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The Ontology of Social Objects: Harman's Immaterialism and Sartre's Practico-Inert

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Abstract: In his recent *Immaterialism*, Graham Harman develops a theory of social objects based on his object-oriented ontology. Whereas some of the more mainstream theories in the humanities would dissolve such objects into their material constituents or their various effects on others, object-oriented social theory theorizes them as inert, resilient entities with a private reality that exceeds their components and actions. Harman's theory focuses on what social entities are qua *objects*, and consequently says little about their specificity as *social* objects. A more complete social theory would also outline how human existence is to be understood in relation to a social world comprised of discrete and inert entities, as opposed to, for example, far more continuous material fields or networks of associations. We argue that an unexpected yet solid candidate for such an extension of object-oriented social theory already exists in Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of practico-inert being and group formation. We first outline Harman's and Sartre's respective ontologies of social objects, and then discuss how their many complementarities make the latter a suitable extension of the former.

Keywords: Social objects, object-oriented ontology, immaterialism, symbiosis, inertia, practico-inert, Jean-Paul Sartre, Graham Harman

1 The reality of social objects

One of the most remarkable events in recent continental philosophy is the emergence of Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO). Sixteen years after its introduction in *Tool-Being*, OOO now enjoys a sizeable audience, a serious presence in various debates in the humanities and arts, and a marked influence on a good number of scholars. OOO's central thesis is that objects are neither reducible to their material or processual components, nor to their effects on other entities. Objects have an interior reality that withdraws from all relations, such that each object is always-already more than (the sum of) its parts and actions. This distinguishes OOO from most mainstream theories in continental philosophy, which, according to Harman, never fail to reduce objects to their components and effects.

In his recent *Immaterialism*, Harman expands OOO into an "object-oriented social theory" that covers social objects such as restaurants, corporations, and governments.¹ As we will see, this regional ontology has several unique features that distinguish it from rivaling theories. We will also see that Harman's social theory remains somewhat incomplete. It demonstrates that social objects cannot be reduced to their parts or actions, and that they are inert, resilient entities whose interior reality rarely changes. Yet in addition to analyzing social objects qua social *objects*, one should also account for their specificity as *social* objects: objects with which humans are in some significant sense intimately involved. *Immaterialism* understandably shies away from this, because one of Harman's aims is to emphasize the irreducibility of social objects to their human ingredients. Nevertheless, if social objects are ontologically robust entities

¹ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 3.

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with a private reality, an object-oriented *social* theory should also describe how their being thus and so bears on human existence.

We will argue that a serious candidate for such a supplement to OOO's social theory already exists in the form of Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of the practico-inert and group-formation, as developed in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. And that, of course, sounds weird. First, because Sartre is associated with phenomenology, which might not always sit well with OOO.² Second, because Sartre is an existentialist, and *Immaterialism* explicitly sneers at existentialism for its alleged one-sided focus on human subjects.³ Finally, because most continental philosophers have dismissed Sartre as an outdated thinker who would have been surpassed (or even refuted) by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and others. These possible objections are all connected to the image of Sartre as putting human beings at the center and steering wheel of reality.⁴ This image is undeserved, because, as we will demonstrate, Sartre offers a profoundly object-oriented account of our engagements with social objects.⁵

In comparing (and connecting) Sartre's and Harman's ontologies of social objects, we will show how Sartre's theory of the practico-inert (1) helps OOO account for how humans are involved with social objects while retaining the irreducibility of those objects, (2) explains why human beings come to think about reality in terms of totalities like 'nature' and 'matter,' even if only objects exist, (3) provides support for the notion of real object-object relations between social objects, just as it (4) provides support for Harman's thesis that real change in social objects is rare and often constrained to their 'youth.'

Section 2 of this article is a brief outline of OOO and of Harman's reasons to reject several mainstream theoretical approaches to social objects. Section 3 reconstructs Harman's analysis of social objects. Section 4 presents Sartre's account of how humans relate to social objects, and Section 5 reconstructs his account of group formation to show how social objects come about. Section 6 reflects on the complementarity between Sartre's and Harman's theories of social objects. In the conclusion, we then reflect on when something is a specifically *social* object. This is useful because it is not *a priori* clear which objects qualify as 'social.' Art genres, markets, political systems, and formal organizations will be on anyone's list, and most of us would also include laws, languages, buildings, and agricultural landscapes. Yet things become more ambiguous when we ask if, for example, ecosystems and animal species that are significantly affected by human activity are social objects, so that a clear definition of the term becomes instructive.

2 Harman's withdrawn objects

The basic premise of OOO is that all objects are equally objects, in that no object can be reduced to anything else.⁶ A bird, a circus tent, a perception, an emerald, and a smartphone differ immensely from each other in terms of what they are made of and what they can do, but they are nonetheless equals in the precise sense that each is an irreducible object. This is neither an ethical thesis according to which all objects have equal worth, nor a practical thesis according to which they have equal power, but simply an ontological thesis according to which they have equal being qua objects.

Harman argues that there are just two ways to deny that objects are the basic building blocks of reality, and that both are incoherent. First, one can "undermine" objects such as dogs, candles, and snowflakes

² As suggested by the title and back cover of Sparrow's *The End of Phenomenology*. The actual *content* of that book actually offers a quite nuanced comparison of phenomenologists and speculative realists (the genus of which OOO is a species).

³ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 47.

⁴ Sartre reputedly came to regret his infamous *Existentialism is a Humanism* precisely because it burdened him with this reputation. See: Jeanson, *Le problème moral et la pensée de Sartre*, 36.

⁵ We here remain agnostic with regards to (a) how the practico-inert functions within the wider *Critique* and (b) the precise label (existentialism, Marxism, phenomenology...) that it deserves within that context. This is because the practico-inert is perfectly understandable *such as it is*, and we are interested in how it might serve as an extension of Harman's philosophy (*not* in how it functions within Sartre's wider philosophy).

⁶ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 5. *The Quadruple Object* is the most concise overview of Harman's ontology to date. We therefore use it as the main reference for our outline of OOO, supplemented with some relevant quotes from *Immaterialism*.

by reducing them to a deeper, underlying reality.⁷ For example, one can reduce objects to pre-Socratic substances, subatomic particles, or, as in Jane Bennett's materialism, "an ontological field without any unequivocal demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, or mineral."⁸ The problem is that if everything is ultimately One (substance), it becomes unintelligible why it ever fragmented into distinct pieces, or, alternatively, why part of it (humans and other animals) experiences itself in terms of an illusory diversity. Underminers can try to parry this by arguing that the deeper reality behind concrete objects is in fact a diversity of, say, particles, processes, events, and flows, but that does not help. If this diversity is continuous and lacks real distinctions, it still comprises the good old One. If it is discontinuous, then any given process or particle really is *this* entity that cannot be reduced to its neighbors, and one has already accepted OOO's central thesis. Finally, undermining is unable to explain why 'higher' objects have properties that are not found in their components. Water, for example, boils and freezes at different temperatures than oxygen and hydrogen. As Harman writes: "The problem with undermining is that it cannot account for the relative independence of objects from their constituent pieces or histories, a phenomenon better known as *emergence*."⁹

Second, one can "overmine" objects by reducing them to their effects on others. Harman's favorite example is Bruno Latour's thesis that any given actor (i.e. entity) is exhaustively defined by how "other actors are modified, transformed, perturbed or created" by it.¹⁰ Another example is the empiricist thesis that an object such as an apple ultimately is an observer's habitual conjunction of impressions of redness, sweetness, and roundness.¹¹ Overmining thus reduces objects to their presence to or impact on others, meaning that objects are understood as *being* their relations with others. Yet if everything is its current relations, if all that exists is exhausted in its givenness to others, then nothing possesses a non-relational reserve that would allow for change. As such, "the problem with overmining is that it allows objects no surplus of reality beyond what they modify, transform, perturb, or create."¹²

Note that a "duomining" approach that simultaneously overmines and undermines objects only exacerbates the problem.¹³ This is because duomining dissolves objects into both their 'upward' and 'downward' relations, so that it remains incomprehensible what those relations are actually relations *with*, as well as how any object – now firmly reduced to its being stuck in an ontological spider web – could ever end up in new relations, let alone do so while remaining *this* entity.

Harman therefore concludes that objects must be split between how they manifest in relations with other entities, which he calls a "sensual object," and a "real object" that withdraws from all relations and constitutes the currently undeployed reserve that allows for real change.¹⁴ It follows that interaction between objects is always indirect. If I play with my dog or explore a building, I only encounter sensual manifestations behind which the real 'dog object' and 'building object' remain withdrawn. In addition, any sensual object must be encrusted with but not reducible to "sensual qualities."¹⁵ When I look at a statue of Thomas Aquinas, for example, it can subtly change colors as clouds obscure the sun, and what previously seemed a benevolent teacher can now strike me as a judgmental authority figure. Despite this qualitative change, I still look at the same sensual object. Finally, any real object must have "real qualities."¹⁶ If the withdrawn reality of entities would just be the bare fact of there being a real object, then nothing would distinguish *this* real object from *that* one, and it would be incomprehensible how different sensual objects can arise from them. We can therefore deduce that any real object must also have real, interior qualities that endow it with a specific character. The basic structure of Harman's ontology is therefore a fourfold

⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 8.

⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 116-117.

⁹ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 9.

¹⁰ Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 122.

¹¹ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

of real objects with real qualities and sensual objects with sensual qualities. For our analysis here, the most important characteristic of this fourfold is that objects, qua real object with real qualities, are always-already withdrawn from, more than and irreducible to their relational engagements with their components and environments.

This brings us to social objects. As stated on its back cover, *Immaterialism* asks what objects exist in the social world and how we should understand them. Early in the book, Harman notes that it seems as if the humanities – sans OOO – are already adequately equipped to deal with such questions.¹⁷ ‘Seems’ is the operative word here, because Harman argues that two mainstream theories that analysts of social objects might turn to, these being New Materialism and Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT), are hampered by serious shortcomings.¹⁸

A New Materialist analysis of social objects would undermine them in favor of their material background conditions. To argue the point, Harman quotes from the New Materialism anthology of Diana Coole and Samantha Frost: “our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment.”¹⁹ Presumably, this implies that a New Materialist analysis of a social object like Apple would dissolve that corporation into the “throbbing whole” of humans, computers, software packages, company rules, patents, and offices that populate its environment.²⁰ Conversely, ANT would overmine Apple in favor of the myriad ways in which it affects other entities.²¹ Among other things, Apple would be fragmented into the millions of changes that its products triggers in individuals, households, and businesses.

The problem with both theories is that neither accords ‘Apple’ a private reality over and above its material components or network of activities, which makes it impossible to account for *resilience* and *delay*. A theory of social objects should be able to understand Apple as a substantial entity that throws around its own weight and that has the ability to deflect how others try to affect it (for instance, regulatory bodies or activists that try to change its ways). Second, Apple must have a private, non-relational interior to account for how its encounters with actors in the past can still characterize its operations in the present. For example, it is undeniable that the late Steve Jobs has significantly affected almost every aspect of Apple. Yet since he is no longer around to act, Apple itself must have a reality into which traces of Jobs’ actions have been carved, so to speak. It is crucial to note that none of this can be sidestepped by claiming that the materials or actors that swarm around Apple account for such resilience or delays instead. That can only be the case if they, too, possess a substantial *character* over and above their current connections to other entities. One would then again admit to OOO’s central thesis (albeit implicitly), the only difference being that one has a personal preference to scrutinize ‘smaller’ entities in the vicinity of a social object, rather than the social object itself.

3 The resilience of social objects

The first aim of *Immaterialism*, then, is to theorize social objects as ontologically robust entities that cannot be dissolved into their components and actions. Such objects are “sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve, and do not unleash all their energies at once.”²² As we saw, OOO upholds a difference in kind between what an object *is* (a real object with real qualities) and what an object is *doing* (being encountered as a sensual object, or encountering others as such). In his analysis of social objects, Harman is primarily interested in the former. Second, Harman states that a truly pro-object theory “needs to be aware of

¹⁷ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 4.

¹⁸ We here write about ANT and New Materialism as Harman understands them in *Immaterialism*. Whether Harman’s reading is *correct* is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁹ Coole and Frost, *New Materialism*, 1.

²⁰ As Harman disapprovingly cites Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 226 at Harman, *Immaterialism*, 20.

²¹ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 7.

relations between objects that have no direct involvement with people.”²³ If, for example, one company decides to ruin a smaller firm before it becomes a serious competitor, object-oriented social theory seeks to demonstrate that this is really a case of one social object obliterating another, instead of mere metaphor.

Immaterialism outlines such an object-oriented social theory with a case-study of the infamous Dutch East India Company (abbreviated as VOC for *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*). This “ontology of the VOC” first establishes that the VOC truly is a real, unified object.²⁴ For Harman, this is “beyond any reasonable doubt,” partly because the VOC meets a series of criteria, originally proposed by Manuel DeLanda, to distinguish unified assemblages from mere aggregates.²⁵ First, it has retroactive effects on its parts: it changes the lives of its employees, reduces people to slavery, and moves spices across the globe. Second, it generates new entities, for example trade outposts and coinage stamped with its emblem. Third, it has emergent properties that are not found in its components. For example, the VOC can exert political pressure on sovereign states, which is something that individual ships and crews could hardly manage.

Now, the challenge is this. At any given moment, the VOC is obviously connected to thousands upon thousands of material entities (ships, sailors, spices, islands, weapons, political rivals, various peoples that it brutally exploits, and so on) and involved in countless activities (expeditions, negotiations, naval battles, massacres, and so on). All those relations cannot equally affect the VOC's real being, because “if all relations were equally significant, then every entity would become a new thing in every trivial instant of its existence, since our relations with objects are ever on the move.”²⁶ Yet at the same time, *some* relations must still engender real change in the VOC's being. As OOO regards objects as the basic constituent of reality, change is only possible by virtue of interactions between objects. Such change cannot merely consist in varying manifestations of sensual objects, because then real objects would be eternal and unchanging. This would reduce OOO to an undermining atomism in which a single layer of imperishable real objects underlies an ephemeral world of appearances. Instead, there must be rare occasions at which a real object's engagement with some other entity engenders real change in its interior being.²⁷

Harman therefore needs “a standard that can isolate those relatively rare events that transform an object's very reality.”²⁸ He finds this in the concept of symbiosis as developed by the biologist Lynn Margulis.²⁹ The underlying idea of symbiosis is that “the gradual shaping of the gene pool through natural selection is a less important evolutionary force than the watershed symbiosis of distinct organisms.”³⁰ In ontological terms, symbiosis suggests that the majority of events that befall an object are accidental and merely scratch its surface, and that its real being only changes following a limited number of decisive encounters:

The model of symbiosis suggests [...] that both of the usual alternatives are wrong: entities have neither an eternal character nor a nominalistic flux of ‘performative’ identities that shift and flicker with the flow of time itself. Instead, we should think of an object as going through several turning-points in a lifespan, but not many.³¹

For Harman, symbiosis also implies that relations are not necessarily reciprocal. Moving to a new city can decisively change a person, without the city changing in turn. This sits well with OOO's claim that objects (such as a city) do not dissolve into their relations, but are instead highly resilient to what befalls them. Second, symbiosis allows for long delays between an event and its impact on an environment. Most people's social interactions, for example, are saturated with mannerisms that can be traced to where they

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

²⁵ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 41, cf. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 36-38; *Assemblage Theory*, 18-19.

²⁶ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 44.

²⁷ Note that Harman's term ‘withdrawal’ is a bit misleading. A real object withdraws from *being encountered by others*, as these others merely register its sensual surface. In *encountering others*, however, it is always the real object ‘doing the encountering.’ Real objects are therefore constitutively *open* to being affected by sensual objects.

²⁸ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 44-45.

²⁹ Margulis, *Symbiotic Planet*.

³⁰ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 46.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

grew up, even if they left that environment decades ago and never returned. This is because our upbringing is a symbiotic phase that truly alters our being. Third, symbiosis allows us to address why certain things *do not* happen. As soon as we analyze objects in terms of decisive turning points, we can start to explain what they *refuse* to do in terms of incompatibility between a force exerted on them and their being thus and so due to previous constitutive events.³² By analogy, think of how difficult it is to acquire a new language later in life, precisely because one's entire character is already attuned to another language. In short, against all reductions of objects to their myriad engagements, symbiosis allows us to start tracking "genuine points of irreversibility" in their existence.³³

Harman therefore analyzes the VOC in terms of five symbioses that transformed its being. The first symbiosis is the VOC's adoption of the policy outlined in the *Discourse on the State of India* by Jan Pieterszoon Coen, specifically the recommendation to not just dominate the Europe-Asia trade, but also Asian inter-island shipping. This symbiosis transformed the VOC "from an autonomous Dutch trade monopoly into a quasi-colonial extortion machine."³⁴ The treatise was accepted as company policy in 1614, but its effects were only first felt in 1621, with the ethnic cleansing of Banda. The other four symbioses are the 1619 founding of Batavia as the VOC capital, the 1623 massacre in Ambon and the resulting domination of the spice islands, the 1625 definitive reorientation toward intra-Asian trade, and the 1641 conquest of Malacca that gave the VOC control over old Arab and Chinese trade routes.³⁵ After 1641, the VOC was of course still involved in countless events, but these did not substantially change the character of the company. Instead, it simply acted in accordance with what it had already become.

One could dispute whether this is the right set of symbioses, but that is not really the point. The point is that symbiotic analysis claims to have more explanatory power than OOO's rivals. First, if we want to understand the *character* of a social object such as the VOC, it is rather pointless to start listing all its material components and actions. Press-ganging a single new crew and selling a single batch of spices hardly affects what the company *is*. Instead, one looks for decisive turning points, such as the adoption of the *Treatise*, that radically affect the character of the company, such that we can better understand why its goals and actions in 1613 are very different from those in 1622. Second, if we want to understand the *reason* why countless sailors, ships, and spices are acting thus and so rather than otherwise, then simply mapping them (in terms of their material existence or their actions) yields a mere tautology: they are acting thus and so because, lo and behold, they are acting thus and so. Instead, the reason is that they are enthralled to a social object, the VOC, which is exercising all its might to bend them to its will. This fixes the order of reasons. It is not the case that in 1620, thousands of entities are laboring to increase their control over the intra-Asian trade and thereby give birth to the VOC. Instead, they help *maintain* the existence of a VOC which has long since set its eyes on dominating the intra-Asian trade, and recruited myriad entities to make this happen.

Many lessons can be drawn from *Immaterialism* (Harman concludes the book with fifteen provisional rules for OOO method). For our purposes, the following are the most relevant. First, social objects have an interior reality over and above their components and their effects. The actions of an object are mere symptoms of this reality.³⁶ Second, relations with a social object need not be reciprocal: they often take the form of single-direction dependence.³⁷ Third, most of a social object's engagements are 'business as usual,' and real change in a social object is rare. Fourth, most of these real, symbiotic changes "occur early in the life of an object, with a relatively enduring character established toward the end of that early period," because a maturing social object becomes increasingly resistant to change.³⁸

As noted in Section 1, however, Harman analyzes social objects qua *objects*. The specificity of these objects as *social* objects (instead of physical, mental, or biological ones) remains underdeveloped, because

³² Ibid., 40.

³³ Ibid., 48.

³⁴ Ibid., 63.

³⁵ Ibid., 107.

³⁶ Ibid., 99.

³⁷ Ibid., 100.

³⁸ Ibid., 67.

Immaterialism does not analyze how social objects structure human social existence. Now, the main difference between OOO and its rivals is that OOO sees social objects as *inert* entities: sluggish objects that remain relatively unaffected by the myriad events that befall them; that hold most of their forces in reserve; and that can engender countless activities that they themselves transcend, meaning that social objects are impassively withdrawn from their field of action. If our social world consists of *such* objects instead of continuous flows, events, actor-networks, or vibrant matter, then we must ask how human existence among such inert entities is to be understood. As said, Sartre's theory of the practico-inert is a serious candidate for such an extension of object-oriented social theory.

4 Sartre and the practico-inert

How is our existence structured by our relations to social objects? Sartre's analysis starts with the simple observation that organisms are driven by the need to sustain themselves. He defines such need as a "negation of the negation."³⁹ The initial negation here is the simple fact that an organism is not its environment. The negation of this negation is the fact that organisms must 'cross the gap' and draw on their environment for, for example, food, shelter, oxygen, and warmth. Needs are of course never satisfied automatically. Satisfaction must be sought out, and given that everything around us is at least a *possible* candidate for featuring in the satisfaction of (future) needs, our surroundings can appear like a "total field" or "Nature."⁴⁰ Such a unified totality is a "false organism" in that it does not exist as such.⁴¹ It is an abstraction posited by us because we must find the means to satisfy our needs among all the stuff that exists 'out there.' As Sartre puts it:

As soon as need appears, surrounding matter is endowed with a passive unity, [...] matter [is] revealed as passive totality by an organic being seeking its being in it – this is Nature in its initial form.⁴²

The satisfaction of needs requires what Sartre calls "praxis."⁴³ Praxis is action undertaken with regards to one's continued existence and future integrity.⁴⁴ In praxis, "negation [...] comes to matter:" we inevitably realize that our surroundings often *do not* contain what we need, so that we must labor to change them.⁴⁵ This means that we must define "zones, systems and privileged objects" suited to our needs, such as fertile land as opposed to barren land.⁴⁶ It must be noted that this part of Sartre's theory is still a formal abstraction. Human beings are never face to face with a *real* and unified field of pure matter that they must then carve into pieces. We always-already exist among "worked matter" that praxis has wrought, or in terms of this article: among social objects.⁴⁷ Sartre stresses that such worked matter is irreducible to whatever physical components constitute it (in this sense, the term 'matter' is confusing, and we will be able to do away with it shortly).⁴⁸ We will also see that it is equally irreducible to the human beings that are involved in it.

By worked matter, Sartre means social objects like farmland, traffic systems, houses, corporations, and factories. Such matter is "inert" in that it stores and retains the changes that we make in it.⁴⁹ It thereby "eludes" and surpasses the relations of individuals to it.⁵⁰ This is not just because others currently engage with it as well. It is above all because praxis "crystallizes" in wrought matter such that it becomes

³⁹ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason – Volume I*, 80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 122, 188.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

irreducible to our relations to it.⁵¹ As Sartre writes, “every thing maintains with all its inertia the particular unity which a long forgotten action imposed upon it.”⁵² Moreover, wrought matter is never merely a passive intermediary for the satisfaction of our needs. It also confronts us with *its* demands, which Sartre calls “counter-finality.”⁵³ In worked matter, our initial action literally “becomes other,” and it subsequently starts to exercise “exigencies.”⁵⁴ Social objects have what we would otherwise consider “human functions,” most notably the ability to set demands and compel other entities to fulfill them.⁵⁵ It is not the case that such demands, for example for maintenance, originate in our thoughts and are then projected onto something like a house. Rather, it is the house that engenders these thoughts in us:

This is not a metaphor. To preserve its reality as a *dwelling* a house must be *inhabited*, that is to say, looked after, heated, swept, repainted, etc.; otherwise it deteriorates. This vampire object constantly absorbs human action, lives on blood taken from man and finally lives in symbiosis with him. It derives all its physical properties, including temperature, from human action. For its inhabitants there is no difference between the passive activity which might be called ‘residence’ and the pure *re-constituting praxis* which protects the house against the Universe.⁵⁶

Worked matter thus has a “life of its own,” which also means that it can act on other social objects.⁵⁷ Sartre approvingly cites Lewis Mumford’s observation that “since the steam engine *requires* constant care on the part of the stoker and the engineer, steam power was more efficient in large units than in small ones [...]. Thus steam power *fostered* the *tendency* toward large industrial plants.”⁵⁸ Social objects, then, do not just exercise exigencies on humans, but also on other social objects:

[E]very object, in so far as it exists within a given economic, technical and social complex, will in its turn become exigency through the mode and relations of production, and give rise to other exigencies in other objects.⁵⁹

Because we are here analyzing *social* objects, exigencies and other kinds of interactions between objects will generally involve human activity. Steam engines may demand bigger factories, but human beings will need to design and construct those. Nevertheless, human beings that heed the call of worked matter do not work according to their own goals, but to goals imposed on them by matter. This is why we can often describe the workings of a social object quite adequately without discussing the *humanity* of the humans that feature in it. For instance, if we want to describe the workings of a factory, it is irrelevant whether certain operations are carried out by a human being named Pierre, an android named X32, or an aggregate of nameless devices.⁶⁰ It may be ethically, economically, and politically relevant that machines can replace factory workers, but as long as the work gets done it makes little difference to the factory itself (which is why automation can even *be* a problem!). In interactions between social objects, then, humans feature as mediums or instruments.⁶¹ Compare this to seeing another person. It is obviously not the eye that is literally doing the seeing (try yanking out someone’s eyes and then making those see). *Someone* sees and uses their eyes to do it, and it is ultimately irrelevant whether we see with our biological eyes or with a bionic surrogate. Worked matter is thus not just ‘other’ than its physical components and our human relations to it, it is also capable to exercise force (‘exigencies’) on human beings *and* other social objects. Such entities are what

⁵¹ Ibid., 161, 164.

⁵² Ibid., 101.

⁵³ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 124, 165.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁸ Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 162; cited at Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason – Volume I*, 159. The emphases are Sartre’s.

⁵⁹ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason – Volume I*, 189.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ibid., 189, 191.

⁶¹ For now, note that OOO is also committed to the idea that objects need other objects to mediate their interactions, because there is no universal force or background through which everything can connect.

Sartre calls “practico-inert.”⁶² A practico-inert being transcends both “the individual as an isolated agent and inorganic matter as an inert and sealed reality.”⁶³ These beings comprise our social world, and there is no escaping them in favor of flows and events, let alone a material field without sharp demarcations.⁶⁴

How do practico-inert beings bear on human existence? Social objects such as newspapers, money and companies comprise “collectives” in which human beings feature in “seriality.”⁶⁵ A series is a gathering of people with the same practical relation to a social object, for example a group of people waiting for a bus, attending a service, or listening to a radio program. A series imposes unity in that it ties different people to a social object similarly, and allows them to relate to each other as such (as, say, students or factory workers). It also imposes alterity in that each specific individual in the series could in principle be replaced by someone else without serious consequences for the series, the social object, or the collective: “the series represents the use of alterity as a bond between men under the passive action of an object.”⁶⁶ Just like praxis engenders a variety of practico-inert beings, these beings engender a variety of collectives. A factory divides people into collectives of blue and white collar workers, a university divides them into students and academics, and so on. A collective can consist of human and non-human entities, as is the case with, for example, a bus line (which involves vehicles, passengers, routes, and so on). It can also consist exclusively of people, as is the case with a queue of people waiting for a bus. The latter type of collectives are what Sartre calls “gatherings.”⁶⁷

Practico-inert beings (social objects) also affect what people become. We already saw that practico-inert beings exert demands on entities in their environments, particularly on those functioning as their components. Human beings rank among those components. As such, our being depends on the social objects with which we become engaged. Or as Sartre puts it in the context of factory work, “machines, by their structure and functions, determine the nature of their servants [...] and, thereby, *create men*.”⁶⁸ This, however, does not simply reduce people to how they function in social objects. Instead, people are practico-inert beings as well. They, too, carry crystallized traces of their relations with others within them, and they, too, exercise exigencies and counter-finalities on others.⁶⁹ It is not the case that every single social relation will significantly alter one's being, but it is the case that our human condition is first and foremost characterized by the fact that we invariably dwell among countless social objects that exert their demands upon us:

I need only glance out of the window: I will be able to see cars which are men and drivers who are cars, a policeman who is directing the traffic at the corner of the street and, a little further on, the same traffic being controlled by red and green lights: *hundreds of exigencies* rise up towards me: pedestrian crossings, notices, and prohibitions; collectives (a branch of the Credit Lyonnais, a cafe, a church, blocks of flats, and also a visible seriality: people queueing in front of a shop); and instruments (pavements, a thoroughfare, a taxi rank, a bus stop, etc., proclaiming with their frozen voices how they are to be used). These beings – neither thing nor man, but practical unites made up of man and inert things – these appeals, and these exigencies do not yet concern me directly. Later, I will go down into the street and become *their thing* [...].⁷⁰

⁶² Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason – Volume I*, 191.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Cf. Ibid., 169.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 255-256.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 266.

⁶⁷ The term ‘gathering’ can be misleading. Sartre does not mean that people should be physically together. He makes a distinction between direct and indirect gatherings. A queue is a direct gathering, but the audience of a radio program is an indirect gathering. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason – Volume I*, 270.

⁶⁸ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason – Volume I*, 159, cf. 207, 238.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 235.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 323.

5 The formation of social objects

This, however, is not yet the full story. Sartre makes a distinction between two kinds of social objects. In addition to collectives, there are groups. People in groups are no longer related to the same object in alterity, but ‘commonly.’ They are not passive, as they are in a series, but actively contribute towards a certain goal. In terms of our earlier example: a bus queue is a (collective) gathering, a bus line is a collective and a bus company is a group. Sartre thinks of the formation of groups (which will eventually yield a new social object) as a circular process in which a collective (or several ones) detaches itself from a practico-inert being by progressing through several stages. Sartre stresses that the precise number of stages and their order need not be identical in all cases.⁷¹ Nevertheless, there are some “formal rules” or requirements that a budding social object must always meet if it is to mature, rather than dissolving almost instantaneously.⁷² Because of this, one can grasp the general logic of group-object formation in terms of four phase-types: the group-in-fusion, the pledged group, the organization and the institution.

A collective can start to form a group whenever its members are confronted with a common problem. Such a problem can vary from terrifying mortal danger to a discontent that is utterly insignificant in the larger scheme of things, but nevertheless suffices to spur people into action. A collective of oppressed factory workers can start to form a group, but so can a collective of disgruntled library card holders.⁷³ A group-in-fusion no longer passively functions according to the exigencies of a social object. It is an amorphous object that has started to define itself in terms of a common objective and a corresponding praxis. A common objective, however, is not the only prerequisite for a group-in-fusion. If a collective’s problem or discontent could be resolved in its existing social relations, there would be no reason to detach itself from them. A group-in-fusion therefore also requires “antagonistic relations” with a social object or institution that actively prevent its demands from being met.⁷⁴ Also note that no matter how ‘non-objective’ the members of a group-in-fusion experience their activity, it is always immediately the case that the group-in-fusion is an object to outsiders.⁷⁵ One may, for example, find oneself caught up in a tumultuous, vibrating mass, but outsiders will always perceive that mass as ‘the riot,’ ‘the procession’ or ‘the crowd.’

A group-in-fusion permanently risks regressing back into a collective. Despite the common objective (‘save the forest!’, ‘better working conditions!’, ‘immigrants welcome!’), its initial praxis will be rather spontaneous, voluntary, erratic, and uncoordinated. This renders the group vulnerable. It therefore becomes prudent to introduce a small element of inertia in the form of a pledge that, in a sense, functions to narrow down and crystalize what the group ‘really is about.’ A pledge can take many different forms, including swearing an oath, surviving a rite of passage, or signing a contract.⁷⁶ In all such cases, the pledge is posited as if it precedes the group’s activity, as if everything it has done and is doing proceeds from its now explicitly stated *raison d’être*. This gives the group something to fall back on during moments when the relevance of its common praxis seems less apparent. Or as Sartre puts it, the pledge increases the group’s resistance to “the divisive tendency of (spatio-temporal) distance and differentiation.”⁷⁷ It is important to understand that the pledge is not “a subjective or merely verbal determination” that merely transpires between individual members of the group.⁷⁸ Instead, it is “a real modification of *the group* by [...] regulatory action.”⁷⁹

Once a group is pledged, it becomes possible for members to carry out widely different actions (or even do nothing for extended periods of time) while still being members of the same group. Membership is now ‘anchored’ to the pledge, so that it is no longer necessary that everybody does everything together.

⁷¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 348, 364, 583, 676.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 676.

⁷³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 350.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 419, 485, 606.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 419.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

This allows individual members to start carrying out specialized activities, which gives rise to different functions. When specific functions are assigned, the pledged group transforms into an organization.⁸⁰ The pledge was initially supposed to counter immediate differentiation in the sense of scattering the group, but here we see that it also paves the way for a second type of functional differentiation. When functions are assigned, it is no longer the case that all members contribute to the common praxis in the same way. In a sports team, for example, the goalkeeper does something different than a striker, even though both their actions contribute to the same goal. Note that when functions are assigned, inertia again increases as members start to function according to the exigencies of the (now maturing) social object: someone *has to* prevent goals, someone else *has to* score points, and so on. As Sartre writes:

Organization, then, is a distribution of tasks. And it is the common objective (common interest, common danger, common need assigning a common aim) which defines *praxis* negatively and lies at the origin of this differentiation. Organization, then, is *both* the discovery of practical exigencies in the object *and* a distribution of tasks amongst individuals [...]. In other words, the organizing movement settles the relation between men on the basis of the fundamental relation between group and thing.⁸¹

Assigning functions is not without risk. Because of functional divisions, individuals can lose sight of the functions of other members of the organization. Organized groups are therefore in danger of separation. Members still work towards the same objective, but in mutually isolated rather than truly cooperative fashion.⁸² This, again, risks that the components of the group or social object lose coherence and ultimately scatter. The organized group must therefore evolve into an even more inert object by becoming an institution. This concerns two transformations. First, functions are reified: they are detached from whoever currently carries them out, rendering the occupant interchangeable.⁸³ In an organization, the capacity of its members could precede function (functions are assigned according to present skills), while in an institution the function precedes (and dictates) the capacity of its executor. This also implies formalizing power relations and hierarchies between functions, so that the coherence of the social object no longer depends on voluntary and personal bonds between members, but rather on its own structure.⁸⁴ The second transformation is appointing a single member or sub-group as the sovereign of the institution, which allows for central command over a wide variety of divisions and functions.⁸⁵ The relative freedom of this sovereign is the only thing that still distinguishes an institution from a fully practico-inert being. Take, for example, a social media company that has just gone public.⁸⁶ Up to that point, its CEO could in principle still – within the limits of the law, of current market conditions, et cetera – exercise sovereign creative freedom in the sense that she, as head of the company, could decide upon its general course. As soon as the company is owned by shareholders, however, the CEO, too, becomes a functionary who spends most of their time realizing the objectives of others.

With these four stages, Sartre aims to show that the initial transformation of a collective into a group-in-fusion sets in motion the institution of *another* mature and largely inert social object. At every stage of its development, the group-object is at risk of falling apart, of seeing its members swallowed up into the seriality and collectivity of surrounding practico-inert beings, of getting caught in the orbit of others. The group's only option, if it is to have a more durable effect than a mere outburst of spontaneous non-compliance, is to make itself more inert (allowing it to exercise more 'gravity,' so to speak). Becoming more inert implies that the group 'comes into its own' and grows increasingly less dependent on its being generated by *these* specific members. This, in a sense, makes the circle complete, because the logical endpoint is yet another social object that might one-day see its own collectives rise up and form groups-in-fusion.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 450.

⁸¹ Ibid., 446.

⁸² Ibid., 587.

⁸³ Ibid., 600.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 591.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 607.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

6 Object-oriented inertia

There are striking complementarities between these two ontologies of social objects. Recall that our question was not whether Sartre would accept the metaphysics on which Harman bases his social theory, but rather to what extent object-oriented social theory could be supported and extended by Sartre's theory of the practico-inert. One cannot help but notice that both theories are ontologically similar in holding that social objects are *real*, in which 'real' means that they are irreducible to (the combination of) their inorganic components, their neighboring social objects, and their past, present, and future interactions with human beings. In addition, both thinkers consequently hold that social objects are causally efficacious entities that exert force on neighboring practico-inert beings, regardless of whether the latter are individual persons, soccer clubs, governments, or rock bands. In fact, OOO's thesis of there being a real object with real qualities that withdraws behind its own sensual manifestations in encounters with others further clarifies 'where' this autonomous character of social entities arises. The interior of social objects is – truly – a reservoir or vessel that harbors the object's private character, protected from the vast majority of outside influences by sensual blast shields. With that in mind, we can now discuss the four points of complementarity or expansion that were announced in Section 1: the root of our tendency to think in terms of totalities, an account of human involvement with social objects, a theory of interaction between social objects, and finally the thesis that real change in object is rare and tends to occur early in its existence.

Starting with the first, we can ask why we would ever think about our reality in terms of totalities such as 'Nature' or a 'material field,' if objects are in fact all we ever encounter (and all there really is). There are of course entities that strike us as less discrete than the term 'object' seems to suggest, such as rainstorms and festivals. But it seems far-fetched to conclude from there that there are 'really' no objects at all. Harman, for his part, would probably suggest that our tendency to reduce entities to an underlying (or overarching) unity results from a confusion between knowledge of a thing and the being of a thing.⁸⁷ As he writes, "There are only two basic kinds of knowledge about things: we can explain what they are made of, or explain what they do. The inevitable price of such knowledge is that we substitute a loose paraphrase of the thing for the thing itself."⁸⁸ If our answer to 'what is X?' is always something 'beneath' or 'above' X, then this could be the root-cause of our tendency to posit a unified X (whether unmoving or vibrant) that everything would ultimately be. Were that the case, then our reductionist tendencies result from the relatively easily understood fallacy of confusing knowing with being.

Sartre, however, suggests otherwise. As we have seen, he would argue that our totalizing tendencies are inextricably tied to the primordial fact that we are organisms who depend on their surroundings for the satisfactions of needs. Since nobody comes into existence with a preformatted list of where and when to find the right means for such satisfaction, literally *anything* in our surroundings could (someday, somehow and somewhere) come to feature in the satisfaction of our needs. This gives rise to the notion of a unified 'out there' as the domain of possibilities where one might (or might not) encounter what one needs. This suggests that our reductionist tendencies are not rooted in a confusion of knowledge with being, but in the primal fact of being finite organisms that need to reach beyond themselves to sustain themselves. Yet recall that Sartre would *join* OOO in arguing that such a unified or continuous totality does not exist. Notions of Nature or a 'material field' merely reflect our vague experience of there being an 'out there.' They have nothing to do with what actually exists. Any thought of a continuous field is simply a "fictitious abstract state," a "pure abstraction."⁸⁹ As we saw, even a Sartrean group-in-fusion that ventures to detach itself from its serial enthrallment to a social object can only do so in a durable manner by starting to construct a new and almost fully inert being. Moreover, regardless of how group members experience or report their own activities, perceptive outsiders will always be quick to discern a new social object in the making. In all this, there is never the slightest chance of escaping into some amorphous, continuous blob of matter, let alone a world that would exclusively consist of activities and associations that never coagulate into stubborn and irreducible entities.

⁸⁷ Cf. Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 54, 66-67.

⁸⁸ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 7.

⁸⁹ Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason – Volume I*, 197, 454.

Second, we saw that both Harman and Sartre characterize the social world in terms of irreducible, stubborn, and inert objects that exert real force on humans as well as on each other, and that do not change 'in pace' with their manifold relations with others. Instead, what they *are* tends to stay relatively stable during large periods of time, and this *being* precisely comes to characterize (in the sense of 'style') the many relations that take shape around the object. We tried to extend Harman's account with that of Sartre to also provide a general outline of the human condition with regards to such inert objects. Note that this account is radically different from much of what is currently *en vogue* in continental philosophy. To give one example, in their famous *Empire*, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt posit a 'multitude' that stands over and against the 'Empire.' The multitude is humanity understood as unified collective that comprises "the universality of free and productive practices," that autonomously produces and reproduces "the entire world of life," and that shapes "a new ontological reality."⁹⁰ *Empire*, conversely, is "a mere apparatus of capture that lives off the vitality of the multitude."⁹¹

Sartre's, and by extension also Harman's, understanding of the social world could not be more different. Institutions, corporations, and governments are not some ephemeral superstructure that somehow obscures the (impending) existence of a unified humanity. If we follow Sartre, social objects are *obligatory passage points*, to borrow a term from Bruno Latour.⁹² Human existence is understood in terms of collective and serial attachment to objects, and human detachment from such objects only succeeds if a new practico-inert being is constructed such that it can hold its own among the turmoil of already existing objects. Moreover, even relations between humans are understood *interobjectively*, in so far as Sartre locates the root of human togetherness mutual and serial attachment to a shared object. Sartre's descriptions of human involvement with social objects also allows for an expansion of Harman's current concept of symbiosis. Recall that Harman uses the term to indicate relations that constitute genuine points of irreversibility and real change for an object. When Sartre uses that same notion of an "indissoluble symbiosis," however, he is also including how human beings can come to depend on the social objects whose 'thing' they are. Like social objects, humans are not equally affected by all their relations. They, too, grow attached to and dependent on other entities at decisive turning points in their lives. Our being or our character is simply affected much more significantly by transformative events like moving to a new city, marrying someone, or falling into a drug habit than it will ever be by a stereotypical conversation with a co-worker or a trip to the supermarket.

Third, we saw how Sartre's theory of the practico-inert accounts for object-object understanding without 'direct involvement' of humans. As discussed, this does not necessarily mean interaction in the absence of humans, even though that is of course possible. Two paintings – which are obviously social objects – can crash into each other when a museum is hit by an earthquake, but that is not really what one is after when talking about *social* objects. The real question is how humans feature in such interactions when they happen to do so. Sartre's answer is that we do so as mediators. We are often not the sovereign instigators or exclusive targets of the exigencies and actions of an object. Rather, we are often the simple tools that they use, much like humans use eyes to see. It can therefore literally be the case that a financial market forces a corporation to sell off a division, or that the law forces an inspection agency to shut down a school. Nevertheless, none of these entities can do so without mediators, because (in OOO terms) their *being* is precisely to withdraw from direct contact. This means that all contact is indirect, and social objects are precisely those objects that use human beings as their mediators.

Fourth and finally, Sartre's theory of the formation of new social objects provides tentative support for Harman's thesis that real and symbiotic change in objects is rare and tends to occur early in its existence. Groups, as a subset of social objects (perhaps best understood as the subset of *budding* social objects), go through various stages (group-in-fusion, pledged group, organization, institution) that make them

⁹⁰ Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, 316, 395.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹² Latour, *Science in Action*, 129. Latour uses the term in a description of how a windmill can become an object through which (the actions of) people, but also the wind and corn pass or even *must* pass. Unfortunately, a detailed comparison of Sartre's and Latour's views on relations between humans and social objects is beyond the scope of this article.

increasingly inert, so as to prevent them from dissolving into the exigencies of other social objects. After an initial phase of dynamism and spontaneity, the continued existence of the object demands increased formalization and decreased flexibility. This ultimately results in a fully inert entity to which collectives are once again serially attached. Such a perspective on the social world has serious consequences for how one might think about social change. It is not the case that has to keep pining for some non-ontic environment in which everything flows freely. Rather, it is always a matter of asking whether the social objects to which one is currently attached are already too mature to undergo another symbiotic change, and, if so, how a collective can be transformed into a group with a common objective, a common praxis, and a willingness to construct a new social object that, hopefully, allows for more benevolent forms of seriality.

7 Conclusion

The preceding sections reconstructed two ontologies of social objects that might, to a large extent, turn out to be two sides of the same coin. Whereas Harman primarily focuses on the social object qua social *object*, Sartre is mostly interested in the social object qua *social object*. Both philosophers agree that social objects must be understood as fully real and irreducible entities that are endowed with a specific character, that affect other social objects in their surroundings, and that neither operate in tandem with, nor are even responsive to the vast majority of other entities that relate to them. In fact, both would agree that the nature of the interactions with the entities that orbit a social object are largely determined by a character that the object already had and will probably retain for quite some time.

What would a typical inquiry into the social world look like, if it were to be based on the combination of these two social ontologies? First, it would try to discern the more or less durable character of social objects *themselves*, rather than focusing on the buzzing activities of their material components. One would ‘track’ this character by looking for a limited yet decisive set of symbiotic turning points and progressions into new phases of maturity. Second, rather than being on the lookout for constant change and shifting associations, one would first focus on how a social object generates sameness by serializing human beings into (behaving as) its components on a recurring basis. Such an inquiry (into, for example, how millions upon millions of people do more or less the same things on Facebook or Twitter) would serve to map the actual hold and impact that a social object has on the lives of others. Third and finally, one would try to identify which of the collectives tied to a social object might be transforming into a group-in-fusion, after which one could either track or extrapolate that group’s construction of a new social object.

That being said, there is of course a final question to be answered: which objects, exactly, should count as *social objects*? Recall from Section 3 that Manuel DeLanda proposes three indicators (retroactive effects on parts, generation of new entities, and emergent properties) of the existence of unified objects instead of mere aggregates of things. We would like to propose a similar set of indicators for the presence of a *social object*. First, the serialization of human beings: wherever a social object is found, different people will have the same practical relation to it. A tree in a forest is not a social object, but a tree worshipped by all who dwell in the forest certainly is. Second, the exercise of exigencies on human beings, as in Sartre’s example of the house as a ‘vampire object.’ Social objects make us respond to *their* needs, either for the sake of themselves or as a prerequisite to fulfilling needs of our own. The wind or the ocean is not a social object, until people start to believe that their well-being depends on sacrificing cattle or even people to it. Third and finally, whenever a collective rises up in to protest, to revolt, or to construct a new social object, whatever they are trying to get away from tends to be a social object as well.

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