

# Only Two Peas in a Pod: On the Overcoming of Ontological Taxonomies

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## Abstract

In his 2016 work entitled *Dante's Broken Hammer*, Graham Harman first coins the term “onto-taxonomy”, and proclaims it to be the main nemesis of his “object-oriented” approach to philosophy. The term has however rarely appeared in the absolute majority of his subsequent works, and has also been largely overlooked by thinkers broadly working within and around the field of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). In this paper, I propose to make up for this relative neglect in two ways. Firstly, Harman’s critique of “onto-taxonomy” is analysed and situated in the context of other prominent critiques, such as those of Martin Heidegger’s assessment of “Onto-theology” and Quentin Meillassoux’s assessment of “correlationism.” Secondly, I shall show how what I believe to be the three fundamental tenets of Harman’s philosophical approach are derivable from his critique of “onto-taxonomy.”

**Keywords:** *Graham Harman, Object-Oriented Ontology, Onto-Taxonomy, Contemporary Philosophy, Metaphysics*

In his 2016 book entitled *Dante's Broken Hammer*, Graham Harman first coins the neologism “ontological taxonomy” or “onto-taxonomy”, and proclaims it to be the ‘main target’ of his specific form of “object-oriented ontology” (OOO) (2016a, p. 233). The term, however, only appears in a few pages towards the middle of said text, and has, to date, not been extensively used in almost all of his multifarious publications, with one notable exception being his recently published article entitled “The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy” (2020). The concept has also been largely overlooked by thinkers broadly working within and around the field of triple-O. However, I am of the view that this notion is important and that its relative neglect is unfortunate. For this reason, my aim in what follows shall be to frame Harman’s ideas in relation to his critique of “onto-taxonomy,” in order to show that the fundamental tenets of his philosophy can ultimately be derived from this account. In order to achieve this goal, I will first survey the evaluation of “onto-taxonomy,” situating it in light of other critiques such as those of Quentin Meillassoux’s evaluation of “correlationism” and Heidegger’s critique of “onto-theology.” I shall then proceed to frame this critique in relation to Harman’s proposed threefold solution to onto-taxonomical thinking.

## Onto-Taxonomical Thought

“Ontology” may be broadly understood to entail the study of Being as such. The term “taxonomy”, in turn, refers to a science concerned with demarcation and classification. The neologism “onto-taxonomy” thereby combines each of these terms. It was coined by the American philosopher Graham Harman in order to criticise a deeply entrenched philosophical tendency to postulate a categorical difference – or *taxonomy* – between two exclusive *ontological* domains. The onto-taxonomic gesture may be said to generally proceed in the following manner. It starts off by ringfencing a series of supposedly outstanding traits possessed by a specific kind of being. From this, it then implicitly proceeds to the unwarranted conclusion that such purportedly unique and exceptional features ought to bestow such a being with an extraordinary ontological status which serves to clearly demarcate it from other existents (2016a, p. 230). Harman asserts that Medieval philosophy awarded this privileged status to God, who was endowed with a series of ‘empty superlatives’ designed to categorically distinguish and detach such a being – the *ultimate* Being – from the rest of His creation (2016a, p. 230). Since the birth of Modern philosophy, this privileged role accorded to God has, however, increasingly shifted toward the human. In its modern and contemporary forms, onto-taxonomy therefore imposes an assumed ‘*a priori* [...] split between’ two fundamental ontological domains. One is earmarked exclusively for human beings (*qua* superior moral and rational agents) and their products (culture, creativity, and technology), while the other is reserved for everything else that is supposedly non-human (e.g. the mechanical or irrational) or does not form part of their unique traits (Harman 2016b, p. 5).

## Ontotheology, Ontotaxonomy, and Correlationism

In *Dante’s Broken Hammer*, Harman explicitly asserts that his term “onto-taxonomy” is developed ‘by analogy’ to Martin Heidegger’s critique of “onto-theology” (2016a, p. 237). As is well known, Heidegger claims that Western metaphysics ‘has eminently been both ontology and theology’ or “onto-theo-logy” (2002, p. 54). For him, metaphysics is an *ontology* to the extent that it seeks to identify the most basic kind of being. Simultaneously, it is also a *theology* to the extent that it attempts to give an account ‘of the totality of beings as such’ by explaining their being in terms of a ‘supreme, all-founding being’ (Heidegger 2002, pp. 70-71). Stated as precisely as possible, “onto-theology” thus critiques the idea that there is one fundamental kind of entity acting as the foundation of all others. I am however of the view that Harman’s critique of onto-taxonomy is broader in its scope, since it essentially critiques positions which postulate at least *two categories* of beings at the basis of Being rather than one. Thus, for instance, Harman is then able to criticise Heidegger

for successfully critiquing the latter position only to inevitably fall prey to the former when he affirms a permanent (cor)relation – or “co-proprietion” – between two ultimately distinct domains, namely those of *Sein* (or “Being”) and *Dasein* (which, for lack of a better word, may be roughly – yet not unproblematically – translated to “human”).

Relative to this, it would be necessary to point out that the various historical forms of onto-taxonomy have either postulated an *a priori fissure* separating humans from everything else, or an *a priori relational bond* between the two. The former position is typical of what I propose to call “gap” onto-taxonomical thinkers such as Descartes and Kant, who postulate a fundamental *chasm* between minds and bodies or noumena and phenomena respectively. The latter position is, in turn, attributed to the various “correlationist” thinkers critiqued by the contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux in his now seminal work entitled *After Finitude* (2008) and elsewhere (2016). Roughly stated, the term “correlationism” may be taken to refer to various philosophies who proclaim a permanent and privileged relation between humans and everything else, such that it becomes impossible to think Being – or relations between beings – independently of humans and vice-versa (Meillassoux 2008). In spite of the myriad differences between the various “gap” and “correlationist” thinkers, it may nonetheless be said that both are ultimately onto-taxonomical in their persuasion. This is because they mutually start off with the unwarranted assumption that there are two and *only* two distinct realms which either need mediational bridging (“gap onto-taxonomy”) or are always already conjoined (“correlational onto-taxonomy”). This last point is crucial and thus requires emphasis, since it hints at important differences between Meillassoux’s critique of “correlationism” and Harman’s critique of “onto-taxonomy,” and it also casts doubt on the extent to which the “Speculative Realist” movement can be characterised as unanimously united in its critique of “correlationism” as has sometimes been claimed (Gratton 2014; Sparrow 2014; Young 2020). To elaborate, Meillassoux states that all forms of “correlationism” entail the claim that ‘we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being,’ rather than to ‘either term considered apart from the other’ (2008, p. 5). Given the aim and scope of the present paper, I cannot go into great detail about this matter. For the purposes of the current work, it however suffices to note that Meillassoux’s specific path beyond “correlationism” involves the “speculative materialist” commitment to the idea that human reason is, in principle, capable of gaining access to a non-correlated Absolute (Meillassoux 2008; Meillassoux 2016; Harman 2013b, p. 25). It may nevertheless be noted that, for Harman, both “correlationism” and Meillassoux’s supposed “materialist” passageway beyond the latter in fact remain tethered to onto-taxonomical thinking insofar as they essentially start off by *accepting* the categorical *difference* between thought and being, subject and object, nature and culture, and so forth, ‘and merely [want] to show that these two domains are *not as separate* as some people think’ (Harman 2016a, p. 239, emphasis added).

From what has been said up to this point, it is clear that Harman rejects the onto-taxonomical belief that humans are ‘so utterly different in kind from everything else that they deserve an utterly different ontological category of their own’ (2016b, p. 98). Against such a supposition, he argues that any ‘distinction between [ontological domains] must be *earned* rather than smuggled in from the seventeenth century as purported self-evident truths’ (2016b, p. 98). Of course, Harman does recognise that humans have characteristics which differentiate them from other beings. He mentions high-level thought and speech, the capacity for repression, and the fact that we are historical creatures as examples of such differences (2016a, p. 230). Yet, he also insists that these variances are ultimately only differences in *degree*, and that they therefore ‘[do] not justify basing ontology on a taxonomical dualism between people on one side and all the trillions of non-human entities on the other’ (2016a, p. 230).

### The Trouble with Onto-Taxonomic Thought

Harman sees onto-taxonomical thinking as highly problematic for the following three fundamental reasons. Firstly, he claims that the task of ontology ought to be the ‘discussion of the features of *all* beings as such’ (2016a, p. 230, emphasis added). Taxonomical philosophies nevertheless “short-circuit” this aim by creating a two-tiered ontology which ‘[decides] in advance that basic ontological structures can be read directly from the seemingly special features of privileged beings’ (2016a, p. 231). Secondly, “onto-taxonomy” is said to be thoroughly *anthropocentric* in its scope and persuasion in that it assumes a strict categorical difference between humans and nature, or the cultural and the natural. Finally, “onto-taxonomy” is said to lead to an ‘intellectual division of labor’ (2016a, p. 231) whereby philosophy is disallowed from being able to discuss inter-objective relations independently of human witnesses; the human sciences are left only to deal with supposedly unique human attributes and affairs, while the discussion of relations between non-human others is left to the hard sciences (2016a, p. 232). Furthermore, “onto-taxonomy” is, in Harman’s view, also incapable of properly considering and granting ontological dignity to varied types of technological and social objects as independent forces in their own right (2016a, p. 231).

Having discussed the problem of onto-taxonomy at some length, I will now turn to the question of how Harman’s specific form of “object-oriented ontology” (OOO) offers a possible alternative to such thinking. I am of the view that his proposal for a move beyond onto-taxonomy involves three interrelated commitments, which may be said to also form the basis of his thought. I propose to name these three commitments “ontological democracy,” “ontological accretionism” and “non-reciprocal entanglement.” In what follows, I shall discuss each of these in this order.

## Ontological Democracy

Harman's first move beyond onto-taxonomical thinking entails adopting an "ontologically democratic" view. This specific position emphasises on the irreplaceable existence of an indefinite number of singular entities – or what Harman calls "objects" – with each commanding equal dignity *qua* "object" (Harman 2013a, p. 6). Onto-democracy may be said to entail a "flat" sort of ontology (rather than "hierarchical" one, as in onto-taxonomy) which prohibits the premature assumption of any clear-cut tiered distinction between categories of entities. It is therefore a "neutral monism" to the extent that it deems Being to be composed entirely of objects, but also a "pluralism" insofar as it asserts that there is an indefinite number of individual ones (Harman 2009b, p. 279).

It would, however, be important to note that ontological democracy does not involve the claim that all objects are exactly alike and that humans are therefore no better than a pile of discarded garbage. Rather, it involves the commitment to the claim that "all objects are equally objects" and that there is therefore no *a-priori* categorical difference between the being of natural, technological, cultural, or scientific entities; a peanut, my neighbour Paul, COVID-19, a pot, pan, my laptop, a pistol, plutonium, and Poland are all in fact objects in this specific sense. Given this rather expansive catalogue of entities, one might then venture to ask what the criteria for "objecthood" within Harman's specific schema would be.

It may be noted that triple-O gives the term "object" an especially broad scope, taking it to refer to whatever is *ontologically irreducible*. In other words, and in the first instance, anything may be said to be an object as long as it cannot be reduced downward – or "undermined" – into nothing more than its ultimate component pieces, or reduced upward – or "overmined" – into nothing more than its relations and effects on humans or other objects (Harman 2013c). These forms of "mining" in turn constitute OOO's "negative" theses of objects, insofar as they seek to account for what an object *is not*. Nevertheless, Harman's system also identifies more "positive" features of objects. In a nutshell, his model distinguishes between *real* and *sensual* objects (RO and SO). The objects in the former category are said to exist autonomously from their relations, while those in the latter only exist in relation to some other object, whether human or otherwise. Furthermore, he claims that each of these objects exists in tension with its own respective real and sensual qualities (RQ and SQ) (Harman 2011). Together, what I here call the "negative" and "positive" theses of objects constitute the cornerstone of OOO.

In view of all this, it may then be summarily argued that Harman's sense of "objects" includes not only "mid-sized" entities, but also technological and social entities, fictional characters, mathematical objects, events, sets and historical objects. While this most certainly qualifies as what has been labelled a "liberal" construal of "objecthood" (Morelle 2016; Wolfendale 2014), I am also of the view that this "liberal" – or, better, "democratic" – approach would constitute a better

starting point for doing ontology than one based on the premature reduction of some purported class of entities to some more basic root, as is the case with “onto-taxonomies.”

## Ontological Accretionism

Harman’s second move beyond onto-taxonomical thinking entails what I propose to call “ontological accretionism.” This involves the rejection of the rigid division between natural substances and artificial aggregates postulated by thinkers such as Aristotle and Leibniz. This is because such a distinction grants the status of substance (or “object”) to certain privileged entities at the expense of others, and also creates a hierarchical “two-world” taxonomical theory containing one fundamental layer of basic or natural entities and another derivative layer of relational, artificial, or technological aggregates. It may be noted that Harman rejects such “two-world” positions, since they tacitly involve the “onto-taxonomical” negation of the thesis of “ontological democracy” just discussed.

True enough, Harman claims that there is a sense in which no “object” ‘has any parts at all’ (2005, p. 93) since each is primarily an infrastructural unity rather than an aggregate sum of parts. Nevertheless, he also argues that every object is, in another sense, also composed of parts and is therefore a ‘*multiplicity* that is also somehow *one*’ (2005, p. 96, emphasis added). In other words, every real object is always fashioned from what Harman calls ‘domestic relations’ (2009a, p. 135) between its component parts, but nevertheless also ‘*unifies* [these parts] into an emergent reality which has genuine qualities of its own’ (2010b, p. 15, emphasis added). In this context, it is worth noting that Harman draws an ‘absolute distinction’ (2009a, p. 135) between an object’s “domestic relations” and its “foreign relations”. The former refers to the relations ‘that a thing needs to some extent in order to exist’ while the latter refers to ‘the external alliances that [an object] does not need’ (2009a, p. 135). Nevertheless, Harman claims that a real object is not exhausted by its “domestic” or “foreign” relations; an object is always (relatively) ontologically independent of its “domestic relations” insofar as it *emerges* over and above its constituent parts. It is also ontologically independent of its “foreign relations” insofar as it can reconfigure its alliances with the objects it relates to (Harman 2009a, pp. 135, 188). Thus, Harman argues that all relations – whether domestic or foreign – must ultimately be external to their terms (2009a, p. 188). By way of illustration, an individual hammer is relatively autonomous – or “withdraws” (Harman 2002) – from its external relations with other entities, and therefore acts as a unity ‘with respect to its surroundings’ (2002, p. 171). Nevertheless, the hammer is itself also ‘a relational composite of its internal elements’ (2002, p. 171). This, for Harman, in turn means that the hammer itself ‘is not located at the basement of the universe at all, since a layer of constituent pieces swarms beneath it, another layer beneath that one, and

so forth' (2011, p. 112), to the effect that all objects are 'decomposable into further [entities] *ad infinitum*' (2002, p. 279). Moreover, Harman adds another important twist to this account by further claiming that 'if every entity is already made up of a set of relations' then it would also follow that 'every relation is also *ipso facto* a new entity' (2002, p. 260). Thus, he essentially claims that when objects 'enter into a genuine relation', the relation itself generates a new real object which 'has an identity and a depth that belongs to neither of its parts, and which is also irreducible to all of its current effects on other entities, or to the knowledge we may have of it' (2005, p. 85). Crucially, some real objects may also be "hybrid entities" which unify a mixture of natural, social, and technological elements. Given the above, it is therefore evident that Harman argues for an *indefinitely*-stratified model in which the actual world is an open system 'made up of objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects' (2005, p. 85). It may be further noted that Harman advocates an infinite regress of objects as the only possible alternative to two other models of reality which he regards as untenable, namely those that postulate a *finite* regress of objects – namely classical substance theorists – or *no regress* of objects at all – namely the "philosophies of human access" (Harman 2002, p. 293).

### Non-reciprocal Entanglement

Harman's critique of onto-taxonomy finally involves the commitment to what I call "non-reciprocal entanglement", which is, in turn, presented as a solution to the possible onto-taxonomical postulation of a "world" made up of immanent, holistically entangled, entities standing in opposition to human transcendence.

As I have already stated earlier, Harman's starting point is that individual objects cannot be "overmined" into their relations, and must therefore be understood as existing independently of the latter; they exist autonomously (or "withdraw") from their direct external relations. Nevertheless, he also insists that real objects must simultaneously also be able of *indirect* entanglement and influence, for otherwise it would be impossible for change to occur (2005, p. 1). This simultaneous possibility of *direct* "withdrawal" and *indirect* interaction, in turn, leads Harman to the idea that real objects must 'touch without touching' (2005, p. 215) through a process he dubs "vicarious causation" (2012). Harman (*inter alia* 2005, p. 224; 2009, p. 147) often explicitly describes "vicarious causation" in terms of three core features, claiming that all causality is necessarily vicarious, buffered and asymmetrical. However, I hold that this list can be broadened to include three further principal characteristics, since, for Harman, causation is also alluring, binary and aesthetic. Due to space restrictions, I shall here only briefly summarise each of these features.

Causation and influence, for Harman, can only be "vicarious." One of the main theses of triple-O is that objects are autonomous from one another, or "withdraw" from their relations. This, in turn, entails that objects can only interact by proxy

through the mediation of an alluring relational stand-in – or what Harman calls the “sensual object” – acting as a deputy or “vicar” alluding to the “withdrawn” real object (Harman, 2012, p. 200). Causality is buffered insofar as the “sensual” or “relational” stand-ins inhibit the direct contact between real objects (Harman 2009, p. 221). Causation is, in turn, asymmetrical in two interrelated ways. It is asymmetrical in the aforementioned sense that a real object originally interacts with a sensual mediator rather than a real one (2012, p. 200). It is also asymmetrical because Harman claims that some mutual influence between two real objects is not the result of reciprocal interaction, but rather ‘a special case of two simultaneous *one-way relations* in which two objects happen to relate to one another *independently*’ (2010a, p. 96, emphasis added). In light of this second sense of asymmetry, it can be seen that causation is also binary, in the sense that interactions, for Harman, occur *exclusively* between two objects (2009, pp. 208-209), such that in instances ‘where more than two objects seem to be in relation [...] there will either be a slow accretion of pairs of terms, or a central term that related independently with each of the others’ (2010a, p. 106). Finally, causation is also aesthetic in two interrelated senses; firstly, to the extent that Harman confers the source of all causal impetus to the sensual surfaces of things (2012, p. 195) and secondly, to the extent that Harman identifies the mechanism of allure with a surface or aesthetic effect which is able to split an object from its qualities, using the latter to allude to a real one.

## Conclusion

As I have shown, Harman’s philosophy may be said to be entirely premised on three fundamental commitments. Firstly, triple-O views reality as being composed of infinitely many singularities, each with their own specific nature and impact on the rest of the cosmos. Secondly, it rejects the “two-world” categorical difference between natural singularities and artificial multiplicities, insisting instead that each and every object is simultaneously both one and many. Thirdly, it rejects the notion of a single holistically interrelated world-lump, replacing the latter with a model of interactions by proxy dubbed “vicarious causation.” Each of these ideas may, in turn, said to be entailed by the critique of “onto-taxonomy;” a concept which has unfortunately often been neglected in works dealing with triple-O. The aim of this paper has therefore been to make up for this relative neglect by highlighting how Harman’s fundamental commitments are entailed by this critique.

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