

6-7-2012

Resonating Ontologies: The Illusory Nature of the Confrontation Between Žižek's Ontology and Speculative Realism

Sterling Hall
University of Nevada, Reno

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hall, Sterling (2012) "Resonating Ontologies: The Illusory Nature of the Confrontation Between Žižek's Ontology and Speculative Realism," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans/vol3/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Res Cogitans by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact gilmani@pacificu.edu.

Resonating Ontologies: The Illusory Nature of the Confrontation Between Žižek's Ontology and Speculative Realism

Abstract

There are two main currents of thought in Continental philosophy emerging today – the speculative realists (via: Graham Harman and Meillassoux) and the post-continental Marxists (via: Žižek and Badiou). The two camps have propped themselves against each other, with the speculative realists giving especially acerbic critiques of post-continentalism as being stuck in correlationist thought (while the latter just tend to ignore the former, considering them a philosophy not worthy of exposition). This paper argues that this confrontation is an illusion: the fundamental ontologies of both groups essentially rely on a single concept – that of the non-All – that structures the rest of their thought. Further, it is only by overcoming the illusory nature of this confrontation that we can unleash the full potential of both these fields.

Cover Page Footnote

Honorable Mention Conference Paper, 16th Annual Pacific University Undergraduate Philosophy Conference (2012)

Resonating Ontologies: The Illusory Nature of the Confrontation Between Žižek's Ontology and Speculative Realism

Sterling Hall
University of Nevada, Reno

Published online: 07 June 2012
© Sterling Hall 2012

Abstract

There are two main currents of thought in Continental philosophy emerging today – the speculative realists (via: Graham Harman and Meillassoux) and the post-continental Marxists (via: Žižek and Badiou). The two camps have propped themselves against each other, with the speculative realists giving especially acerbic critiques of post-continentalism as being stuck in correlationist thought (while the latter just tend to ignore the former, considering them a philosophy not worthy of exposition). This paper argues that this confrontation is an illusion: the fundamental ontologies of both groups essentially rely on a single concept – that of the non-All – that structures the rest of their thought. Further, it is only by overcoming the illusory nature of this confrontation that we can unleash the full potential of both these fields.

Let's compare two contemporary competing ontologies present in Continental philosophy as it stands today:

(1) Slavoj Žižek's ontology, as outlined by Adrian Johnston, is primarily concerned with trying to justify a Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity (TMTS). Subjectivity, for Žižek, is materialist because it has a concrete material base: there's a definite link between the interplay and structure of neurons in our bodies and our everyday experience of 'being conscious' – the former somehow provides the basis and gives rise to the second. The term 'gives rise' is crucial here: the transcendental aspect of consciousness, the phenomenological aspect of 'being conscious' and of being something 'more' that a purely material base is intimately tied together with the material aspect. The question thus arises: how does a purely material base give rise to a transcendental experience of consciousness? The answer, for Žižek, can be found only if we consider material as being always-already non-All; that is to say, the constitutive fact about objects, about 'material,' is that they are essentially a void, absent – they are always undercut in their very 'being-there.'

(2) Graham Harman, in contrast, is primarily concerned not with subjectivity, but with trying to find a way of thinking objects in their raw, physical materiality. He utilizes the phenomenological theories of Husserl and Heidegger, among others, to try and create a speculative realist philosophy that can ontologically describe objects – an ontology termed 'Object-Oriented Ontology' (OOO, for short). Harman utilizes Heidegger's analysis of being – most notably that being is never 'present' – along with his famous tool-analysis, to show that objects are hidden away from conscious study and experience; they're untotalizable. This idea doesn't just mean that you can't describe the totality of objects by gathering them and listing their defining qualities: it also means that every object has qualities that hide

away from any sort of conscious exploration. Objects are always torn apart in this way – they both present themselves and recede from any presentation at the same time. In doing this, they lock themselves within logical relations that allow us to talk about objects in-themselves, even if only by ‘looking’ at them awry.

Though these two ontologies present themselves as being fundamentally opposed, they share (at least) one structural ‘quilting point’ that binds them together: the concept that objects are always-already non-All, voided, and non-present to human cognition. It’s the thesis of this paper that both Žižek’s TMTS and Harman’s OOO are compatible, and even supplement each other, despite their apparent tensions. They can’t be bound together though on their own though: the point that binds them together is Meillassoux’s Speculative Realist ontology presented in his ‘After Finitude.’ These three pieces balance each other out, and help fill in one another’s gaps. This essay aims to create a preliminary sketch of these interweaving ontologies, so as to bring their respective possibilities to light.

Given that, this essay will continue in the following way:

- (1) It will briefly outline Meillassoux’s and Harman’s theories.
- (2) It will attempt to weave together these two theories.
- (3) It will introduce Žižek’s ontology as structured by Adrian Johnston.
- (4) It will merge some of the ideas presented in (3) with those synthesized in (2). The aim here, again, is to show that these theories complement each other, not that they fall into one another on a one-to-one basis. This should be kept in mind while evaluating this essay.

Finally, in conclusion, this essay hopes to end by noting some reasons for this philosophical merging, and to flesh out some reasons for its difficulty.

I. Harman and Meillassoux: Realism Revisited

A. Explanations of a Speculative Realist Philosophy:

Speculative realism has come like a shot of thunder in the realm of philosophy, especially for Continental philosophy. For too long now, philosophy has seemed to have avoided some of the most basic questions of philosophy – that is, metaphysical questions. Where such questions were present, they were hidden in cloaks of undecipherable poetic language, or they were deemed as nonsense based on ‘confusions within language’. Speculative Realism has tried to bring these questions back into the forefront of philosophical examinations, explicitly. Amidst the rabble of the ‘end of metaphysics,’ they have the courage to bring the discussion back to fundamental elements – that is, the question of realism versus idealism.

Meillassoux’s “After Finitude” presents us with one of the best analyses of this question, showing us a new light to cast the debate in, along with giving us a truly radical way to think objects in-themselves. The whole point of Meillassoux’s book is try to and “understand how science can think a world wherein spatio-temporal givenness itself came into being within a time and a space which preceded every variety of givenness” (Meillassoux p. 22, emphasis removed). To put it another way, Meillassoux is trying to figure out a way to analyze what he calls ‘ancestral’ statements – that is, scientific statements (such as those describing the creation of the world, or the beginning of the universe) that point to a time existing before any sort of human perception of it could have occurred. To think these statements is to be thrust

head first into the debate over realism, because ancestral statements, by definition, contain a described object but lack some sort of human consciousness to describe it in terms of presence.

Post-Kantian philosophy has trouble in trying to think these ancestral statements though, because it is dominated by what Meillassoux terms ‘correlationism.’ Correlationist philosophies believe that “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Meillassoux, p. 5) – in other words, those philosophies that dominate both the analytic and continental traditions that believe that either language and being, or world and being are the only two modes of thought that are legitimate (e.g. Wittgenstein and Heidegger respectively). That is, the correlationist can think ancestral statements, but only ‘for us’ – they can only think the beginning of the world ‘for us.’ In doing this, they drive a wedge between scientific discourse, and a philosophy that looks down on the scientific disciplines for not having considered things in the same logical manner. Philosophy ‘allows’ science to continue its business, with the knowledge of science’s theoretical error passed by in silence, never going so far as to question its own presuppositions.

Speculative Realism allows for a contrary opinion, one that allows for the realist propositions of science and gives them logical legitimacy, thus bridging the gap between philosophy and science – but in so doing, Meillassoux renders problematic the static nature of physical laws and of scientific knowledge generally. For certain structural reasons (that can’t be explored here), he proposes that the true state of the ‘in-itself’ is that of absolute contingency: what he calls ‘hyper-chaos.’ He means this in its truly radical stance: “Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing” (Meillassoux, p. 53). Any object that ‘is,’ in-itself, isn’t essential. It could cease to exist, for reasons contrary to scientific reason. For Meillassoux, the only thing that is necessary is that things aren’t necessary; the only thing that isn’t contingent is absolute contingency itself. He’s able to recover the ability to think scientific statements in all their realism, but at the cost of any sort of static, absolute description of the world. His philosophy undermines the very glory of objects: they’re no longer essential; they could be wiped away by the hyper-chaos of reality at any moment. If this is the first slight to the glory of objects, then Harman provides the second.

* * *

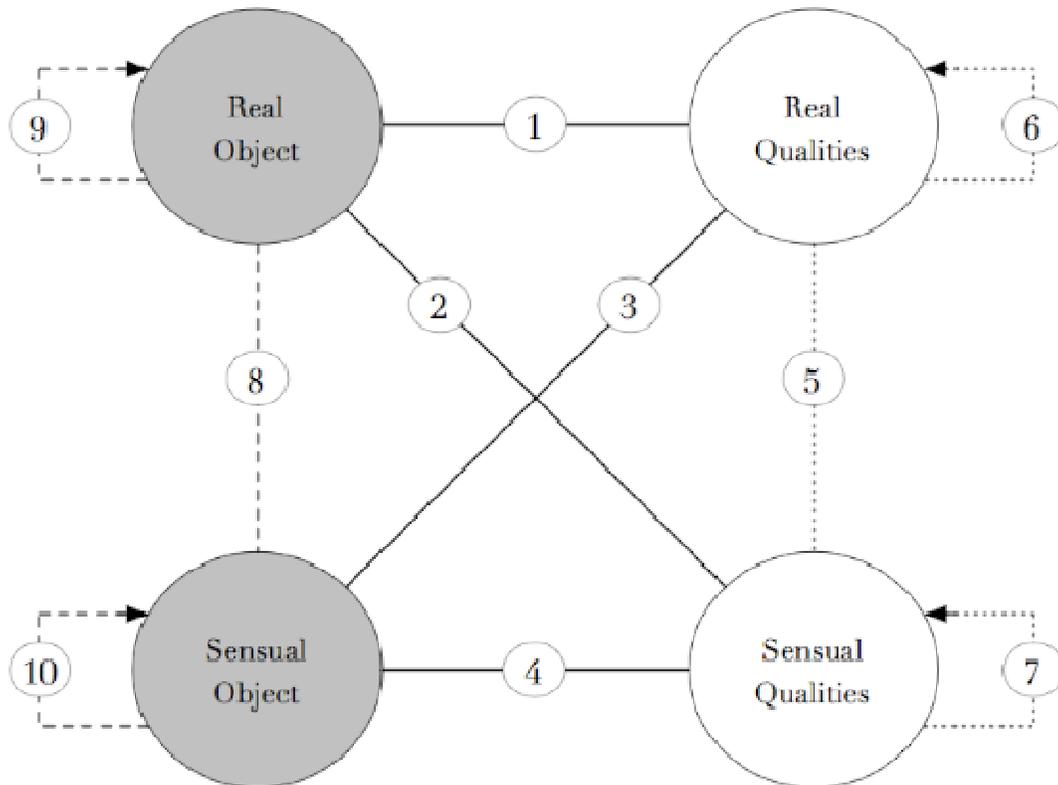
Harman’s philosophy, by contrast, isn’t preoccupied with the recent history of continental discipline (at least to the degree Meillassoux is), nor with the legitimacy of scientific, ‘ancestral’ statements, but instead with trying to figure out the ontological (in Heidegger’s sense) status of objects within the noumenal realm. He wants to think objects on their own level. He takes what he sees to be Heidegger’s fundamental philosophical idea – that being is necessarily non-presence – to try and figure out what objects are like in their ‘subterranean’ realm – or, as he puts it:

Instead of thinking extra-mental reality is founded on what appears to consciousness, we must join Heidegger in concluding the opposite, while also agreeing with him that what withdraws from consciousness are not lumps of objective physical matter. Instead, the world in itself is made of realities withdrawing from all conscious access. (Harman, p. 37)

This idea is compounded with Heidegger's tool-analysis to provide a description of how objects are both present and not-present at the same time. Contrary to Heidegger, who appeared to think that tools could be approached in their 'noumenal' realm when in use, for Harman "Using a thing distorts its reality no less than making theories about it does" (Harman p. 40-1). This means that the 'real' realm of objects, the one that forever disappears from any conscious totalization (whether through passive reflection, or even scientific appropriation), is hidden even during the unconscious use of tools (contrary to Heidegger's famous hammer example).

Objects aren't just this subterranean realm though: even if there's a part of the object that forever is beyond our grasp, we still do approach or touch the object in some way. There are qualities that present themselves – such as color, or extension for example (the exact qualities don't really matter, just that there 'are' some) – and somehow these qualities are joined together with those that are never present. Harman says that the only thing objects 'are' is this interplay between visible qualities and invisible ones (which leads him to later posit that every object is both a real object and a 'sensual' object; that is, one that can be sensed). Most of Harman's philosophy consists in describing the nature of the relations between these two dualisms – real/sensual and object/qualities (a glimpse into which the following diagram from Harman's book provides) – descriptions that lead to interesting and worthy places, but places nonetheless that are beyond the scope of this essay. The most important part to take from Harman's philosophy is that (1) we can actually think real objects in their subterranean depths, but only indirectly, by looking awry, or 'by analogy' as Harman says (Harman p. 31) and (2) though we can think these objects, they are always beyond our grasp, and as far as our senses go objects are 'emptied out,' voided, cut through diagonally, because of the fact that they are always-already hidden from our perceptions. Or, to put it in the Žižek's language, the objects are 'non-All.'

FIGURE 4: The Ten Possible Links



A diagram in Harman's book describing the possible relations between the poles present in all objects

B. The Crossroads of Speculative Realism:

Though I do believe that both Meillassoux's and Harman's theories are decisive steps forward for philosophy, they obviously have some pitfalls that plague their ideas, but it seems that some of the major pitfalls can be avoided, or at least guarded against, by taking both of their theories piecemeal.

Taking Meillassoux as a start, though his philosophy does make significant strides towards being able to think objects in themselves, and in shortening the distance between science and philosophy, there is a curiosity missing from his philosophical edifice – that is, a concrete discussion of actual objects. For all his talk about the necessity of realism for escaping the 'correlationist circle' of contradictions, and of the necessity of thinking through what the arche-fossil presents to us, he always sticks within the bounds of the 'for us.' Objects are just logically necessary for him, their existence an axiom necessary to avoid contradiction, but any ontological description of what an object actually 'is' – any concrete discussion of something like what Harman calls 'cotton-being' (Harman p. 44, for example) – is avoided in full.

To this end, Harman gives us a great leap beyond what Meillassoux presents to us ontologically. By proposing a flat-ontology, he's able to engage in descriptions of what objects are like 'in-themselves,' and thus actually get to the heart of the matter (Harman p. 44). This allows him to not only speak of the times a human subject encounters an object (a person viewing a house, for example), but of the

encounters that occur between objects independently of any human interaction or gaze (that same house being viewed by a tree) (Harman p. 18). Beyond the usefulness of such an approach being solely within the realm of getting to the core of speculative realism – that is, thinking objects in-themselves – Harman’s approach allows for a much broader application of such a philosophical view. For Meillassoux, all speculative realism can really do is supplement the legitimacy of scientific statements and prevent pseudo-religious language from creeping into philosophy. Though Meillassoux’s project is fascinating, it doesn’t go much beyond that point without being helped along by the concrete thoughts of someone like Harman.

Harman definitely isn’t without faults though: what he gains in giving concrete descriptions of objects, he loses in failing to situate his philosophy within the history of philosophy, or even within present-day philosophy, in a rigorous manner. Though much of Harman’s “Quadruple Object” deals with a reinterpretation of Heidegger and Husserl’s ontologies, he tends to be highly reductive towards philosophies that come after those two (see, for example, his highly reductionist reading of Žižek: Harman 55). In taking this approach, he seems to see all of the philosophy that came before him as having made a fundamental theoretical error, thus lacking any need to be thought rigorously in his own philosophy (a mistake Heidegger was often prone to make as well).

Here, Meillassoux is more respectable than Harman: though he disagrees with correlationist thinking, and sees it as an extreme error in thinking, he still sees it as a decisive step forward from both dogmatic realism/idealism. Due to this, he is actually willing to engage concretely with the philosophers of correlationism and their philosophies. In doing this, he’s not only able to better present speculative realist theories within the history of philosophy, but also better able to situate the debates over realism into modern parlance. If, as he argues, philosophy has been dominated by correlationist thought since the Kantian revolution (see the whole last chapter of *After Finitude* for a more in depth discussion of this), but also hasn’t realized that it’s caught in this circle of thinking, then it’s necessary to engage with this correlationist history and flesh out its errors to better highlight the need for a speculative realist philosophy – that is, to actually present it as something new and radical within the history of philosophy.

Only in this way – with Harman supplementing speculative realism by discussing actual objects and Meillassoux doing the same by engaging with the history of philosophy concretely – does speculative realism actually have any hope of achieving its goals of presenting a truly radical new path for philosophy to travel. Without one other, each philosophy falls into inescapable potholes that would send their philosophies to the dustbin of history.

II. Žižek: The Thinker of Absent Subjectivity

Taking a break from forming a preliminary synthesis of present-day ontologies for a moment, it’s necessary to try and work through the core of Žižek’s ontological project so as to be able to add it to the mix. Johnson’s book on Žižek’s ontology is fundamental to this end – it does the commendable job of working through the rigorous thought in Žižek’s works. That is, it cuts through the laughable ‘scholarly’ work Žižek has been subjected to (ranging from exegeses on his pop-culture rhetoric, to pathetic moderate-liberal condemnations of Žižek’s political ‘radicalism’) to actually present the core of Žižek’s thought – that is, the TMTS. For this reason, in my description of Žižek’s ontology, I will only work with Johnston’s book, since it is the only one to have actually gotten to the heart of the matter, while

also being the most useful one for the current analysis.

Johnston's thesis can be broken down into two statements: (1) "The chain Kant-Schelling-Hegel, knotted together vis-à-vis Lacan himself as this chain's privileged *point de capiton* (quilting point), is the underlying skeletal structure holding together the entirety of the Žižekian theoretical edifice" (Johnston p. xiv) and (2) that "Cogito-like subjectivity ontogenetically emerges out of an originally corporeal condition as its anterior ground, although, once generated, this sort of subjectivity thereafter remains irreducible to its material sources" (Johnston p. xxiv). The later statement is what constitutes Žižek's ontology, while the former is what allows this ontology to be possible. It's by interpreting Kant/Schelling/Hegel through Lacan that Žižek is able to come up with a theory of subjectivity that fits the description in (2) above (that is, the TMTS). The question arises though: how does an interpretation of Kant (who we're primarily occupied with here), traditionally seen as the beacon of full subjectivity and idealism, through the lens of Lacan, bring us to the TMTS? That is to say, what is in Kant "more than Kant himself" (to use Žižek's language) that allows for us to create a new theory of emergent subjectivity?

The answer, in short, is the concept of the 'non-All.' Most theories of subjectivity seem to think of the subject as being some full object, something that can be fully known to the self as long as a properly rigorous process of thought/deduction was applied. It was just the telos of philosophy to one day figure out the full dimensions of what 'subject' actually determines. Contrary to this, most post-modernist critiques of subjectivity take arms against this idea of a 'fully constituted subject:' they see the subject as something historically or socially mediated, as something always-already determined by forces beyond its nature. Žižek's fundamental contribution (and arguably, Lacan's) is to present a vision of the 'fully emptied subject,' a vision of nothingness as being the fundamental constitutive element of subjectivity as such. As Johnston puts it: "the true subject is nothing other than this nothingness itself, this void absence, or 'empty spot' remaining after the innerworldly visages of the ego have been stripped away" and "as far as subjectivity is concerned, in the beginning was failure" (Johnston p. 9).

Žižek's reading of Kant hinges on this fact – for him, Kant was the 'first philosopher' because he was the first to present an image of the subject as internally torn-apart from itself, from its own understanding. He sees Kant's obsessive logic as a neurotic inability to confront the nothingness of being itself, of trying to keep away the excesses of the noumenal world itself that presents us with the horrifying vision of our own death: "The nothingness fled from, the void that Kant allegedly labors so hard to avoid, is nothing other than the very absence of the subject itself, the negation of the insurmountable 'transcendental illusion' of its apparent immortality" (Johnston p. 31).

Since subjectivity is necessarily a void though, non-All, our phenomenal experience of everyday consciousness as being a 'whole' is human being's fundamental symptom, the kernel of its fundamental fantasy. Subjectivity is the Lacanian *sinthome* explicitly, "the essential idea here is that subjectivity, in its effective existence, is the most profound symptom of the human condition (the *sinthome* par excellence), a violent reaction-formation precipitated by and setting itself up against the corporeal condition" (Johnston p. 43). Subjectivity for the subject is both an effective illusion that confronts us at every moment, and the necessarily element that stitches together our actual subjectivity itself. Subjectivity for Žižek is precisely 'neurotic:' it's our way of keeping 'dumb materiality' at bay at all times and avoiding a confrontation with that which escapes our fundamental theorizing and all forms of

thought. Coincidentally, though, this tension between being-it-itself and the apparent illusion of subjectivity is precisely the formula Harman follows in creating his theory of the ‘quadruple object.’

III. Harman and Žižek: Thinkers of the Subject Beyond Any Thinking of the Subject

For Žižek, “[T]he same rift runs through the ‘I’ as well as through the universe as a (non-)whole” (Johnston p. 30). The ‘I’ is necessarily not-All, it is voided from the beginning, and the tension between its actual nothingness and its seeming wholeness is what subjectivity is built out of. The subject is only this oscillation between totality and void.

Likewise, for Harman, “The object is a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum: irreducible to its own pieces, and equally irreducible to its outward relations with other things” (Harman p. 45). The object is forever beyond our grasp, or from the grasp of any other object, even the object itself. The object sinks into a realm beyond understanding, a subterranean realm that lacks any ability to be thought in any concrete manner. This applies for all objects though, both the human object and any other. Therefore, subjectivity is both present in its sensual qualities, as a sensual object, but is hidden as a real object, from its real qualities. The relations between these poles, this ongoing dance between extremes that happens all at once, simultaneously, is the status of the subject/object as such.

This seems to be the crux of the matter: no matter what their extra-ontological differences may be, no matter how different their styles may be, or their respective positions within the history of philosophy, no matter whom their respective philosophical heroes may be, Harman and Žižek present an essentially identical ontological grounding. Žižek is just as much at home in speculative realism as Harman is in the post-continental work of thinkers such as Badiou and Laclau (two of Žižek's contemporaries). Their differences are more terminological and administrative than fundamental. Harman misunderstands Žižek because of his use of the German ‘Idealists’ (such as Kant) in his philosophy – what he fails to take into account is the radical new interpretations of those idealists (that is, as essentially not being idealists, or thinkers of the ‘Idea’) that Žižek presents. Žižek seems to see himself apart from the speculative realists because his project is primarily concerned with the experiences of subjectivity, but this placement prevents him from being able to see the structural homology between his own ontological project and those of the speculative realists. Both parties benefit from destroying this spectral dividing line: Harman emerges from it as a thinker of subjectivity as much as he is one of objects, but as one who feels the need to think objects in extra-human ways; Žižek, in contrast, comes out of this conflict as a Hegelian who can think the fundamental contradictions of objects just as much as of subjects, the thinker of the ‘parallax object’ itself, but as someone who instead thinks the psychoanalytic effects of being confronted with noumenal objects. In summary, just as Meillassoux and Harman were two sides of the same theoretical edifice, two thinkers that are unable to stand up fully without the other for support, Žižek and Harman are two thinkers that fail to reach the full effects of their theories without taking into account each other’s ideas. The dualism between subject and object (though not idealism and realism) is present in each of their thought, but just from different perspectives. That's why the two philosophers should be read into each other, to make a garden out of the fruit that hangs from their low-hanging branches.

Bibliography

Harman, Graham. *The Quadruple Object*. Alresford, Hants, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011. eBook.

Johnston, Adrian. *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2008. Print.

Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. New York: Continuum, 2009. Print.