been that OOO's aspiration to speak of objects apart from all their relations runs afoul of Marx's critique of "commodity fetishism." The main purpose of this article is to show that even a cursory reading of the sections on commodity in Marx's *Capital* do not support such an accusation. For Marx, the sphere of entities that are not commodities is actually quite wide, including all the beings of nature not subject to exchange, as well as bartered goods, and tithes and rents paid in kind to feudal lords. In short, the theory of commodity fetishism is a theory of value, not an anti-realist theory of being, and thus does not touch on OOO at all. In closing, I make some brief comments on Marx's relation to Kantian formalism and to Heidegger's famous account of present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) and ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*).

Keywords:

Object-Oriented Ontology, Marx, commodity fetishism, Heidegger

Object-oriented ontology (abbreviated OOO, and pronounced "Triple O") has become the most interdisciplinary of the four different strains of Speculative Realist philosophy, with an especially large following in architecture and the arts.¹ By and large, OOO has not been greeted as warmly on the political Left as it has elsewhere.²

1) Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, "Speculative Realism," in: *Collapse III* (2007): 306-449.

2) Technically, OOO refers loosely to four separate positions, including those of Ian Bogost, Levi R. Bryant, and Timothy Morton along with my own, though Bryant has distanced himself somewhat from the term. In this article, I speak only for myself.

To some extent this cold reception is inevitable, since OOO – at least in my version of the theory – is suspicious of the established Left’s claim to the continuing status of an intellectual and moral vanguard for our time. Now, there is certainly no reason to abandon the Left’s general commitment to equality, education, access to medicine, and the redress of structural economic grievance, its general opposition to racism and misogyny or its spirit of horror at the re-emergence of slavery, white nationalism, the massacre of tribes by miners, and other nightmares we hoped had been left behind. While the cautious streak of the conservative may sometimes provide a useful check on our confidence in our own ability to set everything right, conservatism habitually understates the heavy component of history that flows through human veins. As for political liberalism, though it strikes me as the most prudent course available, it is admittedly built on the edge of a crater where justice is too quickly sacrificed to Hobbesian order, and where the economic freedom of the liberal is too often enabled by the exploitation of the foreigner. Given that I refuse to ignore the list of monsters in liberalism’s closet, then why not just wave the flag of the Left?

The heart of the problem, as I see it, is that the modern Left arose during the heyday of philosophical idealism, and shares the two primary vices of that stage of philosophy: (1) its mistaken claim to a non-existent knowledge of reality, in this case political reality; (2) its relative failure to account for the political role of non-human entities. A third issue, one less directly connected to idealist philosophy, is the frequent failure of the Left to note the difference between politics and morality: not morality in general, but egalitarian morality specifically, as if injustice and exploitation were the sole political problems. There is also a fourth and more local issue, which is that in my own personal and professional milieu, endorsing Leftist slogans in print or in person brings such immediate social rewards that we ought to distrust it for that reason alone. I am not suggesting that we join the ranks of the contrarians: an annoying species who simply find a different social reward in the false superiority of one-upmanship. What I am suggesting is that we not forget to push back – as Francis Bacon insisted with his four types of idols – against the inherent exaggeration of any idea taken to be obviously true in the circles where each of us travels.³ In present-day continental philosophy circles, at least, the supposedly inevitable political truth is not the widely detested “neo-liberalism,” but some form of Leftism. The topic is a large one, but I will limit myself here to a single task: responding to the accusations that OOO indulges in a form of “commodity fetishism” as described by Marx in the opening chapter of *Capital*.

Commodity Fetishism

OOO promotes a return of philosophy to individual things, not just apart from their relations to human beings, but apart from their relations to each other as well. This has aroused some criticism from those who regard OOO-inspired thingism as a degeneration into the historical period preceding the heavily relational ontologies of Hegel and Marx. The most polite and coherent case of this critique I have found was penned by Wesley Phillips:

Schelling and Hegel did away with the distinction between subjective activity on the one side and objective passivity on the other a long time ago. The recent return to “thinghood” emerged with Harman’s account of “equipment.” Harman thus reproduced Heidegger’s (neo-Kantian) blindness to the alternative, more radical attack upon thingism presented in German idealism and, subsequently, in historical materialism. In fact, speculative realism remains closer to “mainstream” continental philosophy than it would like to think. Without any historical materialism, Harman’s “universal

3) Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

theory of entities” falls back into a thing-ism of its own: the theoretical pluralisation of entities now precedes their practical pluralisation (for Marx, “congealed labor”). Why, then, the return to things themselves? Is it an unwittingly masochistic fetishisation of commodity fetishism...?⁴

This brief passage is rich in accusations, even in the sphere of personal psychology (“unwitting masochism”). But the heart of the matter is Phillips’ dual claim that OOO suffers from the “neo-Kantian” blindness to the great step forward in philosophy made by Schelling and Hegel, and a “fetishistic” blindness to Marx’s discovery that things are actually congealed labor. A pair of blindnesses, then; not just one.

Since the focus of the present article is closer to Marx than to German Idealism, I can only address the “neo-Kantian” point quickly. The central idea of Kantian philosophy is also its least popular element today: the thing-in-itself existing beyond all human access, which can be thought but not known. We cannot know the noumena, but only the phenomena.⁵ German Idealism’s manner of dealing with Kant is to eliminate the thing-in-itself as a fruitless residue of pre-Kantian dogmatic philosophy. Pedantic objections may be made about the need to distinguish between Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Marx, but there is no need to incorporate such differences here, since OOO fully upholds Kant’s basic conception of the thing-in-itself, while no German Idealist does so. From their point of view, to think something outside thought is already to think it, and therefore the noumena are inherently contradictory; to know a limit requires that we also know what is beyond that limit; we cannot claim that the noumena “cause” the phenomena, since the concept of cause is applicable only to phenomena; and so forth. By discounting the noumenal status of the noumena and transforming them into a special case of the phenomena, we supposedly reach a more radical position than Kant himself: not to mention more radical than Heidegger, who is then treated as a mere *neo-* in comparison with Kant.

Unfortunately, I cannot join Phillips in assessing his own position as “more radical” than OOO, since he merely repeats well-known arguments from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even seems unaware of the primary difference between OOO and Kant: our claim that objects are noumenal not just for us, but for each other as well. Any critique of OOO that fails to mention this difference has not missed the target, but has failed to see the target at all. Even as Phillips and his comrades-in-argument claim to overcome Kant’s inbuilt limitation when it comes to the thing-in-itself, they nonetheless adopt the more deeply rooted error of Kantian philosophy: the assumption that we cannot speak of any relation that does not include humans as one of its elements. We cannot talk about thunder-in-itself, but only about how thunder manifests to humans under the conditions of space, time, and the twelve categories of understanding, or whatever we take to be the post-Kantian equivalent of these. We cannot think of how fire-in-itself affects cotton-in-itself, but only about how this relation might be mathematized according to the principles made accessible by the conditions of human understanding. We cannot speak of rice in its own right, but only of rice as a place where *h u m a n* labor is consolidated. Once we realize that OOO’s chief virtue consists in its avoidance of this anthropocentric treadmill, we immediately have new tools at our disposal for examining what is living and dead in Schelling, Hegel, Marx, and other heroes of the anti-object club (recall that by “object,” we mean noumena that are noumenal for each other too, and not just for us). For while it is true that organic chemicals must contain carbon, and true that such chemicals are of great importance, no one would dream of saying that *a l l* chemicals must be organic. And likewise, though human beings may prove to be necessary ingredients of politics, art, and love, we would never say that

4) Wesley Phillips, “The Future of Speculation?,” in: *Cosmos and History*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2012): 298.

5) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987). For a more accessible account of his thought, see Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 2001).

all relations must involve a human being as one of its terms. To give just one example, the unseen collision of two comets in the distant Oort Cloud is clearly not a case of “congealed human labor,” and we will therefore see that it is hard to see how the Marxist theory of commodities can say anything against philosophical realism.

Marx’s thoughts on commodity fetishism are not difficult to find, since *Capital* opens on this very topic. Chapter 1, entitled “The Commodity,” gives us a roughly forty-page analysis of the several different kinds of value before concluding on the fetishist theme.⁶ Since Marx holds that commodities – defined as useful goods subjected to exchange– are “congealed quantities of homogeneous [human] labor,”⁷ they are inherently social products whose value arises from social relations rather than prior to those relations. The “fetishist” misses this point, and mistakenly believes that commodities gain their value directly from nature. Two representative quotes will serve to solidify the point. Here is the first: “the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of things... In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye.”⁸ This is how Marx defines fetishism, and like all forms of anthropomorphism, it is said to transfer what belongs to the human side of the equation onto things, in this case resulting in the false naturalization of value. Marx’s famously barbed wit makes him capable of stating the point in even harsher terms, which he soon proceeds to do:

It is nothing but the definite social relations between men themselves which assumes [in commodity fetishism] the form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find any analogy we must take flight into the misty realms of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.⁹

From here it seems a brief step for the Anti-Fetishists to dismiss OOO, which would appear to enter “the misty realms of religion” when it speaks of objects themselves outside of any relation.

The fatal flaw in this view should be obvious, for Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism is a theory of value, not of reality. Even if we accept the Marxist claim that the value of cotton must be deciphered through a social analysis of the labor that made it an item of exchange, it does not follow that cotton only exists in the social context of labor. There are numerous passages which make it clear that Marx by no means intends an anti-realist ontology of this sort— the sort that we find in a radical idealist (even if self-styled “materialist”) thinker such as Karen Barad.¹⁰ The Anti-Fetishist case against OOO entails the bizarre implication not only that commodities are congealed human labor – as Marx himself held – but that therefore everything is congealed human labor. Yet this is clearly not what Marx means, as we learn in a series of passages near the beginning of the chapter. For instance: “A thing can be a use-value without being a value. This is the case, whenever its utility to man is not mediated through labor. Air, virgin soil, natural meadows, unplanted forests, etc. fall into this category.”¹¹ *A fortiori*, we could say that things without use-value do not have the socially congealed value of commodities, such as exotic planets far beyond the limits of humanity’s ability to travel.

6) Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume One, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977).

7) *Ibid.*, 135–136.

8) *Ibid.*, 164–165.

9) *Ibid.*, 165.

10) Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

11) Marx, *Capital*, 131.

Yet for Marx, the realm of non-commodities goes even further than this. It also includes the goods we produce for private sustenance: “A thing can be useful, and a product of human labor, without being a commodity. He who satisfies his own need with the product of his own labor admittedly creates use-values, but not commodities. In order to produce the latter, he must not only produce use-values, but use-values for others, social use-values.”¹² Friedrich Engels adds in a note to his friend’s *magnum opus* that even goods produced for others do not automatically count as commodities: “The medieval peasant produced a corn-rent for the feudal lord and a corn-tithe for the priest; but neither the corn-rent nor the corn-tithe became commodities simply by being produced for others,”¹³ since in these cases there was no question of exchange. Marx himself adds for good measure that “labor is socially divided in the primitive Indian community, although the products do not thereby become commodities. Or, to take an example nearer home, labor is systematically divided in every factory, but the workers do not bring about this division by exchanging their individual products.”¹⁴ Thus we see that, far from being a universal ontological category, “congealed human labor” for Marx does not even describe the totality of conditions found on a factory floor. Let this suffice to show that OOO’s discussion of objects outside all relations in no way contravenes the Marxist principle that commodities have no value outside the social relations through which they were produced. Since there are no OOO writings on economic value as of 2017, it can safely be said to be intellectually neutral on this question.

But the Anti-Fetishist will not give up so easily, and may now try a modified, “weak” version of its criticism of OOO. For even if Marx concedes that many things exist in their own right without being commodities, he nonetheless detects the commodity at work in most of human existence. Thus, we can imagine the Anti-Fetishist speaking as follows: “OOO may have a point about the independent existence of planets, rocks, unknown species of fish, primitive barter economies, and so forth. We concede the existence of these things beyond the scope of congealed human labor. But insofar as OOO aspires to be not just an ontology of inanimate things, but also of human society, it seems ill-equipped to discuss social entities that do not ‘withdraw’ from relations with humans, and which are even constituted by these very relations. What sense would it make to speak, in OOO fashion, of a non-relational economy, a non-relational money, or non-relational textile mills?” There are two separate problems with this new Anti-Fetishist argument against OOO. The first is its philosophical clumsiness, and the second is the fact that Marx himself would disagree yet again.

The philosophical clumsiness consists in conflating two different sorts of relation or non-relation that humans can have with things. In the first sense, humans can be or fail to be ingredients of things. And here there is an obvious difference between something human-made like coats, and something non-human-made like unused minerals on a distant planet. When it comes to coats, OOO agrees with Marx – and even the Anti-Fetishists who criticize us – on the point that human social production created not only the value of these coats, but their very existence. Without human labor, there would be no coats in the world; we are happy to concede this rather commonsensical point. Human beings are ingredients in the production of coats in a way that we are not ingredients in the production of stones on distant planets where no human has ever trod.

Yet when considered in a second sense, one that is far more important for OOO, the coat and the alien minerals have precisely the same status. For no matter how they were produced, whether with or without human labor, both the coat and the minerals are now independent realities in the world that cannot be reduced to the human understanding of them, or even to the mere human use of them. Manuel DeLanda makes this point lucidly in the first pages of his book *A New Philosophy of Society*, when fending off charges that his wish to

12) Ibid.

13) Ibid.

14) Ibid., 132.

understand society apart from humans is meaningless insofar as humans are obviously a necessary ingredient of society. DeLanda's response, a model for all such cases, is that even though humans are a necessary precondition for human society, it does not follow that such society is reducible to what we know about it or to how we make use of society pre-theoretically. In short, it is perfectly plausible for OOO to speak about a non-relational economy, non-relational money, and non-relational textile mills. We do not dispute the obvious point that each of these things was constituted by relations, since the same is true even of gold (composed of atoms) and mountain ranges (composed of mountains). We simply note that just because every object has a relational backstory that tells us how it came to exist, it does not follow that this now-existent object is nothing more than its current relations with its neighboring entities.

And here once again, perhaps surprisingly to some, Marx turns out to agree with OOO. For if commodities were determined purely by their relations, then they would be equivalent to their *p r i c e*: though this is the view not of Marx, but of the "bourgeois" economists he habitually derides. When it comes to matters of value, Marx is more of a realist than these bourgeoisie, since he contends that the value of a commodity is not determined through the contingencies of the marketplace, but by how much abstract human labor is congealed in a particular object. As Marx puts it, in his typical scathing tone:

Our analysis has shown that the form of value, that is, the expression of the value of a commodity, arises from the nature of the commodity-value, as opposed to value and its magnitude arising from their mode of expression as exchange-value. This second view is the delusion both of the Mercantilists... and their antipodes, the modern bagmen of free trade... For [the free traders]... there exists neither value, nor magnitude of value, anywhere except in its expression by means of the exchange relation, that is, in the daily list of prices on the Stock Exchange.¹⁵

And even more simply, "the properties of a thing do not arise from its relations to other things, they are, on the contrary, merely activated by such relations,"¹⁶ which sounds like something taken straight from a OOO manifesto rather than from Marx. From all this it should be clear that Marx's analysis of the commodity form, and of the fetishism that misses the social component of commodities, does not conflict with OOO's insistence on the non-relational reality of objects. Since this was the main intended argument of this article, we now conclude with two closely related side-issues.

Fetishism and Formalism

It is interesting to ask about the relation between Marx's critique of "fetishism" and Kant's embrace of "formalism," the source of the latter's greatest strengths and weaknesses alike.¹⁷ It comes down to a question of whether we recognize the possibility of compound objects made up of both human and non-human elements, which Bruno Latour has helpfully termed "hybrids": for example, the ozone hole over Antarctica is to some degree the unfortunate by product of human labor, but is also a part of environing nature.¹⁸ Does Marx recognize the existence of such hybrids? A case could be made either way. In one respect, we have just heard Marx say that "the prop-

15) *Ibid.*, 152–153 (emphasis added).

16) *Ibid.*, 149.

17) For a more detailed analysis of formalism see Graham Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer: The Ethics, Aesthetics, and Metaphysics of Love* (London: Repeater, 2016).

18) Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

erties of a thing do not arise from its relations to other things, they are, on the contrary, merely activated by such relations.” But in another respect, the commodity qua commodity abstracts from all of its properties as a concrete thing, and is considered purely in terms of the quantity of socially necessary labor that was needed to produce it.

As for Kant, it is obvious that he can not recognize hybrids, given that the whole of his philosophy proceeds according to a rigid taxonomical split between just two kinds of entities: (a) rational beings, a.k.a. humans, and (b) everything else. In his ethical theory, for example, Kant’s chief negative motivation is to avoid any ethics that seeks to obtain rewards and escape punishments in this life and the next, or any ethics whose purpose is to let me sleep with a clean conscience at night, or to gain a reputation for upstanding behavior in my community. Ethical acts must be performed for their own sake, out of duty to the categorical imperative. Though Kant obviously makes no use of a Marxist terminology that did not exist during his lifetime, we could imagine Kant critiquing the “fetishism” of those who want to place ethical value in the things rather than in a purely human action regardless of consequences. This opens up Kant to the famous critique of Max Scheler, who admires Kant’s rejection of all ethical theories revolving around reward and punishment, and effectively takes the basic unit of ethics not to be I myself as a duty-bound rational creature, but rather the compound entity formed of I myself as a being who loves and the objects of my love.¹⁹ While no Scheler has emerged so far to make a similar critique of Kant’s theory of art, the same issue is found here as well.²⁰ Kant’s admirable goal is to grasp the autonomy of art from any personal preference or merely agreeable sensations in the contemplation of art, and to secure the objectivity of taste against the rampant horde of individual opinions. Yet in doing so he locates both the beautiful and the sublime entirely within the human sphere: not in the artwork, but simply in the transcendental faculty of judgment that all humans share. When some of his followers reverse this relation and find all the aesthetic action on the side of the artwork rather than the human mind, they merely join Kant in ignoring the possibility that the basic aesthetic unit is a hybrid object made up of both human and work.²¹ Formalism assumes that the human and the non-human must never be mixed in one and the same object; whether Marx’s critique of fetishism assumes the same, or opposes it directly, remains for now an open question.

Marx and Heidegger

Finally, it is worth attempting a brief sketch of the relation between Marx and Martin Heidegger, given that the latter is a key influence on OOO. Though the two are clear political opposites (the original Marxist paired with a Nazi) it is interesting that they begin their respective major works with what sound like strikingly similar themes. Marx begins *Capital* with a discussion of the difference between what he calls use-value and exchange-value: “The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value... Use-values are only realized in use or in consumption. They constitute the material content of wealth, whatever its social form may be... [By contrast,] exchange-value appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind.”²² Heidegger gives us, near the beginning of *Being and Time*, a famous distinction

19) Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); Max Scheler, “Ordo Amoris,” in *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. David Lachterman (Northwestern University Press: Evanston IL 1992), 98-135.

20) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

21) Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations of Art and Taste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

22) Marx, *Capital*, 126.

between readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). The former obviously sounds a lot like “use-value,” and presence-at-hand—which encompasses such diverse forms as perception, scientific theorization, broken equipment, interpretation, and the mere occupation of a spatio-temporal position—shares with Marx’s exchange-value the reference to “quantity.” Yet there is actually not an easy overlap between these two pairs of terms, and it is worth noting their points of difference here.

The first evident difference is that Marx starts from individuals (various use-values) and ends up with a vast social system (the exchangeability of all commodities through money), while Heidegger starts from a vast system of equipment (all ready-to-hand entities refer to each other) and ends up with a number of isolated present-at-hand entities (individuals broken off from the giant tool-system). But as I have often argued in print, this interpretation of Heidegger—which also appears to be his own self-interpretation—does not work.²³ For even though Heidegger wants to claim that ready-to-hand entities are all dissolved into a holistic tool-system while present-at-hand beings are merely derivative individuals, the opposite would be closer to the truth. When it comes to present-at-hand entities, such as images in my mind or utensils on a table, it should be clear that such entities are utterly relational: after all, to be present-at-hand is always to be present to something, whether to me or to anything else. As for the tool-beings silently and invisibly at work in the total system of equipment, it is too often forgotten that for Heidegger tools break. And there would be no possibility of anything breaking if it were really as sleekly assigned to the holistic tool-system as Heidegger claims. Rather, the function of an object in the tool-system is already an abstraction. If the roof of a factory collapses, or a fuel truck explodes, this proves the very opposite of holism: it proves, namely, that these objects had a dangerous reality that was ignored for as long as these objects functioned innocuously in a co-operative system. Yet even if we conclude, against Heidegger’s own wishes, that present-at-hand entities are inherently relational, they are still not relational in the sense of Marx’s exchange-value. The latter requires social exchange: we cannot trade with ourselves, nor even with others who have produced the same thing we ourselves have, since two corn-farmers would probably never meet to trade corn. As a result, the Marxist concept of exchange-value has profound social implications that are nowhere to be seen in Heideggerian *Vorhandenheit*, which can be found even in the most solitary cases of idle daydreamers and Robinson Crusoes.

A final point to be noted is that Heidegger remains Kantian in a way that Marx simply does not; though unlike many others, including Wesley Phillips, I think this works to Heidegger’s advantage. In the notion of an object withdrawing from any relational access, it is hard not to hear the overtones of Kant’s *Ding an sich*, the thing-in-itself that can be thought but never known. The following passage, taken from late in Heidegger’s famous book on Kant, is too often ignored: “What is the significance of the struggle initiated in German Idealism against the ‘thing in itself’ except a growing forgetfulness of what Kant had won, namely, the knowledge that the intrinsic possibility and necessity of metaphysics... are, at bottom, sustained and maintained by the original development and searching study of the problem of finitude?”²⁴ As for Marx, though he concedes more independent existence to virgin waters and forests than we find in the rather non-object-oriented Hegel, there is never the sense of a mysterious residue in things that lies beyond all approachability by human thought. If something is not a commodity, one gets the sense that Marx would qualify that statement by saying: not yet a commodity. Nonetheless, one simply cannot claim, in the manner of a number of critics of OOO, that Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism requires a philosophical anti-realism in which nothing has any reality apart from human contact with it.

23) Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

24) Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 252–253.

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