

Beyond Epistemic Paranoia: Graham Harman and the Rise of Object-Oriented Social Theory

Thiago Pinho

Department of Sociology
Federal University of Bahia
40110-100, Salvador, Brazil
Email: pinho.thiago@hotmail.com

Abstract:

If someone asks a classical Social Theorist “how do you define your field of research?”, he will probably get a flood of answers, with various shades, colors and even smells, but there is always something on the horizon, an insistent and unavoidable trace. Like any member of the humanities, he is supposed to study the behavior of humans and anything associated with them, right? So we are supposed to study things like language, culture, ideology, power, class, gender, and so on. It does not matter if you are a structuralist, pragmatist, or postmodernist, it does not even matter your background methodological choices, since there is always a humanism lurking in the epistemic shadows. The “human” in Social Theory, therefore, is not just a moving piece of matter, a simple primate walking around with its complex signs, but a transcendental structure, a kind of persistent and dangerous matrix, at least when used without caution. The aim of this essay is to map this displacement, its ups and downs, as well as to suggest all its unexplored contours, while bringing in the Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) of the American philosopher Graham Harman as a possible way out of what we call here “epistemic paranoia”.

Keywords: Object-Oriented Ontology, Graham Harman, Social Theory, Posthumanism

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to understand one of the possible implications of Graham Harman’s thinking, and object-oriented ontology, in the field of Social Theory, contrasted with what we might call its more classical tendency. If one asks a classical Social Theorist “how do you define your field of research?” one will probably get a flood of answers, with various shades, colors and even smells, but there is something always on the horizon, an insistent and unavoidable feature. Like any member of the humanities, we are supposed to study the behavior of humans and anything associated with them, right? So, we are supposed to study things like language, culture, ideology, power, class, gender, and so on. It does not matter if you are a structuralist, pragmatist, or postmodernist, it does not even matter your background methodological choices, since there is always a humanism lurking in the epistemic shadows. The “human” in Social Theory, therefore, is not just a moving piece of matter, a simple primate

walking around with its complex signs, but a transcendentalist structure, a kind of persistent and dangerous matrix, at least when used without caution. When a social theorist speaks of *human acquisition* (Gasset 1963), *labor* (Marx 1955), *individual/society* (Durkheim 1982), *historical sciences/natural sciences* (Freund 1968), *structuration theory* (Giddens 1963), *society/community* (Adorno 2002), *habitus/campus* (Bourdieu 1991), they all maintain the same old premise, i.e., they all preserve the same transcendentalist structure in their approaches, especially the most famous transcendental¹ created by the humans: the *Human*.

The key point of this essay involves simple questions, bordering on the obvious: a) Can Harman and his Object-Oriented Ontology offer an interesting way out of the epistemic dilemmas facing the humanities? b) Is a human science possible where the *Human is* no longer the star of the show, with its suffocating monopoly of meaning, but a simple character like any other? No doubt, these questions will hardly be answered in these lines, but at least it is possible to extract from them some of the distant aroma of a possible Object-Oriented Social Theory, a term suggested by Harman himself in his book “Immaterialism” (2017).

What are transcendental sciences?

Although he emerged from phenomenology, and studies on Heidegger, with his *Tool Being*, written in 2002, Harman cannot be framed in the phenomenological field, although it is tempting to follow that reasoning, as many do (Sparrow 2014). His theory, and OOO itself, presents critiques to this tradition of thought and to what Meillassoux (2013) called *correlationalism*², an approach that considers the boundary between subject (human) and world as something fragile, often even non-existent, making it impossible to understand reality without talking about a subject always on the scene, almost as a necessary condition of access to the world. In this sense, instead of choosing an *intersubjectivity*, an obvious result of the phenomenological and pragmatic influence of authors like Schütz, Goffman, Garfinkel, Bourdieu, Giddens, Boltanski and others, Harman proposes an *interobjectivity*³, a kind of approach that displaces the human horizon in favor of a *strange realism*, as he himself suggested in one of his books. This means that not only humans interact with things, which is obvious in most Social Theory, but also things themselves interact with each other, in an interesting rhythm of agency. Of course, in the face of this ontological *decentering*, and the critique of what Whitehead (1978) called the *bifurcation of nature*, a question springs from the horizon: if meaning is not only in what humans do, think, and speak, that is, if we are here far beyond the anthropocentric projections typical of a *philosophy of the subject* that runs through the field of Social Theories, with emphasis on Weber himself, what other parameters can be discovered? And, above all, what is the epistemic path that helps us follow this interobjective journey?

As a representative of *post-humanism* and, therefore, not distancing himself from Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, OOO dives headfirst into reality as such, albeit indirectly, as will become clear shortly. It does not matter whether we talk about *real objects* (Harman, 2012),

hyperobjects (Morton 2013), *stubborn objects* (Whitehead 1978) or *decentered objects* (Bryant 2011), since in this universe something always escapes, compromising at the same time the convenient and transcendental dimension of our comprehensive arrangements, whether theoretical or practical. This approach further reinforces its *realist* label, reserving to the human only a supporting role, a negotiator, alongside any other instance, be it real or imaginary, what has been called by Manuel DeLanda (2012) a *flat ontology*. Everything is “on equal footing” (DeLanda and Harman 2017, 22), whether a person or a chair, at least in ontological terms, what sociologist Frédéric Vandenberghe (2013) calls a *two-dimensional view*. Of course, political or ethical distinctions (distinctions *a posteriori*) are still allowed, a detail that goes unnoticed by OOO critics. They disregard this aspect, this basic boundary between ontology and politics or ontology and ethics, by imagining everything as a simple undifferentiated goo of equivalent elements. Undoubtedly, all things are valid from an ontological criterion, insofar as they participate in the definition of what is real, presenting an agency and a creativity that cannot be limited only to humans and their precious transcendentals (language, soul, rationality, work, etc.), but this does not mean the non-existence of boundaries or other types of a *posteriori* distinctions. In other words, everything is real, but not everything is real in the same way (Harman, 2010).

Another interesting detail neglected by critics is the fact that OOO does not refuse the human as an important vector of meaning, but only displaces its ontological monopoly and its *transcendentalism*. Humans cannot be seen as a necessary matrix of meaning hidden in the depths of reality, connecting the whole world within a predictable and convenient flow of experiences⁴, but rather as negotiating elements in a complex flow of objects. This means, in a very Goffmanian way, that the members of our species continue to act on the stage of life, so to speak, although no longer as directors of the play, but as actors alongside many others, including curtains, lights, figures, ghosts, speakers, or the city of São Paulo. “Who commands the play, then?” “If the human is no longer the master signifier, the transcendental of the transcendentals, who takes the role?” You ask, probably curious after so many speculative flights. That is exactly the point... for OOO no one controls the theater of life, no transcendental takes over and determines the contours of what exists, not even the famous *transcendental man* with all his overly modern pretension. This does not mean that structures and systems cease to exist, since they are important as epistemic resources for understanding the world, or even as concrete features on the surface of reality itself. What they in fact lose are their *a priori* profiles, beyond the ontological monopoly they once claimed for themselves, being now nothing more than provisional effects of a complex and *a posteriori* network of experiences. In other words, they cease to be transcendental carcasses covering every inch of the world and become epistemic tools or, at most, transient, small ontological elements, thus escaping the dangers of an *ontotheology*. Faced with this anti-copernican reasoning, at the limits of the aesthetic itself, two reactions may spring from our reader, depending on your type of contact with Social Theory: 1) If you are someone more classical, like Marx or a representative of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Erich Fromm), you

will probably argue that all this discussion about the de-centering of the human is, at the very least, something strange or even something dangerous that needs to be avoided at all costs⁵. Thanks to this line of interpretation, you can undoubtedly claim: “Maybe OOO is just an ideology, that is, a new form of objectification in which humans lose centrality and recognition and collapse into some alienated register of some sort, nothing more than a new kind of fetishism.” 2) But if you happen to be a weirder, vitalist Social Theorist, like Bruno Latour (2005), Tim Ingold (2011), Donna Haraway (2008), Mol and Law (1994), and many others, you may end up seeing this post-humanist perspective in a good light, even if you do not agree with all their metaphysical construct. It is okay if you are not so comfortable with Graham Harman’s *substantialism* and his constant return to Aristotle, or if you have created some resistance to Levi Bryant’s Lacanianism and his reconstruction of the famous *four discourses*, or even if you are not so attuned to Timothy Morton’s quantum approaches, but despite all these obstacles OOO can be a great ally in Contemporary Social Theory, as I intend to suggest throughout these pages. In this way, we can group all these people under one interesting umbrella, even if they do not feel very comfortable under it, wishing for their own umbrellas. At least for now, how about calling them all *posthumanists* (Haraway 2008)? This term is a bit loose and generic, I know, but it may help us clarify the contours of our initial question. In other words, “the thread that runs throughout the work of these thinkers is a profound overthrow of the human” (Bryant 2011, 28).

We need to keep in mind that in *posthumanism*⁶, as in OOO, the exclusion of the *transcendental man*, and its suffocating centrality, is not replaced by other transcendentals, such as *nature*, *God* (occasionalism), *body*, *class*, *language*, etc., but rather by a completely new opening on the horizon, as we can notice right from the beginning. The ontological and epistemic fields become a little more flexible, a kind of open space, rich and full of possibilities. Here, in this contingency-laden soil, we are far beyond *Kantian transcendentalism* and its philosophy of the subject, at least in the philosophical universe, since in Social Theory the trap of the Königsberg philosopher is deeper and more dangerous than it seems, mainly because of the prestige and comfort it offers to its most engaged members. Social Theory still cultivates a transcendentalist form of reasoning, whether in its structural, materialist, and postmodern approaches, or even in certain poststructural versions of decoloniality, such as those mixed with orthodox Marxism and its conception of ideology as bad consciousness. As Latour once said, we still live with *transcendental sciences* (Latour 1991, 70) wandering around without anyone noticing, defining at the same time our own field of operation and even the parameters that define our critical thinking. This transcendentalist form in Social Theory “[...] must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of center” (Derrida 1978, 27), as it reveals at every step a new master signifier (Žižek 1992) monopolizing the entire ontological realm, as if there were no autonomy left in anything beyond its own borders. In other words, according to OOO and posthumanists this transcendentalism, especially *transcendental man*, is the opposite of *a democracy of objects* (Bryant 2011), being much more of a dictatorship, so to speak.

According to Latour, this *transcendentalism* wishes

To put everything into nothing, to deduce everything from almost nothing, to place in hierarchies, to command and obey, to be deep or superior, to collect objects and force them into a tiny space, be they subjects, signifiers, classes, gods, axioms (Latour 1984, 163).

In this transcendentalist soil, understanding the world is nothing more than sewing every inch of its surface, never leaving gaps, never leaving excesses, what in philosophy we call *Epistemological Realism* (Bryant 2011), although it is also a constant feature in Classical Social Theory, as is evident in authors like Durkheim. According to him, society is not just something external, not just presented as a thing (Durkheim 2007), but can also be represented, preferably by tracing its transcendent and coercive movement through a statistical and reliable method. According to philosopher Levi Bryant, “epistemological realism is a variant of ontologies of presence that strive to bring objects or the world into the field of presence in an adequate representation” (Bryant 2011, 264). This means that *silence is* not really an option, quite the contrary; it *is necessary to name EVERYTHING that happens*, creating categories and a whole set of tools responsible for the coherence of relations. That is why in front of a event you can hear several interpretations, besides countless methodological maneuvers or epistemological juggling, depending on your theoretical line, but never the pure and disconcerting *silence*. We start from the idea that the world “[...] is a place where everything that now exists or will exist is preparing to be put into words” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 6). The non-transparency and the very escapability of the world, as well as its autonomy from humans, are seen only as obstacles that need to be circumvented, a kind of fetishism that demands a quick fix, either by epistemic or practical means.

It must be clear that there is no boundary in this essay between transcendentalism on the one hand and Object-Oriented Social Theory on the other, as if it were a simple choice between two options, since transcendental structures are not only necessary, but inevitable. They ensure the integration of both my I and the world around me, providing firmness, consistency, and completeness. Even this essay, with its 22 pages, would be completely impossible without a background axis of meaning, without a transcendental horizon that organizes the flow of its words. Unlike more philosophical approaches, such as Meillassoux’s own, I do not believe that the major goal of our endeavor should be the complete “abandonment of transcendentalism” (Malabou 2014). A Social Theorist, by having a slightly more empirical commitment, cannot turn his back on the importance of this matrix within conversations, conflicts, justifications, gossip, crises, etc. The real problem presented in these lines, as will become clear throughout my writing, are the instances when this transcendentalism goes over the edge, when it starts to suffocate other instances of meaning⁷, be they human or non-human. This means that transcendental structures are problematic only when they enact a certain kind of *ontological monopoly*, rather than guaranteeing passage to other alternatives, possibilities, and encounters. This particular and very

dangerous kind of transcendentalism will be called here *paranoid*. The proposal of an Object-Oriented Social Theory is summed up in a simple Latourian question: “what happens when we abandon this burden, this passion, this indignation, this obsession, this flame, this fury, this dazzling goal, this excess, this insane desire to reduce everything?” (Latour 1988, 157).

Roughly speaking, this transcendentalist matrix, by being within tolerable limits, without much exaggeration, guarantees the firmness of a certain chain of signifiers, not only scientific, but of any language exposed to the world. It can assume, as a form, various configurations, such as *subject, reason, god, human, class, body, nature*, etc. Imagine this matrix as a tower, a kind of support that helps to organize the elements dispersed around it, in this case, the semiotic elements in a text, in a research, or even the data extracted from one’s own experience as a phenomenological result, a reflection of a more spontaneous involvement with the world. There are, therefore, *theoretical* and *practical* transcendentals (Pinho 2018), that is, transcendentals that can be found in dissertations and theses, but also in John’s bakery, understood here as a metaphor for everyday life, although it is not necessary to go into these details now. The important thing is to keep in mind that even varying in size, color, and shape, this tower always plays the same role in structuring reasoning, practice, and life, in general. Following a path taken by Bruno Latour and Graham Harman, with their Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), two questions pop up on the horizon: *what are the implications when “transcendental”⁸ structures are de-centered⁹, what new possibilities open up in the field of Social Theory?*

Harman and Epistemic Paranoia

In classical Social Theory, from Marx to Durkheim to Bourdieu and Foucault, transcendentalism is not simply an approach, as it is in Philosophy, and its various Kantian implications, from the most phenomenological to the post-structuralist ones, but it has always been an inevitable destination, almost as a condition of possibility for almost everything that have been said and done. The transcendentalist role with its roots in the modern project is convenient in Social Theory, since everyone recognizes it as an absolute and even indispensable criterion when it comes to the construction of knowledge. If everything around you escapes the clutches of the arbitrary, if every object is connected within an obvious and totalizing comprehensive matrix, in an ontotheology, which can be a system or a structure, you will probably be seen as someone differentiated, smart, maybe even genius, what we call “critical”. As long as you have a transcendentalist language at hand, in which empiricism itself disappears amidst a convenient line of reasoning, do not worry because you are safe, comfortable, and welcomed. And if you have understood that transcendentalism has a roommate called *paranoia*¹⁰, you will grasp my sarcasm even more. I call this uncontrolled attitude, where language completely paraphrases the world in a game of complete simplification of an ontological multiplicity, *epistemic paranoia*, where paranoia not only exists as a psychological trait of scattered individuals,

but is also reproduced institutionally as the condition of critical thinking and of political practice itself. Like any kind of transcendentalism that goes beyond the pragmatic boundaries of its function, in paranoia nothing can be random, strange, or inexplicable, nothing can simply be, but always needs a name, a connection, a system, and so on, as is to be expected from variations of a metaphysics of presence. Objects end up becoming a mere by-product of a delirium, a great theoretical fiction, a speculative flight that went too far, without any conditions for a concrete and prudent landing, as Whitehead would say. The autonomy of things, people and circumstances disappear in the exact measure that language literalizes the world (Harman 2010). That is why Freud draws a close link between paranoia and philosophy, at least the more classical Kantian philosophy: “the delusions of the paranoid have an [...] internal familiarity with the systems of our philosophers” (Berthold-bond 1989, 285).

However, talking about transcendentalism is a bit vague because it “receives different forms or names [...] eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia, (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God [...] and so on” (Derrida 1978, 280), but especially the most famous transcendental ever created and also the center of this whole essay: *the transcendental man*. The *human*, in Social Theory, is not just a concept, or a word, but a structure of meaning, a condition of possibility for knowledge itself, an inevitable transcendental structure. If you do not believe me, if what you just read seems so exaggerated, let’s take a simple example, a quick story about something that happened to me some years ago. While attending a lecture on the novel *The Trial*, at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), the lecturer conducted his entire talk in a way that was too problematic, although I confess it did not surprise me: he basically said that Kafka was a bourgeois writer and his writings were nothing more than a reflection of capitalism and its bureaucratic relations. Now, imagine *The Trial* as a universe, a huge aesthetic space full of fictional objects, like tables, people, buildings, chairs, clothes, and so many other things that walk through its arrangement of words. Imagine that this whole universe suddenly finds itself trapped within a single chain of interpretation, dominated by a single *signifier*, a structure of reasoning that reduces everything around it. This is the problem with limitless transcendentalism, when its provisional epistemic arrangement is taken too seriously, turning into an ontological matrix that stifles the autonomy of everything that exists. Its paranoid tendency lurks in every imaginable space, waiting for the right moment to take semiotic and material control of everything it touches. In other words, epistemic paranoia is basically the instant when epistemological structures, mere comprehensive tools directed at the world, lose this pragmatic foundation and monopolize the contours of reality itself, nothing more than a renewed version of Heideggerian *ontotheology*. We can say that epistemic paranoia is the ontologization of epistemological structures, at least thought of here at the borders of a Social Theory. Within a transcendentalist (paranoid) structure, especially human transcendentalism, meaning is reduced to a single denominator, a single signifier. Because of this, there is no *excess of* objects, or even of the world, nothing that can surprise or *seduce* us (Harman 2010).

The fact that this paranoia is not individual, much less clinical, but institutionalized, makes it difficult to track or even to fight against it. As Freud showed in his “Civilization and its discontents” (Freud 2010) about *neurosis*, there are both an *individual* modality, specific to psychologists and their comprehensive apparatus, as well as there is also its *institutionalized* face, proper to the universe of social theorists, as is typical of Freud in the last years of his career. The difference between the two levels of neurosis, as with the structure of paranoia itself, is only in the level of acceptance, nothing more than a secondary difference. The former is seen as a problem, a deviation, while the latter is embraced as part of institutions and their cultural by-products, that is, embedded in the language structure as a whole. When we follow up to *psychosis*, such as paranoia, we can see something equivalent. In an essay called “*Claims of psycho-analysis to scientific interest*” (Holowchak 2013), Freud compares the *transcendental structure of philosophers* to *paranoia*, although we can also expand the reasoning to the more empirical lands of Social Theory.

Many share, and wish to share, this paranoid (transcendental) atmosphere as a kind of *enjoyment* (Žižek 2006), so to speak. In other words, paranoia, disguised as transcendentalism, and especially *transcendental man*, is not just an epistemic element, but a concrete form that materializes in the structure of the world itself, organizing varied instances, such as universities, courts, schools, and congresses. Fighting against it is not only fighting concepts and propositions, it is not simply invading the space of philosophical theories surrounding the 19th century, but it is also an onslaught against experiences, expectations, and beliefs. As already stated at the beginning of our essay journey, transcendentalism is useful, convenient, and even fundamental, but its exaggeration, its “monification”¹¹ (Savransky 2021), thus not recognizing its own epistemic limits, leads us into a dangerous space on every imaginable level, from the political to the scientific. Despite all this reductionist atmosphere, perhaps there is still a way to escape the *paranoid cage* that has trapped Social Theory for so many decades, by recognizing the ontological merit of other species, objects, and circumstances, while decentering the limits of the “transcendental man.”

According to Harman, this transcendentalist framework can be described within two different approaches. If someone asks you what an object is, there are two ways to answer, two classical ways: “what a thing is made of [or] what a thing does” (Harman 2017, 2). The first is *undermining*, an approach that reduces an object to its most basic components, identified here with the pre-Socratics and their relentless search for the constituent elements that structure reality as a whole. Perhaps it is *water* (Thales), *fire* (Heraclitus), *air* (Anaximenes), or the *Apeiron* (Anaximander). Or, in more contemporary approaches, we also see it in the neurosciences and the new forms of materialism, such as chemistry or physics. But what about in Social Theory? *Undermining* can be found in the first Durkheim¹² and in some structuralist and functionalist authors, where there is always an originating substratum that can explain not only the action of agents, but the very materiality of the world and its grammar of objects. In this scenario, the main goal is to discover this substrate, going beyond the superficial layers of action, or of objects and their accidental qualities, digging its depths in search of a lost, hidden, structuring realm.

The *method of undermining* can be seen in Durkheim's positivism, especially when he uses sociology as a tool that reveals the basic, constitutive substratum of reality, thus removing the more superficial layers of action, such as those of psychological origin. According to Harman, *objects in undermining* are presented as superficial, being second-order dimensions just waiting for a more fundamental matrix behind the scenes. In his book "The Rules of Sociological Method," Durkheim (1982) compares sociology to any kind of hard science, suggesting that they share a similar, though not identical, scientific method. According to him, *society* must be seen as a *thing*, as a reality not only external to us, not only coercive, but also as something material and constitutive. In other words, it is not a simple projection of ideas or representations, but a creature with a life of its own, defining everything around us, especially the way objects are made and used. This means that society is not an epistemic resource of curious philosophers, but a matrix that defines the very ontological space shared by humans, as well as the materiality of things. Just as a physicist breaks down water into a chemical formula (H₂O), to its most basic elements, its most fundamental components, Durkheimian sociology follows a similar course, as do structuralist approaches such as Althusser's structural Marxism, or Talcott Parsons' functionalism. *Structure* and *system* in this scenario are not epistemological terms randomly chosen by the sociologist to understand reality, but are seen as part of reality itself, its most sensitive foundation. Behind the many layers of action, behind the scenes of chairs, tables, books, and humans, there is always one most important element that orders and justifies everything around, and the sociologist's goal is to go through these layers in search of this core. This is even the same movement found in chemists, physicists, or even in pre-Socratic philosophy, as suggested above. As you can see for yourself, the undermined *object* is just a pretext, nothing more than a persistent obstacle in the way of great structural and systemic flights. The important thing is behind the scenes, just as in the second Heidegger the objects, in their more pragmatic functions, only hinder, or hide, the ontological displacement of a Being that is curiously too mystical.

Marx, like Hegel and his *objective idealism*, can be understood as authors of *undermining*, an approach in search of a basic explanatory chain that lies behind the phenomena. In fact, materialist currents in Social Theory are in serious danger of falling into this terrain, especially those that share an *ontotheology*, as Heidegger put it, or a *metaphysics of presence*, in Derrida's words. In this model, the world is always seen as shallow, superficial, which forces us into an intense search often for something deeper, almost as if trying to replicate the steps of the pre-Socratics, but now in a more sociological way. Classical Social Theory basically reproduces the Heideggerian distinction between *thing* and *object*, keeping the same reasoning, although using a different language. *Objects*, at least in this scenario, have nothing special, much less central, being just a byproduct of something deeper and more meaningful.

The second type of transcendentalist knowledge and "the greatest danger for the humanities and social sciences is the opposite, *overmining*" (Harman 2017, 9). The first type of *overminer* is *the one we could call ontological*. According to them, the world outside exists, of course, but it is

seen only as a set of connections that it establishes in a circuit of *exchanges, flows, and experiences*, with nothing solid or singular hiding behind the curtain. There is nothing behind or below, but always a “between”, a constant practical and horizontal movement. Unlike *underminers*, the first type of *overminers* bet on the idea that objects are very deep, with nothing underneath or hidden in their accidental and contingent manifestations. Here, there is nothing but transitory exchanges, be they pragmatic, phenomenological, or vitalistic, that is, encounters that cease to be with impressive ease, almost like a wind passing by and knocking down the aging branches of some tree. The second type of *overminer* are the *social constructivists*, also known as the *idealistic part of the movement*, also called the “epistemic” portion. According to them, reality disappears completely, and may be a product of the mind, language and its justifications (linguistic turn)¹³, ideologies, power, and so on. This is the reason that led Foucault to state that “the objects to be known [...] are the effects of the fundamental implications of the knowledge of power and its historical transformations” (Foucault 1995, 27). In this post-structural scenario, at least when one thinks of the archaeological Foucault, we do not have any kind of ontology, not even the escapist scent of Heideggerian Being, for the world itself is only a distant and impossible dream, a simple discursive mirage suffused at various epistemic levels. One can see this tendency also in the *culturalists* within Anthropology, the postmodernists, poststructuralists, and so on. In any case, both types of *overminers* mentioned so far believe that the identity of an object, and its internal consistency, is just an optical illusion. To understand an action, the goal is not to decompose its layers in search of a consistent and fundamental space (undermining), but to observe the connections it establishes and the effects it produces in the world. In other words, there is always a *theory of affects* (Massumi) or a *theory of difference* (Deleuze) within *overmining*. There is nothing here but relations, whether linguistic, phenomenological, pragmatic, or vitalistic. According to Harman, by contrast, “rather than replacing objects with a description of what they do (as in ANT) or what they are made of (as in traditional materialism), OOO uses the term ‘object’ to refer to any entity that cannot be paraphrased in terms of its components or its effects” (Harman 2017, 3). In other words, “the object is deeper than any possible relation to it” (Harman 2011, 37). The curious part is that even the link between *objects* (interobjectivity) does not exhaust their particular qualities either, for it always points to a characteristic that overflows. That is, even *objects* tend to reduce other *objects* into an interobjective bond, making any kind of direct contact impossible, as can be seen in “Harman’s favorite example” (Bryant 2011, 39):

For fire to burn cotton, which is the favorite Islamic example discussed in all these ancient texts, fire does not need to react to most of the properties of cotton: its smell and color are irrelevant to fire. Fire will burn cotton based on flammable properties, whatever they are [...] (Harman 2011, 37).

According to Harman, not only does human interference reduce objects to a certain reductionist and even paranoid horizon, offered by language, power, culture or the like, but even objects tend to reduce each other, which reveals an ontological abyss in the world itself and not only

in our limited epistemic categories. The world escapes from itself, so to speak, and not just from our imperfect, and violent, language, as certain genealogical lines seem to suggest (Butler 1999). Access is always “by indirect, allusive, or vicarious means” (Harman 2017, 17), even when two objects interact with each other (*sensual objects*). Therefore, translation is never fully complete, something overflows, fails, frustrates. There is a kind of *excess* that escapes even interrelation, as if there were a gap, an abyss, at least of *ontological* origin, in constituting the core of the world itself. Each *object* is not only barred by others or from others, but is barred from itself all the time. Something goes beyond the contours of interobjectivity itself, that is, the Latourian network and its vitalist derivatives finds its limit here as well. And if we pay attention, something not only goes beyond the limits of the network, but can, under certain circumstances, compromise its very functioning¹⁴, as an excess, a “surplus value” in the sense given by Žižek (2006). In other words, the object at its core, in its essence (in Harman’s terms), is not a merely functional or useful tool, but an *excess* that surpasses even any kind of pragmatic and phenomenological bond.

The approach of authors like Bourdieu, Giddens, and Habermas, figures that attempt to combine *undermining* and *overmining*, that is, structure and experience, Harman called *Duomining*, a type of synthesis more problematic than its isolated parts. Despite their differences, and the very originality they carry in their respective fields, both share the same transcendentalist model, like that of the “transcendental man” himself. Harman would probably have some resistance to micro-sociological approaches, as well as those that try something more macro, or even those that seek to reconcile the two trends. Both would suffer from two persistent forms of reductionism: The second one understanding reality as a pure flow of interactions, a simple movement of exchanges, encounters, always accompanied by a certain kind of *flat ontology*, either in Schütz’s phenomenological project or in Garfinkel’s pragmatics. There are no level shifts here, no explanatory chain that stands out from reality, which can generate, in methodological terms, an exaggerated commitment to description and a deep fear of more theoretical flights, as is very evident in “studies in ethnomethodology” (Garfinkel 1967). Here the identity of the object is merely an optical illusion caused by the practical movement of subjects in the world (an ontological approach) or produced by discourses, ideologies, and power (in a more epistemic way). The first trend, on the other hand, reduces that same world to something more materialistic, as in Althusser’s structuralism or Durkheim’s functionalism. Unlike the *overminers*, the *underminers* really believe that objects exist and that they have their own identities, but this fact would not matter much. What really matters is the *Apeiron* behind everything, the *truth behind the phenomenon*, the *thing behind the object*. Besides the *Overminers* and *Underminers*, the authors of synthesis (*duominers*) would not escape criticism either, since they continue to move between the two extremes, sometimes suffering from phenomenological (or pragmatic) pains, sometimes suffering from the structural and functionalist blows.

Harman, on the other hand, proposes a third form of cognition, an alternative way to confront the *transcendental man* and his monifying and paranoid process, without resorting to

the previous strategies. This non-reductionist approach, far beyond *undermining* and *overmining*, Harman will call “*anti-transcendentalism*” or “anti-Copernicanism” (Harman 2010). Reality, then, cannot be reduced to a search for some more fundamental core and its embedded ontotheology, nor reduced to relations and their consequences. In other words, he questions both functionalism and pragmatism, both phenomenology and positivism, both Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde, both Bourdieu and Latour. The curious thing is that this form of cognition suggested by Harman is not a knowledge, a kind of knowing, but something else, something that can only be accessed indirectly through art, jokes and metaphors, since an excess always escapes in the end. Moreover, it cannot be reduced to human contact or any other form of interaction, however spontaneous and pre-reflexive it may seem. Although reality is much more than the *transcendental man*, we cannot conclude that the human being is something optional, for without him there is no art or any other sphere of coexistence. In other words, the human being is an important ingredient for understanding Harman’s *weird realism*¹⁵, but it is not enough. The world has this escapist and overflowing characteristic, and that leads us straight to an unusual kind of post-humanist project, much more radical than the *relationalism* proposed by Whitehead or Latour.

In Harman, the concept of experience, very important *in overminers*, such as phenomenologists, ends up becoming a kind of obstacle, since something always escapes, including traces of silence, rupture, that is, a kind of gap in the fabric of our own circuit of experiences. As a result, there is what OOO calls a critique of *correlationalism*. Rather than understanding the human as dissolved within a grand relational totality, where everything remains stitched together in a constant and indistinct web of encounters, for Harman, on the contrary, there is something beyond, something that cannot be reduced to any pragmatic and phenomenological pact, to any convenient indistinction between “subject and object.” A kind of excess breaks this pact, this transcendental integration, almost as if threatening the harmony of Cézanne’s phenomenological strokes, while at the same time pouring out some wild drops in Pollock’s style.

By radicalizing the OOO’s statements, Harman manages to go beyond most posthumanists, since they are still close to *overmining*, especially by using phenomenology or vitalism as a metaphysical background. An example offered by Harman, which reinforces this boundary between him and most posthumanists, can be found in his re-reading of Heidegger’s famous “*tool analysis*”. By denying the Heideggerian distinction between theory (*present-at-hand*) and practice (*ready-to-hand*), Harman claims that the spontaneous use of the hammer or the very act of reflecting on it when it is broken would be two equivalent processes, both reductionist. Practice would not be more problem-free than theory, as Heidegger imagined, as if the former accessed the world directly and spontaneously, that is, realistically. This space of interactions, this practical arrangement between Dasein and its surroundings, a phenomenological and pragmatic feature in *Being and Time*, ends up being seen by Harman as another limitation. The Latourian network, therefore, does not extend to infinity, as if it were some persistent substance, but finds here a limit, a boundary that cannot be crossed, compromising at the same time its cohesion and effectiveness.

In other words, this kind of homogenizing *relationalism* (the network) is faced with an object that withdraws, that escapes, while at the same time it cannot be reduced to its interactions, whether theoretical or practical. In this sense, Harman does not completely reject Actor-Network Theory (ANT), nor the possible pragmatic and phenomenological approaches that may exist behind its scenes, but only presents its limitations, and offers an additional¹⁶ path. The object does not deny the existence of networks, or any other pragmatic (or phenomenological) arrangement, but only points towards something beyond, something incapable of being exhausted, literalized (Harman 2010). Given this, you may ask, “What is an Object-Oriented Social Theory? What does it mean?”. Instead of merging structural and phenomenological (pragmatic) tendencies, as a good part of Social Theory has done, it abandons them almost completely in search of another line of reasoning. Perhaps we are in a new space of possibilities, probably an unexpected kind of *posthumanism*.

Epistemology as an extension of Aesthetics and not the other way around

Harman’s posthumanism not only invades epistemology and compromises its *transcendental man*, or the ethics associated with it, but also delves into aesthetics, being a place where OOO shines most brightly. “This means that aesthetics becomes the first philosophy” (Harman 2007, 221). On the other hand, in classical Social Theory, following a more predictable path, we have quotes like this:

Now humanism, that is, the passionate study of man’s nature, is essential to all literature and art; and good art and good literature are humanistic in that they not only investigate man and the true essence of his nature with passion, but also and simultaneously passionately defend human integrity against all attacks, degradation and distortion (Lukács 1970, 69).

So, is that all we need to know? Is a work of art nothing more than a reflection of human relations and underlying historical conditions? Perhaps something is missing here, something in art itself as such, what we could call its *mode of existence*, its autonomy. Harold Bloom, an American critic and very much aligned with OOO formalism, presents very well what this missing element would be when he analyzes Shakespeare’s works, synthesizing at the same time what Harman, OOO, and the posthumanists are trying to say:

Here they [the critics] face insurmountable difficulties in Shakespeare’s most idiosyncratic strength: he is always ahead of you, conceptually and imaginatively, whoever you are and wherever you are. He makes you anachronistic because he already *contains* you; you cannot subsume him. It cannot illuminate you with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration, but by post-figuration, so to speak: everything of Freud that matters most is already there in Shakespeare, with a persuasive critique of Freud himself (Bloom 1995, 24).

Aesthetics in OOO is not just an important detail, but its fundamental core. Philosophy follows the path of art as a way of understanding the world, mainly by not simplifying the contours of what happens, by guaranteeing its autonomy, its capacity for rupture and surprise. Moreover, aesthetics ceases to be just a pretext within some well-defined theoretical arrangement or any kind of transcendental structure and becomes an extension of philosophical doing itself, which resembles approaches such as those of Badiou and Deleuze.

Works of art [...] are misunderstood if we reduce them downward to their physical components [undermining] or upward to their socio-political effects [overmining], despite occasional attempts within these disciplines to do just that. There is something about these works that resists reduction in either direction, opposing the literal paraphrase of which knowledge always consists (Harman 2017, 12).

Badiou always rescues the curious aroma of an anti-philosophy, whether in books or lectures, at least when he considers along the way authors who do not defend truth as knowledge, as a systematic body of concepts, some kind of linear reasoning. Badiou thinks of Lacan and Nietzsche when he offers this definition, but no doubt it could also be Graham Harman and his Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). The implications here are enormous, especially in the contours of scientific propositions. According to Harman, philosophy was never directed to knowledge, but to the love of knowledge, which indicates a certain distant relation to something that cannot be properly represented. Socrates never defined concepts in his dialogues, even when he encountered sophists like Gorgias and Protagoras along the way, reinforcing the idea that philosophy was born not as a form of knowledge, but as something beyond, a more slippery kind of element. Would an approach be possible in which truth is not knowledge, not a systematic set of definitions and concepts, but something deeper, though also undefined? What would be an approach that gave up a simple and naive criterion of validity, of pure epistemology, in favor of a more aesthetic criterion, almost as if following the Kafkaesque path or that of directors like Hitchcock? Contrary to the suspicions of the first Wittgenstein, at the end of his *Tractatus*, in one of the most read aphorisms, would it be possible to talk about something that cannot be named? About what cannot be talked about, should one really be silent? Is Social Theory possible without its classical *transcendental man* and his convenient transcendentals? There are many questions hovering in the air, although answers are still beginning to appear on the horizon. The important thing is that new challenges are springing up in Contemporary Social Theory, new ways not only of organizing ideas, but of understanding the world itself beyond the arrogance of the *transcendental man* and his dangerous paranoia. As Harman once said, “The object-oriented model holds great promise for many fields of knowledge, but especially for the various disciplines of the human sciences” (Harman 2010, 138).

Endnotes:

1. *Transcendentalism* is used here in a *broader* and *weaker sense* (Habermas 2003), that is, as an *a priori* matrix that organizes, reduces and simplifies reality in a certain way. As a result, it does not matter

whether we are talking about *signifiers, Class, God, Body, Power, Nature or Man*. It does not matter whether this transcendentalism is epistemic, with respect to arguments, concepts or categories of understanding the world, or phenomenological, including here a practical, pre-reflexive contact with reality. The point is the same old Kantian structure: “its status is transcendental, that is, it organizes our experience into a meaningful totality” (Žižek 1992, 15).

2. “I call ‘correlationism’ the contemporary opponent of any realism. Correlationism takes many contemporary forms, but particularly those of transcendental philosophy, the varieties of phenomenology, and postmodernism” (Meillassoux 2008, 1).
3. “For a long time it has been agreed that the relationship between one text and another is always a matter of interpretation. Why not accept that this is also true between so-called texts and so-called objects, and even between so-called objects themselves?” (Latour 1984, 166).
4. Which here will be called *the transcendental man* (Merleau-Ponty 1964).
5. Even today there is clear resistance to this kind of displacement, especially from neo-Marxists and neo-Lacanianists such as Russell Sbriglia, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou.
6. This Posthumanism (or Anti-transcendentalism) has also been called “Anti-Copernicanism” by Harman (2010) and Latour (2012).
7. Although it is not the purpose of this essay, it should be remembered that there are criticisms made of the neo-Kantian model, and its transcendentalist implications, also in decolonial authors, such as British sociologist Martin Savransky, in one of his most recent books: *Around The Day in Eighty Worlds: Politics of Pluriverse* (2021). In this work, he establishes a close link between colonial practices of violence (exclusion) and neo-Kantian models of thought.
8. It should be made clear that the entire critique of transcendentalism in this essay only applies to its Neo-Kantian version, as will become clear later, and not to its alternative versions, such as Brassier’s “transcendental realism” (Shaviro 2014) or Deleuze’s “transcendental empiricism.” For example, “the Deleuzian ‘transcendental’ is infinitely richer than reality - it is an infinite potential field of virtualities from which reality is actualized” (Žižek 2004, 4). These specific and very unorthodox uses of the term “transcendental” do not apply to what is called “transcendentalism” here.
9. As will become clear, “de-centering” does not mean “excluding”, but rather a process of re-signification.
10. As I said at the beginning of this essay, transcendental reasoning is inevitable, and even important, within Social Theory or any other arrangement of relations. What is being criticized is the exaggeration, when this transcendentalism goes over the edge, becomes “ontologizing”, monopolizing and suffocating the possibilities of meaning in the world and even in other human groupings.
11. “monification of the world: the disqualification and devastation of differences [...]” (Savransky 2021, 6).
12. The last Durkheim, the more Kantian and author of *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1912), changed so much his approach that reminds us of Wittgenstein’s path and his two great phases. If Wittgenstein oscillated from a more logical approach to a more pragmatic path in maturity, Durkheim started as a materialist and ended his career diving into more Kantian approaches, being, therefore, a profound change of direction.
13. “[...] we will never be able to step outside language, we will never be able to apprehend a reality that is not mediated by a linguistic description” (Rorty 2000, 57).
14. It is for this reason that Latour states: “everything happens as if there is, in fact, a border, a kind of internal limit to networks” (Latour 2011, 35).
15. “Weird Realism” a term created by Harman himself to describe his own realist journey.
16. Many of the limitations to TAR presented by Harman had already been suggested by Latour himself in his AIME (An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence) in 2011, at which point he reevaluates many of the postings of his earlier works, in particular “We were never modern” (1991).

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