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Realism with a Straight Face: A Response to Leonard Lawlor

Graham Harman

In the closing weeks of 2017, my Argentine friend Laureano Ralón conducted an interview of Leonard Lawlor that I read with great interest.¹ Lawlor is currently Edwin Earle Sparks Professor of Philosophy at Penn State University, and has long been one of the most influential members of his generation in the American continental philosophy establishment. He has distinguished himself as a scholar of established classics in philosophy, but also as someone unusually alert to such relatively recent trends as the philosophies of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. In short, he has always been near the cutting edge of wherever American continental philosophy happens to be. For this reason, his views on some of the latest developments in continentally inspired philosophy need to be taken seriously. Nonetheless—as will be seen in what follows—I think he gets these developments largely wrong. I hope that Lawlor will take these pages in the spirit of friendly disagreement in which they are intended, though inevitably there will be some friction when two views of the future of continental philosophy as different as ours confront each other.

We begin with the third-to-last question of the interview, in which Ralón asks Lawlor about “the new realism of the 2000s.” More specifically, Ralón wants to know if “Deleuze is more of a realist than, say, Heidegger, Foucault, or Derrida.”² This seems like a reasonable question, given the broad spectrum of views on this topic: ranging from Manuel DeLanda’s provocative claim that Deleuze simply *is a realist* to Ray Brassier’s rather vitriolic account of Deleuze as one of the great *anti*-realists of recent philosophy.³ Rather than answering directly, Lawlor challenges the question itself:

When I hear the word “realism” today, I’m really not sure what it means. . . . If realism means that we seek the ontological conditions of consciousness, of the subject, then of course Heidegger is a realist. But if realism means that reality exists in itself, separate from experience, then I think this is a return to the “old metaphysics.” . . . I guess if the debate now is between realism and transcendentalism, then I am a transcendentalist. Simply, I do not see how one can return back beyond Kant’s Copernican Revolution. As Kant showed, if there is a reality beyond the forms in which things are given to us, the noumenal, then we can say nothing about it. And to say anything about reality in itself amounts to falling prey to an illusion.⁴

Here we lodge a first point of disagreement with Lawlor. For object-oriented ontology (OOO, pronounced “Triple O”) just as for DeLanda himself, realism definitely does not just mean that “we seek the ontological conditions of consciousness, of the subject,” which is the deflationary sense of realism that Lawlor offers.⁵ Although I do read Heidegger as a realist, this involves a much more stringently classical definition of the term.⁶ That definition—also used by DeLanda when he calls Deleuze a realist—happens to be the very one rejected by Lawlor as a form of the “old metaphysics,” which he rejects in favor of “transcendentalism.” Hence, in the first part of this article, I will defend realism against transcendentalism. But it will be necessary to do a bit more than that: for unlike DeLanda, I regard the notion that “reality exists in itself, separate from experience” to be a necessary condition for realism, but not a sufficient one. The reason for this is that reality exists not just “separate from experience,” but separate from *any relation at all*, including the sort that is so ontologically primitive that we might hesitate even to call it experience. Finally, I will challenge Lawlor’s rather mainstream assumption that “if there is a reality beyond the forms in which things are given to us, the noumenal, then we can say nothing about it.” For there is actually quite a bit that can be said about the noumenal, paradoxical though it may sound.

The second interesting passage from Lawlor’s interview, and thus the topic of the second section below, concerns OOO’s connection with the philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux. The link is not at all how Lawlor portrays it; nor does he get Meillassoux quite right. I speak of the following passage:

While I find Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* to be an interesting work, the argument he makes for ancestral time is very weak. How could we speak about anything that is prior to givenness, when what we are speaking about must have been given to us somehow? If it was not given somehow, we would know nothing about it. Therefore, it seems to me that Meillassoux and his followers—object-oriented ontologists—are dogmatists. What must be explored first of all, as Husserl showed, are the modes of givenness.⁷

Several problems arise in this passage even before we reach the key point of philosophical interest. First, though I am happy to hear that Lawlor finds Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*⁸ to be an interesting book, he seems to get the basic argument of that book wrong. Lawlor claims that Meillassoux makes a “very weak” argument for ancestral time, and that the French philosopher thereby mistakenly assumes we can speak about something beyond its givenness. Yet, this is not actually what Meillassoux does. His entire book is based on the assumption that *both* the claim of science to speak of a world independent of givenness *and* the correlationist claim that there is no way to speak of anything prior to givenness are persuasive.⁹ He does not simply belittle correlationism at the expense of scientific realism, but employs considerable finesse in trying to find a novel solution that incorporates the insights of both. Though I happen to think his solution fails, it is not the simplistic “naïve realist” solution that Lawlor seems to imagine, but something far more intricate.¹⁰ Furthermore, in no sense are object-oriented ontologists “followers” of Meillassoux, as even a cursory reading of my criticisms of Meillassoux’s position would show. And finally, it is hard to see how

Lawlor can call object-oriented philosophers “dogmatists” when the entire OOO position is based on the acceptance and amplification of Kant’s notion of the thing-in-itself: the very kryptonite of all dogmatism. In the second section of this article, then, I will show how Lawlor misreads: (a) Meillassoux’s approach to realism, (b) Meillassoux’s relation to OOO, and (c) OOO’s position with respect to dogmatism.

The third and final passage from Lawlor’s interview that I wish to consider is the following, which concerns the status of the human being in recent continental philosophy:

Here too, one more comment: as far as I can tell, the object-oriented ontologists do not really understand what the transcendental is, especially as this idea develops in 20th century phenomenology. The transcendental and even the transcendental subject are not human. The whole 20th century discourse of anti-humanism develops from the recognition that *Dasein* in *Being and Time* is not human, not human existence or human reality. Fundamental ontology and transcendental phenomenology are not forms of anthropology. While not equating the two, *Dasein* in Heidegger and transcendental subjectivity in Husserl refer, respectively, to the conditions for human existence and the conditions for human subjectivity—but these two kinds of conditions are not identical with human existence and human subjectivity. If they were, they would engage in the kind of circular reasoning we discussed earlier. Already in transcendental phenomenology, humans are “actants,” as I think some of the object-oriented ontologists say, along with objects.¹¹

Having already declared himself on the side of transcendental philosophy, Lawlor preemptively critiques OOO for misunderstanding what that position entails. Specifically, Lawlor holds that OOO is wrong to find transcendental philosophy guilty of a human-centered standpoint. He does get one thing right: OOO does, in fact, claim that transcendental philosophy is anthropocentric. Making unexpected use of the terminology of Bruno Latour (who still seems little known among American continental philosophers) Lawlor claims that Heidegger’s *Dasein* is already an “actant,” thereby implying that OOO is reinventing the wheel when it tries to outflank Heidegger on the side of anti-anthropocentrism.¹² The third section of this chapter, then, will address Lawlor’s view that Heidegger is already as “anti-humanist” as one can possibly be.

I Realism and the “old metaphysics”

We have seen that Lawlor expresses some perplexity about the meaning of the word “realism” in its contemporary usage. This is not entirely his fault, since countless attempts have been made in recent years to redefine “realism” in a less robust sense than is usual. In American continental philosophy, we have John D. Caputo making the nearly inedible claim that Jacques Derrida is a realist; the impossibility of this will be seen shortly.¹³ I interpret this as resulting from a wish to make Derrida impregnable to the objections frequently thrown his way by philosophical realists of a more standard

sort. The important thinker Karen Barad uses the term “agential realism” for her position, even though she explicitly denies that either subject or object can exist independently of one another; her views are basically those of the physicist Niels Bohr, one of her intellectual heroes.¹⁴ This is more of a correlationist or even idealist view than a realist one, to such an extent that “agential idealism” would be a better term for Barad’s position than “agential realism.” And finally, there is my own favorite living philosopher, Bruno Latour, who uses the opening pages of *Pandora’s Hope* to try to remove the term “realism” from the hands of his—admittedly thuggish—opponents in the 1990s “science wars.”¹⁵ Yet as someone who has probably spent thousands of hours studying the writings of Latour and conversing with him in person, I can safely declare that Latour has not an ounce of sympathy for anything traditionally called “realism.”¹⁶

Only against the background of these many imprecise uses of “realism” is it possible for Lawlor to say that “if realism means that we seek the ontological conditions of consciousness, of the subject, then of course Heidegger is a realist.” For obviously enough, this is not what “realism” means when used by speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, by DeLanda in his realist interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari, or indeed by anyone who would normally be called a realist: Maurizio Ferraris, for example, who for years has been one of the most hardcore realists among continental philosophers.¹⁷ In any case, the sort of realism that interests me is the more traditional sense of the term that Lawlor rules entirely out of play: “But if realism means that reality exists in itself, separate from experience, then I think this is a return to the ‘old metaphysics.’” We will consider the theme of the “old metaphysics” shortly. But first, I want to contest briefly Lawlor’s suggestion that Heidegger is primarily about “seeking the ontological conditions of consciousness,” and that he might count as a realist only in this rather un-realist sense of realism. For the purpose of comparison, let’s consider the case of Immanuel Kant. Kant holds, of course, that rational beings have no direct access to the things-in-themselves, and therefore the primary theme of Kantian philosophy does amount to “seeking the ontological conditions of consciousness.” But obviously enough, there is nothing about the study of consciousness that could count as “realist” in any normally accepted sense of the term. If we are nevertheless inclined to call Kant a “realist”—as I am so inclined—then this clearly has nothing to do with his pursuit of the transcendental categories of experience, but only with what *escapes* such categories: namely, the infamous *Ding an sich*, or thing-in-itself. Returning from Kant to Heidegger, an analogous point holds true. If we want to consider Heidegger a realist, then this has nothing to do with the transcendental structures of *Dasein* as uncovered in *Being and Time*, but with that which escapes or eludes *Dasein*.¹⁸ The first example of what thus eludes *Dasein* comes in the tool-analysis, where it is not just a question of a practical use of things preceding a direct perceptual or conceptual awareness of them—as too many readings have it—but of the tools themselves being deeper even than our practical use of them. Without such a surplus of being in the tools, they could never possibly break, and breaking is the most illuminating thing that equipment does in *Being and Time*. Beyond this, *Being itself* is always characterized by Heidegger in terms of its withdrawal from any direct presence. In sum, I would argue for reading both Kant and Heidegger as realists: not because they think there is a reality to which we have direct access, but because they are committed to the notion that

reality means that which *escapes* any such access. It is a sense of realism directly opposed to that of dogmatic or naïve realism, which takes an interest in the real only insofar as it can be known. On this point, OOO can be likened to the positions of Kant or Heidegger: not insofar as these great thinkers are preoccupied with the structures that make human reality possible, but insofar as they point unmistakably beyond such knowable structures into the darkness of the real.

We turn now, as promised, to the “old metaphysics.” Here Lawlor speaks in a somewhat accusing voice with a markedly Derridean accent. Let’s recall some key passages from Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* to show what he means by the old metaphysics, which—I hold—is not quite the same thing as what Heidegger wants to combat under that name.¹⁹ On one level there is an obvious similarity, as seen from Derrida’s Heideggerian-sounding wish to “undermine an ontology which, in its innermost course, has determined the meaning of being as presence.”²⁰ There can be no question that Heidegger is an enemy of the metaphysics of presence, which he treats as the hereditary flaw of Western philosophy since Plato; for Heidegger no less than for Derrida, nothing can ever be made directly present. What can be questioned is whether Heidegger would agree to Derrida’s additional embellishments on this theme. For instance:

Heidegger’s insistence on noting that being is produced as history only through the logos, and is nothing outside of it, the difference between being and the entity—all this clearly indicates that fundamentally nothing escapes the movement of the signifier, and that, in the last instance, the difference between signified and signifier *is nothing*.²¹

This sounds less like Heidegger than like the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, with its famous claim that meaning arises only from relation and differentiation. But the view that Heidegger’s Being is nothing apart from its various meanings to *Dasein* is not a plausible reading of Heidegger, for whom Being is always that which withdraws from any attempt to thematize it. Yet Derrida doubles down on this point, insisting that nothing exists at all apart from its relations with anything else: “The so-called ‘thing itself’ is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity.”²² Stated differently: “The thing itself is a collection of things or a chain of differences.”²³ We learn further that those who disagree with this premise are guilty of “logocentric repression”: an astonishing act of political intimidation aimed by Derrida at realists, who are portrayed as patriarchal oppressors of those liberated ones who celebrate chains of difference and the mirroring of signs unto infinity.²⁴

But some of this is beside the point. For whether or not the reader agrees with my brief account of the chief distinction between Heidegger and Derrida, it should be easy enough to see the difference between my own position and Lawlor’s. I am in total agreement with Lawlor that the “old metaphysics” ought not to be revived, but we disagree as to what was harmful about that metaphysics. For OOO, the old metaphysics failed through its assumption that the thing itself can somehow be brought to direct

presence: an error found not only in pre-Kantian dogmatism, but even in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, whom I admire at least as much as Lawlor does. From a OOO standpoint, the problem with Husserl's much-maligned "intuition of essences" is not the "essence" part, but the "intuition" part. The essence really is there: not just at the level of the given phenomena—where Husserl acknowledges it—but also in a layer of the cosmos withdrawn from all access, and hence impenetrable to "intuition" or to any other form of relation. But for Derrida, and evidently for Lawlor, the very *existence* of a thing-in-itself outside all relations to human meaning is incoherent. This is not just an anti-presence view, but a bluntly anti-realist one. While it is certainly true that Heidegger emphasizes the permanent co-existence of *Sein* and *Dasein*, it does not follow from this correlation that *Sein* is nothing more than how it appears to *Dasein*, despite Derrida's groundless claim that Being is nothing outside of how it comes to presence in history at various times. To summarize, Lawlor's effort to link philosophical realism with the old metaphysics of presence fails, just as Derrida's own effort in this direction fails. Derrida complains that any identical thing would be "self-present" and would therefore run afoul of the Heideggerian strictures against presence. But this notion of "self-presence" is found nowhere that I can recall in Heidegger and is simply an attempt to impose Derrida's own ultra-relational ontology onto the rather different Heideggerian landscape, where it is not altogether applicable.

We now turn to Lawlor's attempt to deploy Kant against OOO. We recall that his words were as follows: "Simply, I do not see how one can return back beyond Kant's Copernican Revolution. As Kant showed, if there is a reality beyond the forms in which things are given to us, the noumenal, then we can say nothing about it. And to say anything about reality in itself amounts to falling prey to an illusion." While basically correct, Lawlor's gloss of Kant contains an added drop of contraband German idealism. For it is by no means true that Kant holds that "we can say nothing about" the reality beyond the forms. He at least says we can be sure that the in-itself is really there, which is more than most contemporary philosophers are willing to concede. But more importantly, what Kant thinks about the thing-in-itself is not the most important matter here.

First, it is odd to claim that OOO slips back into dogmatism, when it makes perhaps the most ardent defense of the inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself since the days of Kant himself. Dogmatism means the claim to gain direct knowledge of the in-itself, and while this is a perfectly accurate description of what Meillassoux aims to do by mathematical means, OOO is resolute in its defense of Kant on this point: finitude is insurmountable, not something we can pass beyond. Yet there is a second point on which OOO *disagrees* with Kant, though both Lawlor and Meillassoux agree with him. Namely, OOO holds that the thing-in-itself is not just something that haunts human perception and cognition. Instead, the thing-in-itself is the excess or surplus outside of any relation between *any* two terms, including inanimate ones. When fire burns cotton, these entities interact with only a small portion of each other's reality, not with the whole of it; here we can see that finitude is not a uniquely human burden but is the name of the game in any relation whatsoever. Now, Meillassoux dismisses this aspect of OOO for an odd taxonomical reason: he holds that only natural science should be able to tell us how to deal with inanimate beings, and that philosophy should not be

imposing what he calls “hyperphysics” onto terrain that is the rightful property of the sciences.²⁵ But I suspect that Lawlor would offer a different reason for rejecting OOO’s treatment of inanimate objects, one that is closer to what would probably be Kant’s own. Namely, while we can justifiably speak about human access to the world, since that is the space that each of us always occupies, we cannot have any idea of what the experience of fire or cotton is like, or even if such experience exists at all. Therefore, to make any claim at all about inanimate interactions is to step illegitimately into something beyond our direct access, and thus to commit the crime of dogmatism. But to say this is to conflate two separate issues. For it is one thing to ask whether we can speak of the thing-in-itself directly, and quite another to say whether we can speak about the relation of non-human things to the world that is outside of them. From a OOO standpoint, the answer to the first is no, while the answer to the second is yes. One need not be able to experience the world as a lizard or a stone experiences it in order to deduce that they cannot experience the thing-in-itself: not because they possibly lack experience, but because even sub-experiential relations cannot make any contact with the thing-in-itself. OOO does not claim to be able to step into the shoes of other beings in order to determine whether they can grasp the thing-in-itself. Rather, OOO claims that it is not through experience that I conclude that an in-itself exists beyond that experience. The thing-in-itself is something we *deduce* from the fact that—contra Merleau-Ponty—no number of views of a house suffice to add up to a house.²⁶ Nor would any number of *causal impacts* with the house add up to a house. On this basis I deduce that I have no access to the thing-in-itself, that my wife has no such access, that Lucy in the primeval Awash Valley did not, and that every animal, bacterium, fire, cotton ball, and asteroid in the history of the cosmos has not had access to the thing-in-itself.

The other problem with Lawlor’s views—though it is certainly common enough—can be found in his deceptively logical-sounding assumption that if the thing-in-itself is beyond all direct access, then we cannot say anything about it at all. Note that this all-or-nothing approach to speaking would render *philosophia* as practiced by Socrates impossible, and would even annihilate philosophy altogether. It is true enough that we can never know the thing-in-itself in the manner of confronting it directly and face-to-face; in this sense, there is no wisdom. But there is always *love of wisdom*, and herein lies the entire justification of philosophy. Socrates tells us famously that a god can have knowledge and an animal none at all; though both parts of this claim are more than dubious, we can accept them for the sake of argument. The real import of the claim can be found in its third part: humans can have something without having it. There is no passage in the Platonic dialogues where Socrates successfully defines anything, but this hardly means that Socrates does not succeed in saying anything of value. Only the overemphasis on scientific knowledge since the 1600s has browbeaten us into the assumption that the only options are knowledge on one side and ignorant gesticulation on the other. This crude vision of human cognition has never made any sense in the arts, for instance: for an artwork is a reality autonomous from whatever any human opinion of it may be, and there can be no final adequate critical knowledge of any given artwork.²⁷ This was Kant’s point in the *Critique of Judgment* when he separated art from the realm of concepts and rules.²⁸ To summarize, the claim that

philosophy need not deal with things-in-themselves because there is nothing we can say about them is a false one.

II Meillassoux, OOO, and dogmatism

We now turn to Lawlor's discussion of OOO, its link with Meillassoux, and the relation of both to the metaphysical dogmatism effectively ended by Kant. Let's begin with Meillassoux, whom Lawlor misreads in the same way as virtually all mainstream continental philosophers in the United States (the situation seems somewhat better in Great Britain and Australia): "While I find Meillassoux's *After Finitude* to be an interesting work, the argument he makes for ancestral time is very weak. How could we speak about anything that is prior to givenness, when what we are speaking about must have been given to us somehow? If it was not given somehow, we would know nothing about it." The mistake here results from a misunderstanding of Meillassoux's aim in introducing the concepts of "ancestrality" and the "arche-fossil," which he does in the early pages of *After Finitude*.

Surely the most famous concept in Meillassoux's book is "correlationism." Here is the initial definition of the term, taken from page 5 of the English translation:

the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*. By "correlation" we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call *correlationism* any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined. Consequently, it becomes possible to say that every philosophy which disavows naïve realism has become a variant of correlationism.²⁹

There are two points worth noting here. The first is that Lawlor himself, at least in his interview with Ralón, defends what is in effect a correlationist position. In Lawlor's own words: "What must be explored first of all, as Husserl showed, are the modes of givenness." For my own part, I actually see Husserl—great philosopher though he is—as an outright *idealist* rather than just a correlationist. But there is no reason to have that argument with Lawlor in the present article. What is relevant here is that, even by Lawlor's own admission, his position and Husserl's are both *at least* correlationist if not idealist. "What must be explored first of all, as Husserl showed, are the modes of givenness." In other words, Lawlor admits that both he and Husserl adhere to the following principle that Meillassoux ascribes to correlationism:

Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object "in itself," in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object.³⁰

To claim that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object (in Meillassoux's terms), and the reverse, is the same as to say that we must "first of all" explore the way that the object is given to the subject (in Lawlor's terms). In short, Lawlor cannot claim to be exempt from being called a "correlationist," though of course we have no textual evidence that he would wish to exempt himself.

That brings us to the second important point in the initial passage quoted from Meillassoux: "it becomes possible to say that every philosophy which disavows naïve realism has become a variant of correlationism." Lawlor seems to read Meillassoux as a naïve realist rather than a correlationist, and to view this as Meillassoux's cardinal error. But this is not what is going on in *After Finitude*: by no means does Meillassoux aspire to overturn correlationism in the name of what many continental philosophers would call "naïve scientific realism." Instead, Meillassoux is trying to develop the consequences of the paradox that *both* naïve realism and correlationism have an important point to make. His entire philosophical enterprise amounts to a rather complex effort to overcome the limitations of both options, and I happen to think this effort fails.

In one sense, it is true that Meillassoux has tremendous respect for the work of the natural sciences. He finds it utterly implausible that the astronomical statement "the Big Bang occurred 13.5 billion years ago" could be rewritten in terms of "givenness" by saying "the Big Bang occurred 13.5 billion years ago *for us*." The philosophical problem this presents is not merely hypothetical. No less a thinker than Bruno Latour argues that Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis, as Egyptologists now claim, since, in the time of Ramses, tuberculosis had not yet been discovered. For Latour, the most we can say in this case is that *from our standpoint today*, Ramses II died of tuberculosis.³¹ Now, it is true that Meillassoux has no sympathy for correlationist-sounding statements of this sort. As he sees it, the "naïve realist" has a good point, and this is why ancestral statements about arche-fossils—entities that pre-exist the emergence of all consciousness—must be taken seriously in a *literal* sense, rather than correlationized into "arche-fossils for us."

But this is only half of Meillassoux's concern. The other half, usually forgotten, is that he also thinks the correlationist has a point: Meillassoux *is not* a naïve realist. As he puts it in *After Finitude*: "we cannot go back to being dogmatists. On this point we cannot but be heirs of Kantianism."³² To some extent it is true that *After Finitude* emphasizes the strength of ancestry and the arche-fossil more than the equal strength of correlationism, perhaps because this book's primary enemy is the rampant correlationism of continental thought. But any doubts about Meillassoux's respect for correlationism quickly evaporate as soon as one reads his remarks from the inaugural 2007 Speculative Realism Workshop at Goldsmiths, University of London. As he puts it there:

I insist on this point—the exceptional *strength* of this argumentation, apparently and desperately implacable. Correlationism rests on an argument as simple as it is powerful, and which can be formulated in the following way: No X without givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X. If you speak about something, you speak about something that is given to you, and posited by you.³³

This is not a stray or misfired remark. The whole point of Meillassoux at Goldsmiths was to show that there is no easy way to escape the correlational circle, that it represents the permanent horizon of all serious philosophy. Let's now place two previous citations side by side for purposes of comparison.

Lawlor "How could we speak about anything that is prior to givenness, when what we are speaking about must have been given to us somehow? If it was not given somehow, we would know nothing about it."

Meillassoux "No X without givenness of X, and no theory about X without a positing of X. If you speak about something, you speak about something that is given to you, and posited by you."

When it comes to givenness, it should now be obvious that Lawlor and Meillassoux are very much in agreement. The difference is that Meillassoux is still somewhat uncomfortable with the situation. For this reason, he tries to radicalize what he calls "strong correlationism" into a position he calls "speculative materialism." For the speculative materialist, even though we cannot think a thing outside thought without turning it into a thought, something might exist outside thought anyway. Although I have argued in print more than once that this position is impossible,³⁴ it is important that we not confuse it with naïve scientific realism, as Lawlor seems to do. Meillassoux's speculative materialism is actually in far greater danger of slipping into idealism than into naïve realism.

This brings us to Lawlor's mistaken assessment of the relative allegiances of the speculative realist philosophers. Namely: "it seems to me that Meillassoux and his followers—object-oriented ontologists—are dogmatists." It is hard to know where this came from. Simply put, the object-oriented ontologists *are not* followers of Meillassoux. How could Lawlor have formed such a notion? The most charitable interpretation I can think of is that my own enthusiasm for writing frequently about Meillassoux has been mistaken for a symptom of OOO having actually derived from Meillassoux.³⁵ While this inference may be understandable, even a quick scan of what I have written on this important French thinker will show severe disagreement with the foundations of his work, which obviously does not preclude admiration and interest.³⁶ It is also worth mentioning that the term "object-oriented philosophy" (the predecessor of "object-oriented ontology") has been in public use since 1999, some years before I first became aware of Meillassoux's existence in 2006.³⁷

But it may be more helpful simply to give a brief list of the major differences between OOO and Meillassoux's speculative materialism. First, whereas Meillassoux thinks that the correlationist argument ("you can't think something outside thought without turning it into a thought") is a formidable one, OOO finds it to be extremely weak. Second, Meillassoux regards mathematics as the exemplary form of cognition, while for OOO aesthetics enjoys that role; a great deal follows from this disagreement. Meillassoux dismisses the principle of sufficient reason, though for OOO it is of crucial importance that it be retained. Third, for Meillassoux, the thing-in-itself is not beyond all thought, but is simply that which can exist before thought rises and after it disappears;

for OOO, more along the lines of Kant, the thing-in-itself exists right now and is beyond all thought. Nonetheless, for Meillassoux—as for Kant—the thing-in-itself is something that exists outside *thought*, while OOO departs from Kant in treating the thing-in-itself as existing outside *any relation at all*, including causal relations between inanimate beings. These are some of the chief differences between speculative materialism and OOO, whose originators were born just over six months apart, and whose dice were already cast years before the two currents of thought came into contact.

III *Dasein*, actants, and humanism

We should conclude by speaking, more briefly, of Lawlor's claim that OOO misunderstands the respective places of *Dasein* and the human being in twentieth-century continental philosophy. Here is one of his shorter remarks on this topic: "Already in transcendental phenomenology, humans are 'actants,' as I think some of the object-oriented ontologists say, along with objects." The term "actant" is borrowed by OOO from Latour, who took it from the semiotics of Algirdas Greimas but pressed it beyond the limits of semiotics; "actor" is one of Latour's synonyms for "actant."³⁸ The important thing to recognize about the term "actor" is that it is not used by Latour just to say that something acts, but to say that everything is *equally* an actor, and in the same way. In Latour's actor-network theory human beings act, as do giraffes, trains, protons, cartoon characters, square circles, along with "golden Mountains, phlogiston, unicorns, bald kings of France, chimeras, spontaneous generation, black holes, cats on mats, and other black swans and white ravens."³⁹ In other words, the primary function of the term "actor" or "actant" for Latour is to be *ontologically democratic*, along the lines of what is often called a "flat ontology." Please note that no such thing exists in Heidegger's work, at least not according to Heidegger's interpretation of his own work. Central for Heidegger is the correlation between *Dasein* (human being) and *Sein* (being). Though he occasionally speaks about other types of beings, none of them rise to the level of *Dasein*, to which Heidegger always accords a special status. There can be no question of a flat ontology in Heidegger of the sort that we find in Latour, however inconsistently the latter may carry it out at times. For this reason, it is impossible to speak of Heideggerian *Dasein* as an "actant," no matter how many actions one may ascribe to it.

This leaves us with a final, related point by Lawlor. I speak of the following:

as far as I can tell, the object-oriented ontologists do not really understand what the transcendental is, especially as this idea develops in 20th century phenomenology. The transcendental and even the transcendental subject are not human. The whole 20th century discourse of anti-humanism develops from the recognition that *Dasein* in *Being and Time* is not human, not human existence or human reality. Fundamental ontology and transcendental phenomenology are not forms of anthropology.

Here, rather than engaging in a genuine philosophical dispute, Lawlor plays the authority card by saying that OOO simply "does not understand" a crucial point, which

he goes on merely to assert rather than to argue: the purportedly vast chasm between the transcendental and the human. In response, I should say first that the “20th century discourse of anti-humanism” does not interest OOO very much, since the inauguration of this discourse has done absolutely nothing to move human beings away from the center of philosophy. You can claim all you like that the transcendental is not the human, but until you are also willing to ascribe a “transcendental” structure to an animal, citrus fruit, or stone, then you are still linking the transcendental to just one specific type of entity: the human being. And if you claim that this is inescapable, insofar as we cannot step out of the human categories into the experience of animals, citrus fruits, or stones, since it will always be *we* who think of them, then you have simply repeated Kant’s unfortunate ambiguity about dogmatism already discussed in Section I above. What we must overleap is not the pointless low hurdle of “humanism,” but the more serious obstacle of the widespread assumption that *givenness to thought* is the starting point for all philosophy.

Notes

- 1 Laureano Ralón, “Interview with Leonard Lawlor,” *Figure/Ground*, December 11, 2017. Available at: <http://figureground.org/conversation-leonard-lawlor/>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002); Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave, 2007).
- 4 Ralón, “Interview with Leonard Lawlor.”
- 5 Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman, *The Rise of Realism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017).
- 6 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).
- 7 Ralón, “Interview with Leonard Lawlor.”
- 8 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).
- 9 Meillassoux’s underpublicized respect for correlationism was the central theme of his contribution to the April 2007 Speculative Realism Workshop. See Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux, “Speculative Realism,” *Collapse III* (2007): 306–449, in which Meillassoux’s presentation runs on pages 408–49.
- 10 See Chapter 1 of Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
- 11 Ralón, “Interview with Leonard Lawlor.”
- 12 Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 13 John D. Caputo, “For Love of the Things Themselves: Derrida’s Phenomenology of the Hyper-Real,” in *Fenomenologia hoje: significado e linguagem*, ed. Ricardo Timm de Souza and Nythamar Fernandes de Oliveira (Porto Alegre, Brazil: EDIPUCRS, 2002), 37–59.

- 14 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). For a more detailed critique of Barad's position see Graham Harman, "Agential and Speculative Realism: Remarks on Barad's Ontology," *rhizomes* 30 (2016). Available at: www.rhizomes.net/issue30/harman.html.
- 15 Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1–23.
- 16 See Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009); Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (London: Pluto, 2014).
- 17 Maurizio Ferraris, *Introduction to New Realism*, trans. Sarah De Sanctis (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- 18 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 2008).
- 19 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). For a more detailed critique of these passages from Derrida and others, see Graham Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 183–203.
- 20 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 22–3.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 25 Quentin Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign" (a.k.a. "The Berlin Lecture"), (unpublished version, trans. Robin Mackay, 2012), 13–14. Available at: https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0069/6232/files/Meillassoux_Workshop_Berlin.pdf.
- 26 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2012), 79.
- 27 See Graham Harman, "The Third Table," in *The Book of Books*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 540–2.
- 28 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).
- 29 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 See Bruno Latour, "On the Partial Existence of Existence and Non-existing Objects," in *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 247–69.
- 32 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 29.
- 33 Meillassoux, in Brassier, Grant, Harman, and Meillassoux, "Speculative Realism," 409.
- 34 Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018), 123–65.
- 35 Graham Harman, "Quentin Meillassoux: A New French Philosopher," *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 104–17; Graham Harman, "Meillassoux's Virtual Future," *Continent* 1, no. 2 (2011): 78–91; Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*.

- 36 See especially Chapter 15 of Graham Harman, *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2013).
- 37 See Chapter 6 of Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010).
- 38 For an interesting account of Latour's relation to semiotics, see Hennig Schmidgen, *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Gloria Custance (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
- 39 Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 161.