

GOTHIC NATURE



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Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*

(London: Penguin Books, 2018)

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Graham Harman's *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (2018) makes a bold claim with its subtitle, but this small, well-organised book works hard to justify its declaration. For anyone interested in the controversial school of philosophy called OOO (pronounced 'triple-O'), Harman's book is an ideal place to begin. *Object-Oriented Ontology* is intended for a general audience, and Harman does not lose sight of this target, even as he gets into some of the more complex and sticky elements of his philosophy.

According to Harman, the most basic element of OOO is its rejection of truth and knowledge in favor of *reality*, which is only ever accessible indirectly. OOO is a realist philosophy, meaning it 'holds that the external world exists independent of human awareness' (p. 10). By taking this position, OOO departs significantly from the type of theory that has tended to dominate the humanities in recent decades (e.g. Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Judith Butler). OOO also deviates from the norm in advocating an initial flat ontology that rejects human exceptionalism and values all objects, a term Harman defines capaciously as 'anything that cannot be entirely reduced either to the components of which it is made or to the effects that it has on other things' (p. 43), including animate/inanimate or real/fictional things. However, Harman is quick to clarify that 'OOO does not see a flat ontology as an absolute good' (p. 54). Rather, it is only a starting point to ensure that artificial hierarchies, taxonomies, and prejudices do not obscure our ability to see and consider everything.

As stated in the subtitle of the book, Harman proposes OOO as a new theory of everything. He criticises previous theories that have made the same claim for four defects (physicalism, smallism, antifictionalism, and literalism) and asserts that OOO avoids these common pitfalls. Part of his argument hinges on the notion that also titles his second chapter: 'Aesthetics is the Root of All Philosophy.' In this chapter, Harman draws from Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's essay (1914) on metaphor to declare that aesthetics is the way in which we begin to approach real objects outside of their relation to the person perceiving them. Harman distinguishes between *real objects* and *sensual objects* (as well as *real qualities*

and *sensual qualities* of those objects). A *real object* is the thing-in-itself, the inward essence of the object, which can only be accessed indirectly, whereas a *sensual object* is the object as we experience it. These terms, as well as the concept of indirect relations, are essential components of OOO that Harman explains at length. Harman stresses that what sets OOO apart is its assertion that ‘objects never make full contact with each other any more than they do with the human mind’, what Harman calls ‘the mutual darkness of objects’ (p. 12).

Throughout the book, Harman anticipates objections from his readers and acknowledges the various critiques that OOO has received from many quarters in the years since its inception. Framing the book with a brief discussion of Donald Trump, Harman appears to make a particular case for the political relevance of OOO in the face of assertions that OOO leaves us adrift in an unknowable world with nothing solid to which to cling. One of the special challenges Harman faces in writing this book is explaining and justifying OOO’s critique of knowledge and truth, especially at such a politically turbulent moment in United States history where everything it seems is declared ‘fake news’. Although the concept of truth is beyond rehabilitation for Harman, he usefully clarifies in chapter four that OOO does not entirely reject the concept of knowledge per se; it merely rejects the notion that knowledge equals unmediated access to reality. Instead, in OOO terms, knowledge is an untrue, justified belief about the real qualities of a sensual object. This definition may seem unsatisfying, but Harman states that appeals to knowledge are not the solution to today’s political crisis anyway. What we need, says Harman, is an appeal to *reality*. That said, it remains unclear to me what a politics compatible with OOO actually looks like in action.

From the outset, Harman declares his intention to write an accessible and engaging book modeled on Sigmund Freud’s *Introductory Lectures of Psychoanalysis* (1917), and he succeeds in those goals despite the challenging subject matter. His argument is carefully developed, beginning with a list of the seven central principles of OOO, and following with a gradual elucidation of those principles complemented with diagrams designed by Michael Flower. In addition to methodically explaining the central tenets of OOO, Harman also clarifies his stance by contrasting it with the philosophies of Derrida and Foucault. While Deleuze makes a couple of brief appearances, I would have liked to have seen a thorough discussion of OOO’s difference from his philosophy, especially given Deleuze’s recent prominence in the humanities.

After clarifying all the things OOO is *not*, Harman follows up by showing the various manifestations of OOO as practiced by its other major adherents: Levi Bryant, Ian Bogost, and Timothy Morton. He additionally discusses Jane Bennett and Tristan Garcia, who both do largely compatible and related work that is nevertheless distinct from OOO. A useful overview of OOO's main tenets concludes this small but dense work. Although Harman's book does not address ecoGothic or ecohorror themes, his philosophy does have something to contribute to ecocriticism more broadly, and it is the component that OOO is generally known for: its initial flat ontology. Ecocritics would do well to adopt an initial flat ontology (and to teach their students to do so as well) so that they may be sure to value even those aspects of our environment that tend not to capture our attention, elements such as soil or fungi. That being said, although OOO may be known for its advocacy of a flat ontology that values nonhuman, inanimate objects, Harman's book reveals that this new philosophy is much more complex than many give it credit for. It is, after all, a new theory of everything.

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