

- Peter Wolfendale (with a postscript by Ray Brassier), *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes*, UK: Urbanomic, 2014, 458 pp.

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This book analyses Graham Harman's understanding of metaphysics and the right path that Speculative Realism (SR) is required to take. Peter Wolfendale's story of writing this book is no less speculative and representative of new-wave philosophy than is SR itself. A polemical work, it focuses mainly on Harman's version of Object-Oriented Philosophy (OOP) as well upon Harman himself, Wolfendale, and Martin Heidegger (d. 1976). Along with what SR actually means, they seem to disagree strongly on what Heidegger's philosophy actually says. The birth of this polemic in the blogging world attracted a great deal attention, as seen by the different means of argumentation and debate observed in the ensuing article and blogging forms.<sup>1</sup> The discussions deal with a wide range of topics that will attract attention of those dealing with the contemporary analytical and phenomenological traditions of mind, ontology, and language.

In general, OOP is viewed as a subtitle of SR. Here, it may be useful to give a brief introduction to SR, the so-called speculative turn that claims to go beyond the limits of critical and linguistic turns. This ability is critical to re-discovering the links between thinking and things. An April 2007 conference held at the University of London's Goldsmiths College is generally recognized as the beginning of a particular version of this movement against the post-Kantian stance that defends a human being's capability to metaphysical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> The SR movement refers to idealist theories, such as those of Kant and Husserl, as *correlationist*, for they necessarily link thinking and being and deny that human beings can be thought of in any way independent of subjective apprehension. Thus correlationism is a hindrance on the way to a proper realism.<sup>3</sup> Concerning this particular problematic, both Wolfendale and Harman support realism.

On the other hand, OOP goes back to Graham Harman's 1999 doctoral dissertation *Tool-Being: Elements in a Theory of Objects*. His approach to ontology and object, and more generally to metaphysics, has become a matter of debate.

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DOI: dx.doi.org/10.12658/human.society.5.10.D0120

1 Wolfendale's criticism first emerged as notes in his blog, <https://deontologistics.wordpress.com/commentary/>, which he subsequently developed into an article [http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1181229/20126263/1346713221483/Noumenons+New+Clothes\\_Pt1\\_Wolfendale.pdf?token=MYVcMZQNjebDBDkfcldl7bqamiSw%3D](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1181229/20126263/1346713221483/Noumenons+New+Clothes_Pt1_Wolfendale.pdf?token=MYVcMZQNjebDBDkfcldl7bqamiSw%3D). The second part and the enlarged version of the article were then published as a book.

2 The conference, moderated by Alberto Toscano of Goldsmiths College, included presentations by Ray Brassier of the American University of Beirut (then at Middlesex University), Iain Hamilton Grant of the University of the West of England, Graham Harman of the American University in Cairo, and Quentin Meillassoux of the École Normale Supérieure in Paris.

3 Kevin R. Lewis, "Correlationism and the Transition from Transcendental Idealism to Transcendental Realism" accessed: [https://www.academia.edu/7674869/Correlationism\\_and\\_the\\_Transition\\_from\\_Transcendental\\_Idealism\\_to\\_Transcendental\\_Realism](https://www.academia.edu/7674869/Correlationism_and_the_Transition_from_Transcendental_Idealism_to_Transcendental_Realism) (10 Jan. 2016).

Woldendale's book opens with Harman's metaphysics, its justification, and underlying conceptual themes to provide a background for his position. Central to Harman's philosophy are the notions of withdrawal as well as fourfold and vicarious causation, both of which frame the first chapter. The second chapter elaborates upon these notions, and chapter three evaluates such concepts as representation, quality, and relation together with claims about objects, metaphysics, and meaning. In these first chapters, the author not only tries to bring out the problem with Harman's metaphysics, but also points to the issues related to ontological liberalism. In his opinion, the main problem with Harman's equation of objects (i.e. saying that everything is an object, which Wolfendale calls *flat ontology*) is that the object is regarded as such a comprehensive concept that it becomes mystical and therefore difficult to define and describe.

Along with asking methodological and meta-philosophical questions on how to do philosophy, the book also tackles its history. In the fourth chapter, the author focuses on claims about the human incapacity to know things as they are, namely, Kant and the correlationism that developed after his criticism of metaphysics. Woldendale's large spectrum of readings enables him to evaluate meta-philosophical and historical questions and bring together contemporary questions and matters about early modern history from the philosophy of analytical and continental sides. The fourth chapter presents what Harman calls a *hyperbolic reading*<sup>4</sup> of his own theory by Wolfendale, in which he wants to show how Harman's critical method does not work for his theory, mainly due to the complex nature of Harman's ontology.

As mentioned above, a core criticism of Harman's OOP is that the notion of object is too vague to play an explanatory role. This is interesting, especially when we remember Harman's reason for proposing his studies on *object*: that it needs to be defined further. Wolfendale claims that Harman's "object" is too comprehensive: When everything is regarded as object, it is difficult to differentiate one from another. Another feature of this is that a flat-ontology turns a human being into just another object, one that is exactly the same as all other objects. Wolfendale summarizes this ontology by explaining Harman's volcanic metaphor uses as such.<sup>5</sup>

[...] 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 will always be a tourist. [...] You will never see the real island. [...] You might get the occasional taste of it [...] but that is all you will ever get. (pp. 11-2)

- 4 In the previously mentioned article, Wolfendale summarises the hyperbolic readings of philosophies in the following manner: We first imagine that at some point in the future, the philosophy being discussed here became strong enough to attain a dominant position. In that future, what problems have been and remain to be solved? Thus, we are required to think what the missing issues might be in such a future world.
- 5 Harman's volcano metaphor is summarised: "The reality of things consists in their molten cores, the liquid specificities of which withdraw behind a sensual crust of visible features. ... the substantial magma at the heart of every entity is forever taped 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 the faultlines in its phenomenal facade, but only catch it as it cools, already crystallising into new sensual continents. The lava itself is nowhere to be found." (NNC, p. 11)

An important concept to explain disconnectedness is withdrawal. Given that real objects cannot affect each other (p. 14), it is very hard to account for our knowledge of real things. This point also hints at why correlationist charges have been levelled against Harman's metaphysics (Wolfendale calls this world *noumenal cosmology*) and why Wolfendale reads this object-orientedness as *noumen's return*. Even Harman admits this slight tendency toward correlationism despite, at the same time, regarding his thought as a criticism of the movement. Wolfendale interprets this tension in support of correlationism to mean that Harman is merely consolidating its central features instead of critiquing it.<sup>6</sup>

However, more will be revealed by analysing the object itself in this two-dimensional world of the sensual and the real. We are in the real world, as thus everything that affects us, namely, everything that happens in the world, belongs to this world (NNC, p. 13). But objects are different from their qualities. Introducing the *object/quality* distinction to the *real/sensual* distinction results in four poles and two relation areas: *fusions* and *fissions*. To give some examples, the relation between a sensual object and sensual qualities refer to *time*, whereas the relation between the sensual object and its real qualities is what Husserl calls *eidōs*. Similarly, *space* and *essence*, in the sense that Zubiri uses these terms, are defined. By using the object-qualities/real-sensual fourfold, Harman seeks to define object and categories. The relation between objects becomes an essential part of this explanation. But Wolfendale finds a problem here:

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 every other by an honour guard of distinct sensual objects, forever precluding access to it, at least by default." (p. 15)

This criticism concerns connectivity. This disconnectedness, when carried over into epistemology, might imply a similar disconnectedness between Kant's *noumen* and *phenomen*. As Harman does not privilege human knowledge, the discussion is conducted on the level of objects. Remembering how Harman established his cosmology of disconnected islands, the question here also concerns how objects affect each other and are, in turn, internally affected.

The author assigns causation as the third notion that describes Harman's metaphysics. Genuine change occurs when internal change in a real object is connected to its qualities while regenerating its essence (p. 24). The affected object does not see the affecting one. The object's disconnectedness is also related to Harman's peculiar reading of Heidegger, which is another important matter of criticism for Wolfendale. Harman's Heidegger lacks an important central notion: human *Dasein*. Remembering that Harman's flat ontology places human beings in a line beside other objects, he reads Heidegger with a similar vision.

Another problem with this reading is that Harman regards the distinction between the ontological and the ontic as equivalent to that between the ready-to-hand and the present-

6 "Noumen's New Clothes", p. 293, accessed: [http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1181229/20126263/1346713221483/Noumenons+New+Clothes\\_Pt1\\_Wolfendale.pdf?token=MYVcMZQNjebDBDKfcd17bqami5w%3D](http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/1181229/20126263/1346713221483/Noumenons+New+Clothes_Pt1_Wolfendale.pdf?token=MYVcMZQNjebDBDKfcd17bqami5w%3D) (2 Jan. 2016).

at-hand. Yet another issue is Harman's claim that the world should not be understood as a phenomenological horizon. In short, he seems to tailor Heidegger's theory to fit his own vision of metaphysics. And it is this distortion, in particular Harman's exclusion of the human *Dasein* from Heidegger's metaphysics, that Wolfendale does not welcome.

To summarize, we can regard the conversation between Wolfendale and Harman as two attempts to re-claim realism and to define which path it is supposed to take in the future. Although both men oppose all correlationist explanations of the world, they treat individuality as an important metaphysical topic, tend toward panpsychism<sup>7</sup>, and are open to the possibility for consciousness in other things as well as in human beings. Most importantly, they believe in the possibility and the necessity of realism and assert that it is essential if metaphysics is to be pursued (p. 35).

Apart from the forced complexity of his language and style, Wolfendale's is a book full of interesting ideas, intriguing discussions on the methodology of philosophy, and even on philosophy itself. Although it seems to focus on Harman's ontology, in reality it takes the reader on a journey that goes beyond his rival's ideas.

7 The claim that everything material has an element of individual consciousness. Modern history of the term goes back to Baruch Spinoza (1632-77) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). The movement is related to Jamesian and Russelian monism historically, and some discuss neutral monism entails panpsychism. Thanks to Galen Strawson's works, panpsychism recently has a group of defenders among young scholars as well. Accessed: Seager, William and Allen-Hermanson, Sean, "Panpsychism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/panpsychism/>>. For a list of related works, see: <http://philpapers.org/browse/panpsychism/> (15 Jan.2016).