

Graham Harman

Graham Harman is the founder of the object-oriented ontology (OOO) movement in philosophy. He is Associate Provost for Research Administration and a member of the Department of Philosophy at the American University in Cairo.

Object-oriented ontology (OOO) first emerged in the

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late 1990s from an attempt to radicalize the famous tool-analysis of Martin Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. OOO studies the interactions between all forms of objects, whether they be physical, mental, natural, artificial, simple, complex. For Harman, objects can never interact directly, but only through some form of mediated or vicarious interaction. Reality is polarized into four basic zones: real objects, real qualities, sensual objects, sensual qualities. The inter-actions between these four poles yields ten possible permutations, giving a model for the philosophy of objects somewhat analogous to the standard model of

Planets were known to the ancient Greeks as wandering stars, and those as far as Saturn could be seen with the naked eye. Their occasional retrograde motion was explained by Ptolemy through epicycles – smaller circles grafted onto larger circular orbits – a useful theoretical fiction. When Galileo aimed his telescope at Jupiter and found it to be swarmed with moons, the sun lost its brief status as the center of the cosmos, as each planet became the lord of its own satellites. More recently the planets were found to be covered with pits, volcanoes, and gas-storms. Each of the past three centuries claimed a new planet of its own: Uranus in the eighteenth, Neptune in the nineteenth, short-lived planet Pluto in the twentieth. In the meantime, the hypothetical planet Vulcan was abolished by Einstein's true explanation of the anomalies in Mercury's orbit. Our twenty-first century helped thin the ranks by exiling Pluto from the list at the 2006 congress in Prague. If the decision remains controversial, it was grounded in serious reasoning. Despite its three moons (the sinister Charon, Nix, and Hydra), despite its basically spherical shape and its long path around the sun, Pluto failed to meet the new and arcane criterion of "clearing the area of its orbit": the highly irregular orbit of Pluto remains laced with sub-planetary debris far exceeding Pluto's own mass.

In August 2006, I happened to be on holiday in Prague on the exact day when the decision was taken. While admiring the rigorous standards of the conference, applied to the pruning of schoolhouse tradition, I greeted the news with a shudder. Superstition told me that to be present for such an inversion of astronomical lore suggested that my own psychology had undergone a comparable but still concealed revolution. Were the metaphysical ideas I had developed over a generation soon to be "plutoed" like the newly condemned outermost planet? Or was a much vaster cosmos, barely assimilable in scope, on the verge of entering my thoughts? It should not be forgotten that the downgrading of Pluto was in no way motivated by economy, all appearances notwithstanding; instead, it led to a vast increase in the number of astronomical bodies taken seriously. Evicted from the

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particle physics. In OOO, artworks are treated as special forms of breakdown in the relation of an object with its own qualities; in this way, aesthetics becomes one of the most crucial branches of philosophy.

He is the author of the following books: *Tool-Being* (2002), *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005), *Heidegger Explained* (2007), *Prince of Networks* (2009), *L'Objet quadruple* (2010), *Circus Philosophicus* (2010), *Towards Speculative Realism* (2010), *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (2011) and [w. Bruno Latour & Peter Erdélyi] *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (2011).

ranks of the nine known planets, Pluto had merely joined a larger and seedier gang of trans-Neptunian objects, named for a grab-bag of dead ancient personae, non-Western deities, and antiseptic numerals: Pluto, Eris, Makemake, Haumea, Sedna, Quaoar, and 2007 OR₁₀. Until this time the frozen Kuiper Belt had felt remote to us all, but by admitting Pluto the eerie Belt had extended feelers into the respected solar system of my youth. The dismal, icy Oort Cloud was now just one step removed from home, and in the meanwhile astronomers had discovered at least five hundred exoplanets orbiting distant stars. The apparent austerity of the spirit of Prague really masked an insane proliferation of cosmic objects, most of them completely unknown even yesterday. If anything in the twenty-first century has pushed us beyond the familiar mentoring of the Galileos, the Newtons, and the Einsteins, it was this wild proliferation of new bodies that they had never needed to explain. But still, we could take comfort that these objects remained bound to durable systems through the well-understood workings of gravity: moons circling planets, planets orbiting suns, with a few odd degenerate comets and dwarf planets doing the same a bit more eccentrically. The thought calmed me often during the half-decade following that fateful weekend in Prague.

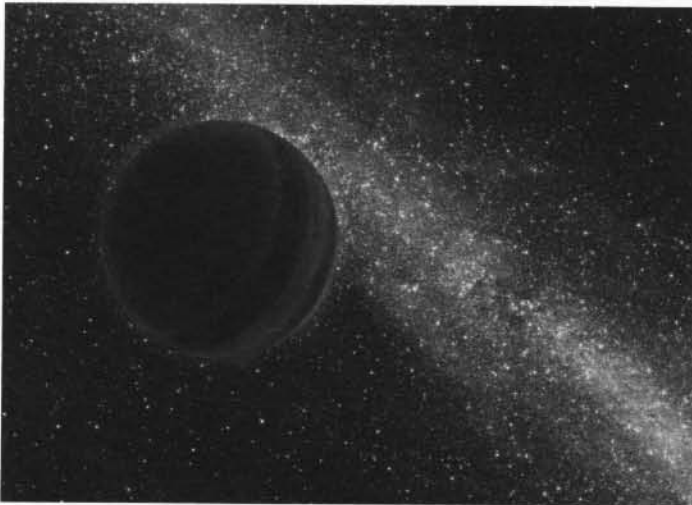
The provisional stability of this solution was shattered forever in May 2011 in a blogpost by Levi Bryant. Speaking in general terms of "rogue objects," Bryant referred with calm

curiosity to a new class of rogue planets recently discovered by Takahiro Sumi, who worked amidst the neon haze of Osaka. At least ten orphan bodies of Saturn's or Jupiter's magnitude had been discovered in just a small portion of the sky. Projecting this number onto the galaxy as a whole, there would seem to be hundreds of billions of planets, twice the total number of stars, wandering freely through the Milky Way. Even worse was the suggestion that such planets could provide surprisingly good homes for living organisms. Not only might rogue planets enter our home region and disturb its gravitational balance, they might even play host to life forms too strange to comprehend, and too powerful to resist. Following the same physical laws that shoveled these planets into motion, our own earth might be evicted from the solar neighborhood, eventually falling under the dominance of a still unknown distant star. Perhaps our planet began its career elsewhere

before transferal to the present sun, too long ago to leave a trace in primeval myth. While Bryant openly delighted in this discovery, its effect on me was of the opposite sort. During the final week of May I found myself sleeping ever more poorly, and I arrived at Cairo Airport on the morning of June 1st in a state of nervous instability.

The occasion of this trip to the airport was a sudden wish to attend the Venice Biennale, the world's leading art show for more than a century. Over the decades its dense and colorful fairground has displayed the works of seers ranging from Matisse to Beuys, while opening its gates to such riffraff as Mussolini, Hitler, and Speer. Yet what drew me to Venice was not these ghosts of good and ill omen, but several living figures of the Dublin arts world who had taken an interest in my philosophical essay. A prospectus written by a man I will call "Dr. Francis" announced that my theories of guerrilla metaphysics would be discussed in the Irish Pavilion in connection with a work by Corban Walker. No less enthusiastic was the artist Isabel, whose sculpture *Future Thing* had recently been purchased in New York and, I was stunned to learn, had been inspired by a stray remark in the oil rig myth of my Circus Philosophicus. With keen interest, I made plans to visit these two and whatever like-minded friends might also appear.

After a disturbing layover in Istanbul, where I was among a dozen survivors of an onboard fire in the Sea of Marmara, I arrived at Marco Polo Airport in Venice. There I was stripped of my luggage in a brazen daylight robbery. Wasting no time in reporting the incident, I purchased a bus ticket directly to Padua – that faded cousin of Venice, where the concealed paintings of Giotto and the specter of Galileo were overshadowed by the boring commercialism of a small-sized city of the European Union. But perhaps I am speaking in bitterness here, since my attempts to economize with a hotel at Padua's distant edge were rewarded with misery and dismay. The hotel was not walkable to the city as I had hoped from viewing the map, and the promised shuttle service was erratic. While the hotel was clean and professional enough, the lobby was oppressed by stuffy air currents and the banality of hundredfold tour groups. Still worse was the physical landscape surrounding the hotel, whose primary feature (other than superhighways) was bleached white tanks holding methane or propane, it scarcely mattered which. The parking lot smelled of freshly poured tar, its perimeter harassed by crows and stray dogs. The next morning I was in Venice, enjoying the labyrinthine intricacies of the forty-five minute walk from the train station to the Piazza San Marco, followed by the simpler walk from San Marco to the



Rogue Planet (artist's illustration), NASA/JPL-Caltech, 2011

Biennale itself. Using press credentials forged for my sake by a curator, I entered the grounds of the Giardini for the preview, closed to the public. There I greeted my Cairo friends at the Egyptian pavilion, made a quick passage through the Austrian and Serbian shows, and was briefly held captive behind a bridge due to the armored arrival of Israeli President Shimon Peres. I then returned to the city to meet Dr. Francis and Isabel. We hit it off warmly; even so, I was delighted and astonished when my grumbling account of Padua was

met with an offer to stay with the Biennale's Irish contingent. Accepting the offer gratefully, I found myself lodged in a colossal rented flat just off the Piazza San Giacomo dell'Orto. Later we were joined on the rooftop terrace by other residents of the flat, Declan and Jeana. Somehow a quiet straggler named Gammon had also joined the group, although no one seems to know when or how this occurred. More friends arrived as the evening progressed. No wine was present, but fruit juice was there in abundance. While it may sound perverse to drink juices by night, this bias seems to be the product of nothing but habit; something about the evening chill brings out new undertones in fruit juice that are obscured by the sunny morning settings in which it is usually consumed. In any case, we drank gallons of juice that night – melon, citrus, pomegranate, and pear.

For me as the lone outsider (other than the silent Gammon), the spirit of welcome was so unmistakable that I was astonished later by the dismissive treatment of my new pet idea, the rogue planets, which I raised during a lull in conversation. Declan responded that he had also read Bryant's post on the subject, and this felt like a prelude to a long series of warm agreements. Instead, he continued rather assertively that any intellectual theory based on the existence of ulterior worlds was condemned to a certain vulgarity. By displacing the mind from inner to outer space, we obtain merely a cheap exoticism that short-circuits the labors needed to awaken the strangeness locked in our own world. Schoolchildren, he continued, would always gush at the notion of alien worlds and strange organisms, none of which are likely to be encountered in a normal human lifespan.

But throughout our days on this very earth, we are able to notice the impacts of events deep beneath the crust of the planet. By way of example he cited the recent Japanese tsunami.

Declan and Jeana developed the theme with enthusiasm. They launched an astonishing account of what they claimed were numerous expeditions in the tunnels of the TauTona gold mine of South Africa, not far from Johannesburg, now the world's deepest mine at more than two miles underground. Jeana spoke with especial delight of the broiling heat towards the lower levels of the mine. While the temperature itself is reduced by air conditioning for reasons of safety, the thickness and slippery texture of the hot air persists despite the artificial cooling. Other features of hot air endured in the air-conditioned tunnels as well, such as an increased speed of sound, and an increased pressure leading to strained moods and sudden explosions of temper despite the ostensible comfort of those hyper-cooled zones. Jeana concluded with a poetic stanza about the effects of the glittering gold ore on the imagination— with no trace of affectation, despite her rather outdated use of verse to make an argument. And while the Dublin contingent had been largely unimpressed by the mere engineering marvels of the Biennale installation entitled *Chance* (French pavilion, Christian Boltanski), they nonetheless toasted the efficient conveyors, coolers, and elevator shafts of TauTona, whose infrastructure they collectively hailed as a work of genius. Declan resumed his earlier thread, insisting once more that drifting planets are too remote from earth and from normal lived experience to stimulate breakthroughs in philosophy, the visual arts, or even cinema. Only in the subterranean landscapes of gold mining, he asserted, could we detect the precise and subtle modulations of experiential properties already explored on paper in some cutting-edge variants of phenomenology, as found especially among the lapsed Jesuits of Dublin who formed the greater portion of Declan's friends. Jeana's follow-up speech made largely the same case, though with the peculiar spin provided by an architect's interests. Taken together, their overwhelming rhetorical persuasiveness made me entirely doubt my earlier convictions. A quick glance around the table made it clear that the entire Dublin contingent was thinking along similar lines. Only the uninvited Gammon showed facial expressions that felt sympathetic to my cause.

Isabel was the next to speak effusively of the intellectual and aesthetic challenge posed by mining. While finishing her 2010 sculpture *Turning Point*, commissioned for the Dublin Airport, she had been in close contact

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with an engineering firm able to deal with the large quantities of rolled steel mandated by the design of the piece. It so happened that the same firm did much work with uranium mines in Kazakhstan, and occasionally in Australia with the renowned Rio Tinto group. But while Isabel had twice accompanied her friends to the TauTona gold mines, she found the slippery density of its air vaguely disheartening. She preferred the sort of uranium mining conducted near the earth's crust. Indeed, some of her recent work had focused on the uranium wastes left behind by this process: from so-called "overburden" (the contaminated soil above the uranium itself), to the "proto-ores" in which uranium existed in unprofitable quantities, to barren rock mostly free of uranium, to the shredded cuttings of rock left behind by the drill. Unlike Declan and Jeana, Isabel was less interested in the deeply hidden ores and masked heat of the infernal underground layers than in the tangible refuse of more accessible mines. Working with a team of industrial engineers, she now planned a gigantic installation near gloomy wetlands far outside Dublin, where the aforementioned wastes would be displayed in a sprawling uranium park, combined with evaporation pond sludges imported from Central Asia. It was a testy subject for Isabel, whose friends continued to mock her belief that the Irish government would allow such lethal imports to its shores from dubious Kazakhstan. Nonetheless, her blueprints for the uranium park were immaculate, and the safety procedures she had devised looked serious enough to untrained eyes like my own.

Through all these speeches Dr. Francis had remained atypically silent. When he finally spoke, it was in praise of the homely but dutiful *copper* mine, which he freely admitted was lacking in the seductive power of gold and the thrill effect of uranium. But what he appreciated about the copper community was its way of mixing explicit open-pit mining with in-situ leaching, in which boreholes are drilled directly into the deposit (he had recently observed the process during trips to Bulgaria and Chile). Under prodding from Isabel he was forced to admit that uranium mining allowed for a similar mix of daylight and underground techniques. But Dr. Francis countered that uranium waste was a distraction from the real problems, thanks to its flashy and noxious effects and its overexposure in the political sphere. By contrast, the slag and flotation waste of copper mining were subtler and more understated side effects.

The impression left by this unanimous praise of mining from members of the Dublin arts community was obviously bizarre. Normally, I would have assumed I was the victim of a cruel extended joke. Yet the sincerity of

the four was beyond question. In their tone of voice I detected none of those hints of exaggeration with which practical jokers give themselves away or even hope to be caught. All that remained was the question of whether these artists had schooled themselves in mining to the degree of expertise they claimed, or whether my own ignorance of the subject had allowed them to magnify superficial mastery into a pseudo-encyclopedic command of the topic. To this day I remain unsure on the point. In either case, I felt demoralized by the group's cursory dismissal of my interest in rogue planets. After a safe change of topic and a polite quarter-hour's wait, I ended the conversation on some pretext, making loose and evasive statements about the need to take a late walk before the approaching thunderstorms arrived. I descended to the ground floor of the building and took three quick turns, hoping to distance myself physically from that disappointing conversation among friends in which I had emerged as the clear loser. Moderately wounded, I even considered returning to Padua the next day, before realizing that the generosity of the Dubliners had been so great, and my own suffering in the discussion so minimal, that it would be a touchy and self-destructive gesture to return to my hotel's sickening chemical wasteland so far from Venice. I found an empty bench and tried to regain some faith in my recent theories.

Behind me were shuffling footsteps. It was Gammon, the freeloader who had penetrated the Dublin group only because we each thought he was the friend of someone else. In a voice showing no sign of integrity or intelligence, he bluntly asked for money for a train to Denmark. Coming from a perfect stranger, the request was so ridiculous that I was able to reject it sharply with no sense of guilt. How often it happens that the spectacle of another person's complete lack of touch with reality both enhances our pride in our own better grounding, and inspires us to sharpen our sense of the real even more. Dismissing the imposter with a wave of the hand, I forgot the rejections of my friends and returned to speculations on the rogue planets once more.

The bars were just closing on the piazza; three young Belgians passed, heavily perfumed, and left their scent behind for some ninety seconds. A bar lantern was swarming with moths, but at the extinction of this light the moths arose and scattered like a cloud of vapor. Then came an approaching troupe of comedians from the north of the square. This was a terrible Venice cliché, of course, but it was fascinating to watch their ritual exchange of masks: yielding a Pierrot with a Columbine face, a Harlequin with Cassander's, and Arsenio with the face of a snake. Turning my eyes

skyward, I tried to remind myself of why the rogue planets were of such interest. It was not the mere idea of distant worlds that captured my imagination, but the concept of worlds breaking free from their systems, drifting through the ether, eventually captured by some foreign sun or knocking other planets like billiard balls.

But the point in question was no longer disaster, but astronomical *fertility*. Nothing in the cosmos had ever seemed more self-contained, more hermetically enclosed, than suns surrounded by planets. Stars could live and die, stray rocks might drift between one portion of the galaxy and another, but planets had seemed forever locked in place with a single master. But now we learned that stars were like flowers sharing their pollen through invisible bees; like atoms losing electrons from their outermost shells; like carnivals emitting helium balloons by way of careless children. For the first time, all things seemed capable of exchange. Poets transferring the qualities of wine to the sea or of fingertips to dawn; blue pigments freed from a paint can and assigned as servants to a weeping portrait of Dora Maar; the familiar gestures of comfort and friendship mimicked by the fraudulent Gammon. The world was generated not by *perspective*, as the relativists held, but by punctuated exchanges with one self-contained entity occasionally giving up its greatest treasures and sending them elsewhere. Someday even the earth would be ejected from its system and driven towards some still unknown star. Occasionally America expels its unwanted to Egypt, or Russia its outcasts to America.

Wishing to explore the topic further with others, I returned to the flat, only to discover that the Dubliners were already sleeping. From the rooftop terrace I could smell loose perfumes and hear songs from a distance. But Gammon had vanished forever. And even the most powerful telescope would not have revealed rogue planets behind the polluted air.