

Not Your Everyday Objects

Review: Graham Harman and Christopher Witmore,
Objects Untimely: Object-Oriented Ontology and Archaeology,
(Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 2023), 240 pages.

This is a very unusual book and it is so in several different respects. Firstly, it is co-authored and that already makes it a rare bird in contemporary philosophical output. Secondly, the author duo represent different academic disciplines. Graham Harman is a philosopher devoted to developing and promoting his own metaphysical system, which he dubbed Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), whereas Christopher Witmore is an archaeologist and classicist focused on the material heritage of Ancient Greece. It is not just the fact that the book is co-authored by people with different professional backgrounds that makes it unique, but also that both authors themselves stand apart within their own fields. With his consistent focus on creating and constantly improving his own “theory of everything” while at the same time refusing to conform to either of the dominant trends in both continental and analytical philos-

ophy, Harman is an exceptional figure in the landscape of contemporary philosophy. Also, Witmore – who displays a lot of interest in the abstract problems of methodological, philosophical and anthropological nature – is far from being a “typical” archaeologist of the day. Finally, the main topic of the book, which is on the nature and possible ways of conceptualizing time, is not often explicitly addressed in the recent literature within these fields – despite its undoubtedly fundamental significance for both philosophy and archaeology.

The structure of the book reflects the situation of its dual-authorship perfectly. Over the course of five chapters, Harman and Witmore manage to utilize all of the possible writing configurations: the first chapter is written by them both, chapters 2 and 4 are written respectively by Witmore and Harman alone, whereas chapters 3 and 5 take the form of a discussion commenting on the content of the respective previous chapters. Unlike some famous philosophical cooperations of the past, such as those between Marx and Engels or between Deleuze and Guattari – the distinct voices of Harman and Witmore can be easily recognized in this book. While both authors definitely do not speak in unison, they also neither fight nor contend with each other. They share some crucial general assumptions regarding the discussed topic as they both reject the intuitive view of pre-relativistic physics, expressed most clearly by Kant, according to who time and space are empty “containers” constituting a fixed and unchanging stage on which the spectacle of being takes place. Instead, Harman and Witmore propose a revolutionary change in thinking about time and its relation to objects. The relation in question gets reversed, they reject the view that objects are “immersed” in time which itself “precedes” them as an empty and indifferent container. For them it is exactly the other way round: objects are primary to time and in various ways they are shaping the latter. “Time is generated by objects” (viii, 1), as they openly claim. As a consequence, Harman and Witmore reject the Newtonian idea of time as a linear progression and replace it with various other conceptions, such as percolating temporality, epochal time, retroactive time, topological time and others which I will address later.

The challenge taken by this book is undoubtedly a serious one and the authors are fully aware of it. Borrowing the adverb “untimely” from the title of the famous collection of essays by Nietzsche (of which the most famous one is devoted to history), the authors hint at their general position being at odds with the current mainstream trends

in their disciplines and in the humanities in general. Archaeology, as Witmore sees it, has been predominantly conceived of as a study of human past through its material remains. This view, according to him, is wrong for many different reasons. It downplays the role of actual objects that archaeologists discover and study. These objects are not just second-rate evidence allowing for the verification of our knowledge of the past, which is predominantly based on written sources. Instead, they deserve interest in and of themselves as objects belonging to the present time that somehow contains other temporal dimensions. Moreover, the traditional approach tends to neglect the non-human activities, such as formation, entropy, or accretion (4), whereas Witmore claims they should be taken into account in the wider picture of new archaeology.

For Harman, this book is another episode in his long crusade to defend objects in philosophy. Since his first book¹ he has constantly promoted his own highly abstract ontological system which seems a quite unusual goal for a contemporary philosopher. Drawing on Aristotle, Husserl, Heidegger, Latour, and others, he argues that objects should constitute the central category of philosophy. Objects, according to Harman, have been subjected to two opposite forms of repression in the philosophical tradition. On the one hand, objects have been subjected to “undermining” which in Harman’s terminology means that for some philosophers (Nietzsche, Deleuze and other materialists, among others), there is a tendency to reduce concrete and discrete objects to some “primordial” continuous reality, be it matter or “flux,” as in case of the Deleuzians. On the other hand, objects have been “overmined” in the philosophical tradition, by which Harman understands them as being “dissolved” into operations of the human cognitive apparatus and consciousness, such as in case of empiricism, idealism and Kantianism. Accordingly, Harman’s OOO has always been directed against two enemies: materialism and anthropocentrism in all their many and varied forms.

While Harman used to identify his position with the Speculative Realism movement during the peak of its popularity around 2010, his idea of an object is clearly far from commonsensical realism. According to him, everything that exists is an object: living creatures, inanimate things, abstract or imaginary entities, aggregates, and social collectives. All these objects share a common ontological structure which is

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

derivative from two dualisms or “rifts.” The first of these rifts stretches between the “real” (which here stands for “withdrawn from any relation”) and the “relational” (or “sensual”). The second polarity stretches between objects and qualities. By crossing these dualisms Harman constructs a fourfold model that could be used to characterize every single object in the universe. The model contains four “poles”: real object (RO), sensual object (SO), real qualities (RQ), and sensual qualities (SQ). The crucial and most ingenious part of Harman’s model consists in the interactions between these poles and it is here that we find the core of his conception of time. Time is one of four so-called tensions, or interactions, (along with space, and things Harman calls “essence” and “eidos”). Time comes into being “between” the SO and SQ poles, which means it is the effect of the tension between a sensual (as opposed to real) object and its sensual qualities: “temporality is the play of objects and qualities through which everything, something or nothing can occur” (101). Or, in other words, “what we call time is simply the surface phenomenon of a durable sensual object with varying accidental qualities” (167). According to Harman, in order to conceptualize time we need both something stable and something ephemeral, so the pair of SO and SQ fits better for that purpose than the Bergsonian idea of flow or Deleuzian concept of flux which do not provide the solid element against which the flow could be assessed.

By putting time entirely on the “sensual” side of the sensual versus real rift within objects, Harman places it on the surface of reality. Time does not belong to the “inner,” withdrawn and inaccessible “real” level of things, on the contrary, it occurs between the relational, sensual objects. As the authors declare on the first page of the Preface, “against the current tendency to treat time as deep, this book articulates a time that is counterintuitively superficial” (viii). This, however, does not imply that Harman and Witmore attach little importance to time. Actually, OOO admits that time is required for anything to happen: “temporality is the play of objects and qualities through which everything, something, or nothing can occur” (101). This is possible due to the fact that, despite their withdrawn nature, real objects are not completely indifferent to time. This is probably one of the most counterintuitive and difficult to grasp, yet also most interesting parts of Harman’s theory. Real objects cannot make direct contact with each other. It is, however, possible that they somehow interact through the mediation of the sensual realm: “in the sensual realm, a real object makes contact with the accidental configurations and adumbrations of other things” (102). While in most instances the surface

interactions of sensual objects and qualities do not interfere with their hidden real cores, there are cases where such an interplay takes place. But how can it be explained in the light of the assumption that real objects are completely withdrawn?

Harman's move here could be seen as a way to make use (an implicit one, though) of Heidegger's notion of *Ereignis*, a concept later re-modelled by the poststructuralists into the category of "event" (*l'événement*), as seen in Foucault, Deleuze, and Badiou among others. Thus, he draws a distinction between "empty" time periods, and "events" that are the times of special intensity. The latter take place when "the sensual interaction leads to a momentary bridge between one real object and another, which come together and form a new object (an 'event' is just another object, however transient)" (102). This is how significant changes come into being. These changes, whether global or local, follow the same ontological pattern. Harman refers to all sensual relations as perceptions: "all relation is perception, even if not 'consciously' so" (123). This terminology, awkward as it may seem to newcomers, is consistent with the unconventional interpretations of Husserl and Heidegger developed by Harman in his first two books². In *Tool-Being*, Harman extended the "tool-analysis" presented by Heidegger in *Being in Time* so that it would apply to every relation, not just to the actions of *Dasein*. In *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, he provided a similar extension to phenomenological theory of perception. In short, according to Harman, a book lying on a table "perceives" that table in that it makes contact with some of the table's features while the others are inaccessible to it. This situation is equalled to human sensory perception described in a phenomenological way, where the subject perceives just one aspect or an adumbration of the object, while the rest remains unseen. Now, these kinds of relations according to Harman may turn out in two different ways. In most cases, their aftermath is limited to the surface level of the sensual (SO-SR). Only in some special cases the surface effects "retroactively" alter the underlying real object. These are the significant moments in time and history that could be conceived of as events or *Ereignisse* (even though Harman does not employ the latter term).

While in his earlier books Harman tended to stress the anti-anthropocentric direction of OOO (it was meant to correct the anthropocentric biases of both herme-

2) Harman, *The Tool-Being*; Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2005).

neutics and phenomenology), this tendency is much less visible in *Objects Untimely*. Abolishing the difference between human perception and relations between inanimate objects may, after all, lead both to depriving humans of their uniqueness as well as, inversely, to the anthropomorphizing of non-human objects and actions. Interestingly, Harman's position seems to gradually veer from one side of that dichotomy to the opposite. Already in *The Quadruple Object*³ from 2011, he declared sympathy toward panpsychism and in the recent book he often uses psychological or human-centered examples to explain the general ontological case of "deep time" that retroactively changes the hidden real object involved. One such example is taken from Harman's favorite stories of H.P. Lovecraft,⁴ "in which characters witness such abominable cosmic monstrosities that they frequently end their days as gibbering madmen in an asylum" (123). Other, less disturbing, examples involve the usage of metaphors and the aesthetic experiences. Such situations may lead to complicated ontological predicaments, as in the case of famous Homer's expression "wine-dark sea." When we read it, says Harman, "the wine-qualities remain accessible, but we do not know what a wine-like sea would be" (123). That is why "aesthetic experience ... creates a rift between objects and their qualities" (123). Here, the real object "vanishes beyond access," yet its qualities remain accessible. But since according to Harman's Aristotelian-based ontological framework, no qualities may exist in detachment from any object, the wine-qualities need an object to sit upon. The missing object is the very perceiver involved: "the perceiver becomes a kind of method actor performing the wine-dark qualities" (123). And why exactly? "Because there is no alternative," answers Harman, displaying his predilection for deductive, speculative reasonings based on abstract principles and models. Regardless of the plausibility of this argumentation, it is important for grasping Harman's idea of time. It is precisely the model of aesthetic experience that Harman uses to explain the cases of "deep" or "eventual" time: this is how "temporal surface changes lead intermittently to changes on the underlying chessboard" (123). Explaining significant events and historical

3) Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2011).

4) Harman published a whole book on Lovecraft in which he aimed to align this author's horror imagery with OOO, see Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2012).

breakthroughs with this model could be seen as contradictory to Harman's earlier principle of "democracy of objects." Even if all objects have the same ontological footing, they may vary in regards to their capability for entering into aesthetic-like relations. And it seems quite uncontroversial that humans, as beings embedded in culture, are more likely to trigger and experience transforming aesthetic experiences than random inanimate beings or animals. Therefore, such an event centered idea of time seems to somehow bring back the anthropocentric claim that humans play the leading role on the stage of history.

While Harman and Witmore rarely enter into strong controversies in this book, they sometimes stick to their own opinions. One such moment occurs in their discussion of different ways of conceptualizing temporality in a nonlinear way. Among others, they are considering concepts of percolating temporality and topological temporality, both adopted from Michel Serres. Witmore opts for percolating time, as he sees it fit for the purposes of new archaeology: "marked by periods of calm, thunderous accelerations, and countercurrents and eddies, time 'percolates.' What might be very distant in linear time can be quite proximate from the standpoint of percolating time" (15). Elsewhere he explains that time as percolation is "a time that pools in reservoirs or settles in pockets, filters and siphons off, accelerates in bursts and creeps slowly, ruptures and turns back within eddies of novelty and repetition" (57). He uses the example of an ancient tomb found near Kazarma, where the relics of Mycenae civilization coexist with the remains of later cultures and with recent objects: "At Mycenae countercurrents or eddies form within and between the room, the items, the bowl, its contents, the soil that formerly held them, and the archaeologists who worked to excavate them" (56). One of the reasons that make the concept of percolation appealing to Witmore is the way it conveys the sense of vigor and energy without the need of assuming a metaphysical flux in a Bergsonian or Deleuzian fashion: "for me percolation need not imply some primordial flux somehow deeper or separate from actual objects. Rather, if we take time to be the vigor within and between things, we might understand percolation as a way of expressing the sum of these vigors" (62–3).

Harman, on the other hand, focuses on the idea of topological time, which rests upon formal similarities between objects, regardless their distance in the "linear" time. This is very much in line with his general predilection for the notion of form. OOO's central category of "object" is clearly modelled after Aristotle's notion of "substance,"

yet Harman, unlike Aristotle, interprets the substance-matter duality in a radically asymmetrical way. “I am fascinated with the movement, endurance, and translation of forms,” he declares. He goes as far as to completely downplay the category of matter: “if you are working on things, you are working on forms of these things,” he claims, adding that “there has never been such thing as matter” (145). Accordingly, in topological time “points far apart on the calendar are brought close together through formal similarities” (166), so that “topology can shrink time in this way, by eliminating the calendar distance between medieval knights and two drunk teenagers in the 1950s playing a duel of ‘chicken’” (71). Topology can also have the opposite effect and “emphasize vast temporal differences between apparently coexisting elements” (71). To illustrate this, Harman recalls Serres’ example of a modern car as an assemblage of technologies dating from the earliest prehistory (fire), late Neolithic (wheel), nineteenth century (pistons), and twentieth century (computers, airbags). Eventually, the discussion comes to the conclusion that percolating and topological conceptions of time are not mutually exclusive but complementary as two ways to oppose a linear time: “percolation upsets linear time primarily by letting it move both forwards and backwards, while topological time does it in a different way, by increasing or decreasing temporal distance” (71), as Harman puts it.

The discussion outlined above is symptomatic of a certain feature of this book which could be described as an abundance of overly theoretical and abstract considerations. It seems somewhat paradoxical that a book which claims to bring attention to objects conceived as something concrete and finite, turns out to focus for the most part on highly general concepts and metaphors. At times, this style gives the impression of a strange match between analytical philosophy and post-structuralist metaphysics where technical meticulousness about details meets broad and underdefined ontological abstractions. But technical, abstract, and general considerations are of course not alien to philosophy and as such they are not something to be criticized. Also, it should be stressed that both authors use a lot of specific examples. In the case of Witmore, they usually relate to the Ancient Greek culture and the ways it is still blended into the landscape of contemporary Peloponnese (a topic to which he devoted a separate book)⁵. Harman’s examples are, as usually in his books, a motley crew of

5) Christopher Witmore, *Old lands: A Chorography of the Eastern Peloponnese* (London: Routledge, 2020).

diverse illustrations, citations, and anecdotes along with many references to philosophical literature. What may be inquired about here, though, is the relation between the theory and these examples. Do we get to know something new about Ancient Greece due to the bold theoretical shifts proposed by the authors? Do we understand better the legacy of Greek culture and its significance for the contemporary world due to these new frameworks? Or does the Greek world serve here just as a more or less random example of purely theoretical efforts? And finally, what is the proper status of a theory in general – should it help us to understand reality (or its parts), or rather should it be a detached and self-centered construction meant to challenge the previous paradigms and get ahead of them?

The object-oriented approach adopted by the authors may seem so detached and abstract also because of the apparent lack of a normative component. OOO does not give us clear hints as to the value of the objects it aims to apprehend. Is there anything special about Greek culture or civilization? Why should we (or should we not) care about it today? To put it more generally: does the ontology developed by the authors have any implications for ethics, axiology, philosophy as a way of life, or general philosophy of culture? While at first glance it may seem that OOO is rather sterile in these departments, but in fact some of the most intriguing parts of the book consist of the strong normative claims made by both authors. One such opinion involves their take on egalitarianism, an idea rarely undermined in contemporary humanities. “We inhabit an intellectual moment in which egalitarian sentiment can seemingly do no wrong” (91), notes Harman. Admitting that this approach is appealing politically, he questions its cultural variant: “one result is that high culture hardly exists anymore ... everyone in academia seems to be working on popular culture, on comic books rather than epic poetry” (91). He shrugs of this situation with a succinct “fair enough” while bitterly noting anyway that “at the end of the day, most people are excluded in any area where we look,” also at the universities: “only a small percentage of applicants are admitted to Harvard or Princeton” (91). Questioning the dogma of egalitarianism allows the authors to put into doubt the necessity of the more recent shift from the heroic archaeology (or history) of the winners to the “stories of the excluded/unheard.” We should not “be so quick to assume that the ‘heroic’ approach is so rightfully dead that it can never rise again,” because “it probably will; most things return someday, in suitably altered form,” claims Harman. Later he develops it in a yet more inter-

esting manner: “the reason for studying classic figures ... is not to learn the truth, but to come to grips with the basic elements from which new classics might be forged” (131). Like Foucault, Harman identifies the desperate search for truth with politics and power struggle, but unlike the author of *Discipline and Punish*, he would like to develop and keep the humanities away from it while pursuing “a theory based on our permanent political ignorance” (85). His thinking is driven not by the reactionary will to re-enact the past, but by the recognition that the past will eventually return somehow anyway, however in an altered shape, so we better get acquainted with it. A similar idea is reflected in Witmore’s intriguing question: “who is to say that future generations won’t identify with the heroic in confronting the colossal challenges all around us that we must inevitably face?” (91). One could only wish he had developed it by providing some interpretation of contemporary significance of Greek heritage.

Another interesting and original point of a normative kind could be subsumed under the category of ethics of a good life or philosophy as a way of living. From the supposition that time is a surface phenomenon that is ontologically secondary to “sensual” and “real” objects, Harman (again giving up on his earlier contempt for the purely human matters), draws an existential lesson on “a renewed sense of human control over time” (128). It is explained with the example of himself as a person that deliberately moves to new flats often and writes many books. These experiences allow him to gain a “renewed sense of human control over time.” Splitting, in a Whiteheadian manner, the “uninterrupted continuum” into many “small-scale epochs” turns out to be a way to make “life feel longer,” as one “can undergo metamorphoses more frequently, with each one building on its predecessors” (here we see again the idea of cyclical time in another disguise). He even makes a confession that until recently he had been writing “a summary at the end of every month of all the good and bad things that had happened, and every new person he had met.” This existential exercise allowed him to avoid the dreadful experience of “where did the years go?” (128), supposedly making life better and calmer. Given Harman’s huge textual output, this ethics of work and productivity seems to be effective.

It is not easy to explicitly evaluate *Objects Untimely*. It is by no means an effortless read, despite its relatively short length. It is easy to get lost in the technical considerations, metaphors, references, polemics, abrupt changes of subject, and the sheer number and variety of problems addressed. The double authorship does not make

things easier, forcing the reader to adjust to two different voices at once. The presented concepts, metaphors, points, and opinions raise all kinds of doubts and questions, most of which I have not even managed to mention in this review. And all that investment does not even pay back with any immediate knowledge surge, as this is not a book to learn from. Yet at the same time, and often for the same reasons, it is an extremely thought provoking, intense, and inspiring read. I am sure that it may prove so to many different groups of readers. I would even go so far as to say that everyone who is actively interested in the humanities today will find something interesting here for themselves. Harman and Witmore make all sorts of fresh comments on the state and methods of contemporary academia while offering a very original take on the basic indispensable problems of time and history in the even more unique form of a dialogue between a philosopher and an archaeologist.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.