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Object-Oriented Ontology and Its Critics

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The Two Times of Objects: A Solution to the Problem of Time in Object-Oriented Ontology

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Abstract: One of the main criticisms of object-oriented ontology in its current formulation by Graham Harman is that it includes a notion of time that, upon closer inspection, renders the overall theory inconsistent. I argue that while this is indeed the case, Harman's notion of time can be modified in a way that leaves the framework of object-oriented ontology intact. More specifically, Harman's theory of time as a single surface tension between sensual objects and their qualities should be expanded into a theory of time as a twofold of related yet irreducible temporalities. Such a theory can already be found in Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*. I argue that much of the latter theory is already tacitly presupposed in Harman's ontology, and show that the proposed modification successfully addresses the most salient criticisms that have been voiced at Harman's notion of time.

Keywords: Object-oriented ontology, time, temporality, Graham Harman, Gilles Deleuze, Aion, Chronos

1 For Better or Worse

If criticism could kill, object-oriented philosophy would certainly be a corpse by now. Just recall some of the grave sins of which it has been accused. First, rooting itself in what eminent philosophers have already denounced as pseudo-problems. Second, relying on straw man tactics when interpreting other philosophies. Third, daring to propose an ontology without first providing an epistemology. Fourth, not giving the natural sciences and mathematics their due. Fifth, advocating an objectionable politics, or at the very least undermining our ability to think politically. And finally, corrupting gullible minds with deceptively seductive styles of writing.

For some, such criticisms suffice to pronounce the death of the genre. According to Ray Brassier, for example, their combined force amounts to a “speculative autopsy” of especially Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO).¹ Others, myself included, might not be so sure, if only because it could be possible to adapt instead of abandon the theory in response to its criticisms. This will surely sound naive to those who have already consigned object-oriented ontology to the grave. Yet such detractors should remember that, for better or worse, it often takes decades of refinement and revision before a philosophy reaches its mature form. Given that object-oriented ontology is still a young philosophy, it seems logical to improve rather than abandon it in response to serious criticism. Such an attempt should obviously not focus on peripheral objections, but concern itself with criticisms that go straight to the heart of the theory.

In my view, this leads us to the notion of time in OOO. One of the most salient criticisms of Harman's philosophy is that its notion of time as a superficial phenomenon which does not affect real objects renders

¹ See Brassier, “Postscript: Speculative Autopsy” in Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*. Also note that in this article, ‘OOO’ will exclusively refer to Harman's ontology, unless stated otherwise.

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his entire ontology inconsistent.² As we will see, Peter Gratton and Peter Wolfendale both argue that a flawed notion of time is the most problematic aspect of OOO. My argument in this article will be that Harman's current theory of time is indeed flawed, but that it can be modified into a more consistent and coherent theory while retaining the general framework of his ontology.

Section 2 outlines some key features of Harman's object-oriented ontology. Section 3 discusses Harman's theory of time and its respective criticisms by Wolfendale and Gratton.³ Sections 4 and 5 then argue that in light of these criticisms, Harman's notion of time should be modified into a twofold notion of time that was originally proposed by Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*. Section 4 first shows how surprisingly similar the model of reality that animates the pages of *The Logic of Sense* is to that of OOO, and then reconstructs Deleuze's theory of twofold time. Section 5 demonstrates that this theory can be incorporated into Harman's ontology with relative ease, and then argues that this modification constitutes an adequate response to Wolfendale and Gratton. By way of conclusion, I discuss how the surprising compatibility of a Deleuzian theory of time with Harman's fourfold model of entities sheds new light on the perceived 'distance' between Deleuze's and Harman's philosophies.

2 Fourfold Objects

The central principle of OOO is that objects can neither be reduced to their components, nor to their relations with surrounding entities, nor to a combination of both. Real objects "withdraw" from their engagements with humans and non-humans alike, such that real objects are never fully present in (the sum of) their parts and their effects on others.⁴ This is an ontological rather than an epistemological thesis. It does not mean that studying the components or effects of objects never yields knowledge. It means that objects can never *be* nothing but those components and effects. It is also important to stress that OOO uses the term 'object' in a very general sense. Rocks, bicycles, chemicals, and buildings are objects, but so are hailstorms, people, rivers, festivals, songs, bacteria, cities, and marriages. The claim is that all of these could count as real objects in so far as none of them could be reduced to their components or effects.

Harman calls attempts to reduce objects to their parts or an underlying element "undermining."⁵ Examples include pre-Socratic philosophies that reduce all entities to primordial physical elements, scientific theories that reduce reality to subatomic particles, and continental philosophies holding that individual entities are but momentary concretions of an amorphous and indeterminate 'something' that lurks behind ordinary reality (Harman ascribes this thesis to Jean-Luc Nancy as well as Emmanuel Levinas).⁶

The main reason to reject undermining is that it cannot explain emergence, as objects have properties not found in the elements from which they originate.⁷ A human being, for example, has numerous properties that would not exist if their constituent physical parts would be scattered across the universe. Objects are also relatively independent of their parts in that they can gain and lose parts without ceasing to be themselves. A university, for instance, can gain and lose students, buildings, researchers, and programs without ceasing to be that specific university. OOO therefore refuses to conflate production with reducibility. It is obviously the case that objects are produced by other entities, but it does not follow that they are nothing but these entities. By way of analogy, think of how the simple fact that batteries can generate electricity does not imply the absurdity that electricity would somehow be nothing but batteries.

The reduction of objects to how they affect other entities is called "overmining."⁸ The problem with overmining is that it cannot explain change, "since it requires that things be entirely expressed in the world

² Someone might argue that the main issue is instead that contra Harman, one simply cannot do ontology without first developing an epistemology. I disagree, but my argument is beyond the scope of this (as well as *an*) article.

³ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 188-199; Gratton, *Speculative Realism*, 98-107.

⁴ Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, 7.

⁵ Harman, "Strange Realism: On Behalf of Objects," 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

here and now, with no portion of the things lying outside their interactions with other things.”⁹ If all entities would be nothing but their current apprehension by others, all of reality would be locked in permanent stasis. To help grasp this idea, take the example of a thousand people attending a Kendrick Lamar concert. An overmining philosophy would hold that at any given moment, Kendrick Lamar is nothing but his being experienced by his audience (plus how he may or may not simultaneously affect a host of other entities). But if that is the case, it would be impossible for Kendrick Lamar to ever transition from one song into the next, as his being would be utterly exhausted by the audience’s current experience of his performance of the current song. Moreover, an overmining position would imply the absurdity that someone who arrives late to the concert can never start looking at Kendrick Lamar, because only experiences of Kendrick Lamar would exist. The last person to arrive could only start experiencing other people’s experiences, and this would of course also be the case for those people. There would be more than a thousand people who only experience the experiences of others, without there ever being an entity that they actually experience. This is clearly nonsensical. If things can be affected, there must be things and not just further affections of which affections are affections. Harman therefore concludes that objects must always be more than the sum of how they are currently registered by other entities.¹⁰

As soon as the irreducibility of objects is established, we can deduce that they must have a fourfold ontological structure.¹¹ First, if an object is “irreducible to its own pieces, and equally irreducible to its outward relations with other things,” then it must be a *real object* that constitutes an ontological excess over and above its parts and engagements.¹² Second, it cannot be the case that what other entities experience, register, or apprehend is ever this real object, because that would overmine the object into its relations with others. What manifests in an object’s relations with others is instead a *sensual object*, which is a translation of a real object into the experience of some other entity.¹³ In perceiving a river, for example, it is obviously not the case that the river itself is literally present in my consciousness. I merely perceive a derived or translated manifestation of the real river, with the latter withdrawing behind the sensual surface with which I am confronted.

Next, sensual objects cannot be bare particulars. If objects only ever encounter the sensual surface of other objects, then the fact that different encounters have different effects on different objects demands that sensual objects have specific qualities. In Harman’s terms, sensual objects must be “encrusted” with *sensual qualities*.¹⁴ At this point, a Humean might say that the notion of sensual qualities renders sensual objects superfluous. The manifest content of experience would simply be qualities such as ‘red,’ ‘round,’ and ‘sweet,’ and the perceiving entity would generalize these into something like ‘apple’ by force of habit. OOO, however, follows Edmund Husserl in holding that sensual objects are initially given rather than habitually synthesized.¹⁵ If I take a walk around a brutalist building, for example, different colors and features slide in and out of view as I circle the structure. Due to variations in mood, lighting and background, it may appear as an intimidating and ugly lump of concrete in one moment, while striking me as an inspiring monument to human ingenuity in the next. OOO holds that this testifies to the existence of a building that is given in experience but not constituted by experience. The shifting play of qualities signals that the building is robust with regards to how it is perceived and used, such that the same building persists throughout the manifold ways in which it is encountered.

Finally, it cannot be the case that the withdrawn aspect of an object comprises nothing but a real object full stop. On this point, Harman follows Leibniz’ argument that monads must be more than simple unities,

9 Ibid.

10 Since two wrongs do not make a right, it should be obvious that nothing is solved by combining an undermining approach with an overmining one. For those in doubt, see Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 13-16.

11 Many questions can of course be raised with regards to each element of this fourfold structure, and much of Harman’s published work consists in addressing such questions. Since my focus here is on the specific problem of time in OOO, I bracket all other possible objections for the sake of the argument.

12 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 47.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 48.

15 Ibid., 97.

because they also need to have individual qualities to be this rather than that monad.¹⁶ In a similar vein, real objects must have *real qualities* if they are to differ from one another and if there is to be sufficient reason for why the sensual manifestations of one object differ from those of the next. Hence the fourfold structure of objects. On the one hand, a twofold of a real object and its real qualities comprises an irreducible essence that withdraws from how the object is perceived or registered by others.¹⁷ On the other hand, a twofold of a sensual object and its shifting sensual qualities constitutes the presence of the object to other entities.

Before moving on, it is important to stress two features of OOO that are pertinent to what follows: *ontological finitude* and *unilateral openness*. Starting with the first, it is not the case that only humans are consigned to a world of sensual surfaces that preclude direct contact with other real objects. All objects are confronted with this ontological finitude, as no entity ever makes direct contact with another real object:

When I look at a chair, make theories about chairs, produce chairs in factories, or simply use chairs, I fail to exhaust their full reality. But the same happens when a lizard walks across the chair, when a hat is sitting on it, when raindrops strike it, or when a fire begins to burn the chair. In all these cases, objects fail to exhaust each other's reality.¹⁸

The duel between withdrawn objects and their sensual surfaces as well as the distorting translation of essences into manifest appearances is thus not a tragic human handicap, but an ontological fact.¹⁹ All that any object ever registers are sensual objects and their qualities.

Second, unilateral openness is the fact that even though real objects are never directly *experienced* by other entities, only real objects themselves *experience* other entities. (Incidentally, anyone who thinks that the term 'experience' is too anthropomorphic is more than welcome to mentally replace it with 'apprehend' or 'register'). In OOO, there is no such thing as a sensual object that experiences something, because sensual objects are merely what something else experiences. The experiencing object must therefore always be a real object.²⁰ When I spot my girlfriend on a busy street, for instance, the entity seeing her is me qua real object and not me qua sensual object, as the latter would imply the absurdity that she is seen by someone else's perception of me. Or to give another example: given that oceans, hounds, and humans are all affected by the moon in various ways, what affects them are sensual manifestations of the moon, but the entities that register these affections are all real objects.

3 The Problem of Time

If fourfold objects are the most basic ingredients of reality, as OOO holds, then such objects cannot exist in something that is not itself (an aspect of) another such object. It follows that OOO must account for all salient features of reality in terms of the four aspects of objects and the ten possible "links" between them (six links between the four aspects and four links that refer each respective aspect to itself).²¹ So too for space and time, which according to Harman must be explained in terms of "the polarization between objects and their qualities."²² Since it is time that concerns us here, for now we simply note in passing that Harman defines space as the tension between a real object and its sensual qualities.²³ That there is

¹⁶ Ibid., 49; Leibniz, *The Monadology*, §8. Also consider that if real objects did not have real qualities, then due to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, only one real object would exist. This implies a regress into an undermining position, and it would render the notions of change, emergence, and diversity unintelligible.

¹⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 101.

¹⁸ Harman, "Strange Realism: On Behalf of Objects," 12.

¹⁹ Harman, "The Road to Objects," 174.

²⁰ Harman, "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos," 11.

²¹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 78, 114-115. Harman divides these links into three groups (tensions, radiations, and junctions), but that typology is irrelevant to the current analysis.

²² Ibid., 100.

²³ Harman, "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos," 17. My claim is not that Harman's notion of space is unproblematic, but that the proposed modification of his notion of time can be realized without analyzing his notion of space in full detail.

space rather than an utterly immediate compression of everything would be due to the fact that real objects withdraw behind their sensual manifestations, thereby literally ‘making room.’

Harman defines time as the tension between sensual objects and their sensual qualities.²⁴ He bases this on what he takes to be our common experience of time as “a remarkable interplay of stability and change.”²⁵ On the one hand, experience presents us with shifting combinations of smells, sounds, colors, and other qualities. On the other hand, “experience does not decay in each instant into an untethered kaleidoscope of discontinuous sensations; instead, there seem to be sensual objects of greater or lesser durability.”²⁶ This corresponds to the tension between sensual objects and the qualities with which they are encrusted.²⁷ If we return to the example of the brutalist building, the different ways in which the same building strikes me as I circle it would strictly speaking not happen *in* time, because this dynamic of change and sameness would itself *be* time.

This dynamic does not happen in a vacuum, because sensual objects are objects that are related to. In the example, I am the real object that apprehends the temporal play between the building and its varying qualities. Moreover, I do not encounter the building in the void, but rather within one or several other real objects.²⁸ Yet all such real objects “are in a sense outside time.”²⁹ According to OOO, the real brutalist building withdraws from its sensual appearances, so it cannot be involved in the temporal play between sensual object and sensual qualities that I perceive. The same goes for myself as a real object that observes this play. I may experience a temporal phenomenon, but since time is strictly defined as the tension between sensual objects and their qualities, the apprehension itself is somehow not temporal. Finally, something similar must be true for whichever real object is the medium or milieu in which I encounter the building: even though this mediating object is the site of a temporal phenomenon, it is by definition not involved in that particular phenomenon.

Some of the main criticisms of Harman’s notion of time are those by Peter Gratton and Peter Wolfendale.³⁰ Neither author holds that Harman’s notion time is the only problematic part of his ontology, but both agree that it is the *most* problematic part. According to Gratton, the very future of object-oriented ontology as a viable theory hinges on whether or not it can provide an adequate theory of time.³¹ Wolfendale is even fiercer and holds that Harman’s current notions of time and space are “the most catastrophically inept aspect of his metaphysical system.”³²

Gratton notes that “if Harman is to give *content* to objects, [...] there is the risk of an idealism worse than anything he critiques.”³³ This would not be an idealism that asserts an identity between being and thought or experience, but an idealism of ideal forms that dwell in an eternal present, unchanging and unaffected by the further vicissitudes of reality.³⁴ These ideal forms would be the essences of entities (real objects with real qualities as ‘content’). The problem here is not that Harman’s ontology would no longer qualify as a realism, as it would simply be realist about ideal forms. The problem is that if real objects are outside

²⁴ Ibid., 17; Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 100.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Harman, “The Road to Objects,” 176; “Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos,” 17.

²⁸ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 250-251.

²⁹ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 215.

³⁰ There is also Tristan Garcia’s critique (cf. Garcia, “Crossing Ways of Thinking”). Yet this critique hinges on a far more basic disagreement between Garcia and Harman. Garcia denies that entities have a substantial excess over and above their components and effects. He defines entities as a *difference* rather than a *content* between their parts and their environment. This leads Garcia to deny that entities have identity over time, meaning that a car one second ago is not the same entity as the car right now (it is now in a slightly different set of other entities, meaning that it is now a different difference and thus a different entity). Since my concern here is with a theory of time that coheres with an ontology that *does* ascribe substantial being to entities, I postpone comparing Harman’s ontology Garcia’s to a future date.

³¹ Gratton, *Speculative Realism*, 107, 202.

³² Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 188, cf. 198. Note that Wolfendale identifies *separate* problems with regards to space and time in OOO, and holds that the latter are more fundamental: “If [Harman’s account of space] is bad, the situation is much worse when it comes to Harman’s account of ‘time’” (ibid., 195).

³³ Gratton, *Speculative Realism*, 99.

³⁴ Ibid.

time, they can neither come into existence, nor change, nor perish, as these are kinds of *change*: “how does change come about to the real thing, which [...] ‘endures’ and is outside the play of time at the sensuous level?”³⁵ This point is also raised by Wolfendale:

Things must change within the subterranean realm of withdrawn objects, even if we only experience the ripples these changes produce in the glimmering surface world. These real changes and the time they presuppose are explicitly not accounted for by what passes for ‘time’ at the level of sensual change [...].³⁶

If real rather than sensual change does not exist, then all of reality is merely a passive representation of an unchanging set of immutable real objects with unalterable qualities, which would make OOO precisely the kind of undermining theory that it claims to overcome.

Moreover, it should be noted that Harman explicitly holds that any given real object will sometimes undergo real change, as it will go through “several turning-points in its lifespan, but not many.”³⁷ In his recent *Immaterialism*, he outlines a theory of ‘symbiotic change’ according to which some but not all of an object’s encounters will alter its real qualities. By analogy, compare this to how most of our daily interactions do not fundamentally alter our personalities, but there will still be relatively rare moments when something deeply affects us and changes who we are. According to Harman, this is the model for real change in humans as well as zebras, bicycles, governments, and emeralds. In light of the unilateral openness mentioned earlier, this is certainly not precluded by the basic tenets of OOO, but it is obvious that Harman’s theory of time needs to be reworked if it is to account for real objects undergoing real change.

Closely related to this are two further problems identified by Wolfendale. First, despite restricting time to the tension between a sensual object and its sensual qualities, Harman uses unmistakably temporal terms to define the nine other links between the four aspects of objects. Take someone who returns to a place that has undergone significant changes since their last visit – say that I return to the neighborhood where I grew up, but all the houses have been demolished and replaced by factories. According to Harman, this change in the “regime of objects” is not a temporal shift, but a spatial one. Recall that space was defined as the tension between real objects and their sensual qualities. For Harman, the change that I notice is due to the fact that the colors, smells, shapes, and sounds in which I find myself immersed are sensual manifestations of new real objects that have replaced those that once existed there.³⁸ He explicitly refers to this as “spatial changes.”³⁹ Wolfendale rightfully points out that since any notion of change presupposes a notion of time, this is incoherent.⁴⁰ If time is the tension between sensual object and sensual qualities, and if space is instead the tension between a real object and those sensual qualities, then change simply cannot pertain to space.

Another example would be the link of “contiguity” between sensual objects.⁴¹ Sensual objects “cannot make contact except through the deputy or mediator who experiences them.”⁴² To use one of Harman’s examples, an aggregate of spires and towers only constitutes a skyline in so far as an observer links these sensual objects into a skyline in their experience. Yet this also implies time. Say that I am ascending a hill and an increasing number of structures comes into view. A contiguity between sensual objects is thus being forged as more sensual objects are added to my skyline experience. This implies that the sensual realm does not just contain the temporal play between sensual objects and their shifting qualities, but also a similar play of varying associations between sensual objects themselves. Yet if time is merely the tension between a sensual object and its qualities, this should be impossible. Similar things happen in Harman’s descriptions of the seven remaining links, but since the general problem should be clear from the two examples just given, there is no need to discuss the rest in full detail.

³⁵ Ibid., 103, cf. 106.

³⁶ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 199.

³⁷ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 47.

³⁸ Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 251.

³⁹ Ibid., 252.

⁴⁰ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 196-197.

⁴¹ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 128.

⁴² Ibid., 74.

The second related problem concerns the simple fact that real objects and their real qualities are supposed to persist.⁴³ Much of Harman's ontology hinges on real objects and their qualities not being dissolved into their current engagements with other entities, as such dissolution would constitute overmining. Real objects must thus persist 'beyond' their sensual surfaces, but this is a meaningless statement as long as such persistence is not somehow temporal. As Wolfendale writes, this implies a tacit reliance on a second kind of "deep time" that OOO does not account for in its current formulation.⁴⁴

A modified version of Harman's theory of time must therefore meet at least three criteria. First, it must allow for the production, alteration, and annihilation of real objects with real qualities, and do so in a way that implies neither undermining nor overmining (recall Harman's thesis that real change is rare, such that objects are not swept away by their engagements). Second, it must allow the ten links between aspects of the fourfold to be temporal, because these links refer to what *happens* in reality. Third and finally, it must account for the persistence of objects, but without positing a time that would exist over and above objects, as this would violate the thesis that objects are the basic constituents of reality.

4 Deleuze and Twofold Time

We are looking for a notion of time that accounts for the temporality of sensual as well as real objects, plus the temporality of the links between those levels. Such a notion is found in Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, which theorizes time as a twofold of "Aion" and "Chronos."⁴⁵ Some may think that Deleuze theorizes time as a threefold rather than a twofold, given his elaborate descriptions of three temporal syntheses in *Difference and Repetition* and elsewhere.⁴⁶ Yet these three syntheses concern what entities *do* in time, not time proper. This will still sound vague for the moment, but the next section will discuss the status of temporal syntheses within a theory of twofold time in more detail.

The Logic of Sense cannot be understood without grasping its profound difference from *Difference and Repetition*, even if the former was published only one year after the latter (1969 and 1968, respectively). According to the well-known metaphysics of *Difference and Repetition*, our everyday reality of seemingly discrete and discontinuous individual entities is the passive result of mutually continuous yet self-differentiating processes which unfold in an intensive "virtual realm," a realm that is different in kind from the extensive actuality that our senses perceive.⁴⁷ In Harman's terms, this would be an undermining position, as individual entities would be passive expressions of a more fundamental, pre-individual dimension. In a preface to *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze explicitly distances himself from this virtual realm metaphysics, writing that it still amounted to a theory of "archaic depth" and that *The Logic of Sense* is instead about a new theory of "surfaces."⁴⁸ Indeed, throughout the thirty-four sections that comprise the book, there is not a single mention of the virtual realm that animates the pages of *Difference and Repetition*.

The general outline of this new 'theory of surfaces' is immediately clear from the first sections of *The Logic of Sense*, and observant readers will notice its proximity to Harman's object-oriented metaphysics. Deleuze posits a metaphysics premised on a "dualism of bodies or states of affairs and effects or incorporeal events [...]."⁴⁹ A body should be understood as a "substance and cause" with its own "physical qualities," and Deleuze adds that each body "withdraws" (*se retire*) from other bodies.⁵⁰ Conversely, incorporeal events are merely "quasi-causes" that depend on bodies for their "real causes."⁵¹ Events also have their

⁴³ Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 198.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 58-65. My argument here in no way concerns Deleuze's wider philosophy, but rather how (part of) Deleuze's theory of time gives us the conceptual tools needed to render Harman's philosophy more coherent. For a more extensive study of time in Deleuze's work, see Williams, *Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of Time*.

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 70-128.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 88, 171.

⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness*, 65.

⁴⁹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7, 4, 6.

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

own qualities, which Deleuze calls “attributes.”⁵² These events and their attributes form the world of sensuous experience, including trees that greet us with their green foliage, scalpels that redden our skin, and battles that ravage our lands.⁵³ If bodies withdraw from each other, this is because incorporeal events “envelop” bodies and thereby prevent them from making direct contact.⁵⁴ In this sense, incorporeal events are “impassible.”⁵⁵ Reality is thus ‘deeper’ than the manifest surfaces of incorporeal events, but this is no longer the depth of a unified and continuous virtual realm. Instead, it is the “depth” of bodies themselves as they withdraw behind their surfaces.⁵⁶

As an aside, we also encounter this model of reality in Deleuze’s second edition of *Proust and Signs*. Originally published in 1964, Deleuze added an entire second part to the 1972 version. The newly added text outlines a theory of bodies considered as “closed vessels” that “communicate only indirectly” because they only ever register each other’s “signs.”⁵⁷ In a striking resemblance to Harman’s ten links between the four aspects of objects, Deleuze writes that such a theory of reality entails a “galactic structure” of “ten combinations” between the various aspects of such entities.⁵⁸

According to the metaphysics of *The Logic of Sense*, bodies can be produced and altered.⁵⁹ Those familiar with the book will recall that Deleuze vehemently argues against ‘Platonic’ theories in which sensible reality is a representation of eternal and unchanging forms. To avoid regressing into such ‘Platonism’, bodies must be things that *happen* and *change*. This is why Deleuze sometimes also writes about real bodies in terms of events, for example when describing a battle or a human life as an “Event,” written with a capital E to avoid confusing an entity with its superficial manifestations.⁶⁰ Deleuze is also aware that if bodies are produced and altered, then this must involve incorporeal events, as a body never makes direct contact with another body. Hence surface events must be the *products* of bodies while also featuring in the *production* of bodies.⁶¹ This leads Deleuze to a twofold theory of time. On the one hand, there is the time of incorporeal events, the time of that which real bodies apprehend. On the other hand, there is the time of what happens to these bodies themselves.⁶² As Deleuze writes, “time must be grasped twice, in two complementary though mutually exclusive fashions.”⁶³ He calls the time of bodies “Chronos” and refers to the time of incorporeal events as “Aion.”⁶⁴

Before we move on, it is important to emphasize that Deleuze does not adhere to our habitual way of talking about the past as something that *was* present, the present as something that *is* present, and the future as something that *will be* present. When writing about the present, he (mostly) refers to what happens to real bodies, and when writing about the past and future, he (mostly) refers to how incorporeal events transpire. With this in mind, we proceed.

Aion is the “time of events-effects” on the surface of entities, which refers to the varying play of incorporeal events and their qualities.⁶⁵ As opposed to the present of real bodies, which “exist,” events in Aion “subsist and insist.”⁶⁶ This sounds like scholastic nitpicking, but it simply means that the play of

52 Ibid., 94.

53 Ibid., 10.

54 Ibid., 10, 111, 124-5, 273-4.

55 Ibid., 124.

56 Ibid., 222.

57 Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 174-5.

58 Ibid.

59 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 89.

60 Ibid., 100, 170

61 Ibid., 124.

62 Deleuze’s theory may very well accord with Timothy Morton’s OOO model of time. Morton writes: “Objects don’t sit in some kind of rigid temporal box. Instead, they are ‘internally’ out of phase with themselves, and this is what produces time and the possibility that they can interact” (*Realist Magic*, 177). This implies two distinct senses of time: one for an object’s existence amongst other entities, and then another one for its existence in a tensed relation – ‘out of phase’ – with itself.

63 Ibid., 5, cf. 132.

64 Ibid., 61.

65 Ibid., 62, 165, 166.

66 Ibid., 53.

events only exists relative to something else, as surface events only ever transpire in relation to bodies that apprehend them. There is therefore a sense in which Aion constitutes a present.⁶⁷ Your current experience of reading this article, possibly with a cup of coffee next to you and with music playing in the background, is an ‘Aionic’ manifold of tightly interwoven incorporeal events. Yet there is an even stronger sense in which Aion has “freed itself of its present corporeal content,” such that “only the past and future inhere or subsist in [it].”⁶⁸ Incorporeal events are produced by bodies (recall that Deleuze calls bodies *causes*). Since bodies are never encountered directly, the shifting play of experience is nothing but the transition from incorporeal events that these bodies *have produced* (past) into incorporeal events that these bodies *will produce* (future). Humans can artificially extract a single moment from this variation and call it ‘the present,’ but we can never make the body that is the cause of such an event present to our experience. We can attend to any given moment in our past, present, or (imagined) future, but all we ever find are series of incorporeal events that *were* produced and transitioned into further events that *were then* produced. This is why Aion “divides itself infinitely in past and future and always eludes the present.”⁶⁹ Note that this is not unique to our human experience of the world. All other entities also only ever apprehend the flow of incorporeal events that have been produced as they slowly give way to further events that are being produced.

Conversely, Chronos is “the present which alone exists. It makes the past and future its two oriented dimensions, such that one goes always from the past to the future.”⁷⁰ As the time of bodies themselves, Chronos is “corporeal.”⁷¹ If Chronos as the present of bodies divides Aion into a past and future, it is because incorporeal events are only ever apprehended or experienced by bodies, never by other events. It is therefore only relative to bodies that a distinction can be made between events that once were and events that then happened. Yet it is not enough to contend that bodies have their own ‘present’ in which they persist. As discussed, it must be the case that bodies are produced and altered by the incorporeal events that they encounter. Aion and Chronos must therefore be mutually involved.

The first aspect of this link is that incorporeal events are produced by bodies. In Deleuze’s words, Aion is a “climbing to the surface” of the “depths.”⁷² Yet these bodies are no unchanging entities. Their present is a “variable living present,” such that there is a “becoming of depths.”⁷³ This variation or becoming has not one but two aspects, such that there are in fact “two presents of Chronos.”⁷⁴ This is because Chronos “expresses the action of bodies *and* the creation of corporeal qualities.”⁷⁵ Since bodies were defined as causes, we know that the ‘action’ of bodies is their production of incorporeal events. Chronos leads to Aion: behind any incorporeal event lurks a body that is producing it. The creation of corporeal qualities is the (re)production or alteration of bodies themselves. Since we already know that bodies never encounter other bodies directly (not even themselves), this must be due to incorporeal events. Aion must thus also lead to Chronos. In Deleuze’s terms, the present or Chronos “gathers together and absorbs the past and the future.”⁷⁶ He also calls this process of Chronos (bodies) drawing Aion (events) into itself “devouring,” “blending,” or “incorporation.”⁷⁷ Bodies are thus created and altered by the very incorporeal events that they initially produce. Hence Chronos is an internal and deep time that cannot be reduced to the time of incorporeal events, but it is equally true that it is also the time of bodies being affected by those very events. As Deleuze writes, Chronos therefore expresses “the revenge taken by future and past on the present in terms of the present, because these are the only terms it comprehends and the only terms that affect it.”⁷⁸

⁶⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 164, 165, cf. 5, 61, 63.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 77.

⁷¹ Ibid., 162.

⁷² Ibid., 165.

⁷³ Ibid., 62, 175.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 168.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 165, emphasis added.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 5, cf. 61.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 132, 162, 168.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 164.

That bodies are affected by events ‘in terms of the present’ – i.e. in terms of themselves – points to the fact that whether or how events alter the qualities of a body hinges on those very qualities. Here, too, bodies are causes, as their own malleable nature determines whether and how events will be registered, as well as the extent to which such events cause real change in a body.

This gives us the full model of twofold time. Any given body registers, apprehends, or experiences an unbroken succession of interwoven incorporeal events. This succession is Aion, the first aspect of time, and it is unbroken precisely because it only ever manifests events, never bodies themselves. It is a succession of the past into the future, a series of events that *have been* produced and that *will be* replaced by events that *are then* produced. The second aspect of time is Chronos, which concerns the production of events by bodies, as well as the persistence of these bodies and the (re)generation or alteration of their qualities.

Concretely, this means that anything I experience (or anything that any given body ever registers) is a succession that exclusively consists of *products*, of events manifested by bodies. This succession is the ‘first’ time, and strictly speaking the *production* of events is utterly absent from this time. This is because the ‘link’ between a withdrawn body and the events that envelop it cannot be made present to another body (and also not to itself). The same is true for how the events that it registers affect and possibly alter a body and its qualities, because this ‘link’ is equally veiled behind the noticeable succession of events. Hence the ‘process’ of bodies producing events and being reproduced or altered by those events implies a ‘second’ time, a circuit between bodies and events that withdraws behind the incorporeal envelopes of entities. It is this model of time that should be incorporated into object-oriented ontology.

5 The Two Times of Objects

To do so, we must first concede that time is not the tension between sensual objects and their qualities. Even our own experience of the sensual world always also includes the varying association and dissociation of sensual objects with each other, as we saw in the skyline example. Moreover, the dynamic duels between sensual objects and qualities do not exist in and of themselves, but only in relation to real objects that experience, apprehend, or register them. Since Harman regularly draws on Husserl to theorize sensual objects and qualities, we can rename the tension between a sensual object and its qualities ‘adumbration.’ The next step is to graft Deleuze’s twofold model of time onto Harman’s fourfold ontic structure.

Time is then no longer a tension between two of the four aspects of objects. Time is a twofold, and each of its two aspects or forms involves a real object with its real qualities on the one hand and sensual objects with their sensual qualities on the other hand. Put differently, time is a twofold dynamic between the withdrawn twofold of objects and the manifest twofold of objects.

The first aspect of time according to Deleuze was Aion, the varying play of incorporeal events and their qualities that is apprehended by bodies. In OOO, this becomes the varying play of sensual objects and their qualities as apprehended by real objects. Here, too, there is a sense in which the sensual world is not the present, but rather the transition of the past into the future. OOO holds that sensual objects are translations of the real objects that lurk behind them. What any entity apprehends or experiences are therefore sensual objects that real objects *have produced*, and these can only ever be replaced by further sensual objects that real objects *then produce*. What remains present throughout this succession is the real object that registers this variation. As Deleuze indicated, a real object always experiences this succession on its own terms, because whether and how an object registers sensual events depends on the real qualities that it has. This incorporates the first aspect of time into OOO, but let us do away with Deleuze’s overly theatrical terminology and call this aspect *manifest time*.

The second aspect of time was Chronos, the time of the production of incorporeal events by real bodies as well as the reproduction or alteration of those bodies as they register incorporeal events. Chronos is thus the temporal circuit between bodies and events. For OOO, this becomes the production of sensual objects and their qualities by real objects and their qualities as well as the reproduction or alteration of qualified real objects as they register qualified sensual objects. It is the circuit between the withdrawn half of objects and the sensual half of objects. Let us rename it to *internal time*. Both ‘directions’ of this circuit

are already acknowledged in OOO. On the one hand, sensual objects and their qualities are translations of the real objects that they envelop. This implies that sensual objects are produced by real objects, based on the real qualities of the latter. On the other hand, we saw that a real object's encounter with sensual objects can result in real change to former's real qualities, as there exist "relatively rare events that transform an object's very reality."⁷⁹ We also saw that the unilateral openness of real objects is the condition for the possibility of such change.

This does, however, cast some doubt on Harman's thesis that real change (alteration of an object's real qualities) is rare. It seems more adequate to say that whereas *significant* real change is rare, *incremental* real change might be quite common. If a real object is open to all its sensual encounters, then it must also be possible that such an encounter leads to slight alterations of an object's real qualities, just as it must be possible that it simply leads to the regeneration rather than alteration of such qualities. And of course, it is also entirely possible that a sensual encounter has absolutely no effect on an object, precisely because a real object has *real* qualities. As Harman writes, objects "push back against whatever circumstances they face."⁸⁰ Because of the real qualities that I have (or rather, am), I may be highly responsive to one experience that thereby ends up profoundly changing me, whereas some other experience may not leave the slightest trace on my being.

Also note that whereas it is not necessary that a real object always manifests a sensual surface (as it can simply be the case that no other object currently registers it), it does seem to be necessary that a real object always registers at least some sensual objects if it is to persist. Harman already seems to acknowledge that real objects are generated and regenerated by what they encounter: "every entity has a definite qualitative character, and I would claim that to have such a character must mean to be articulated or constructed by pieces."⁸¹ These pieces have to be sensual objects. After all, objects are the only possible ground for the existence of entities in OOO, and sensual objects are the only kind of objects that can affect a real object. Even if an object somehow manages to take care of its own persistence by regenerating itself, this must play out in terms of that real object producing a sensual object that is then encountered by itself. By analogy, take the example of 'finding the strength' in oneself to persist during times of hardship. This cannot be a case of you 'tapping into yourself' as a real object. It must take the form of you supplying yourself with a sensual object (a thought, a memory, or a vague feeling) that allows you to persist. We should also note that this does not undermine real objects into the sensual objects that regenerate them, because there exists a difference in kind between the two dimensions of objects. If the generation of sensual objects by real objects is a matter of translation, then the same is true for the 'incorporation' of the force or impact of sensuous encounters into the real object.

As stated in the previous section, this twofold theory of time for OOO implies that objects engage in three temporal syntheses.⁸² Each synthesis involves manifest time as well as internal time. First, real objects produce qualified sensual objects that are contracted into the unbroken succession of the experiences or apprehensions of (other) real objects. Recall the example of more and more sensual objects that are gradually added to an observer's experience of a skyline. Second, real objects and their qualities are maintained and possibly (slightly or significantly) altered by the succession of qualified sensual objects that they encounter. Third, whenever a real object forges a relation with a sensual object, this immediately implies the generation of a *new* real object. As Harman writes, "every genuine relation *forms* a new object."⁸³ According to OOO, when I perceive a building, strike up a conversation with a friend, or think of my hometown, the perception, the conversation, and the thought are not just relations. They are full-blown real entities that cannot be reduced to either myself or the sensual objects 'on the other end'. Such new objects are also immediately immersed in the twofold of time, and this constitutes the final ingredient of the temporal dynamics of

⁷⁹ Harman, *Immaterialism*, 45.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸¹ Harman, "Time, Space, Essence, and Eidos," 5, cf. 15.

⁸² Whether or not the following fully accords with how temporal syntheses are defined in Deleuze's works is a question that I reserve for another time.

⁸³ Harman, *Time, Space, Essence and Eidos*, 13.

reality. Objects synthesize the sensual world, objects are synthesized as the sensual world affects them, and objects synthesize new objects as they relate to the sensual world.

Note that enriching OOO with a twofold of manifest time and internal time leaves the fourfold structure of objects completely intact. The question is now whether this twofold theory in time is an adequate response to Gratton's and Wolfendale's criticisms. The first point was that it must account for the production, alteration, and annihilation of qualified real objects. We have seen that internal time is indeed the condition for the possibility of such events. The second point concerned the temporality of the ten links between the aspects of the fourfold. Given that the combined effect of internal time and manifest time includes every aspect of the fourfold, this is now also accounted for. Finally, the twofold theory of time had to account for the persistence of objects without positing a time that would exist over and above them. This, too, is accounted for by the twofold theory of time. Objects persist or perish in so far as they are (not) regenerated by the sensual objects that they apprehend, which is to say upon which they draw, and this is warranted by the unilateral openness of real objects in conjunction with their internal time.

6 Conclusion

Embracing a Deleuzian twofold theory of time will increase the coherence and consistency of Harman's object-oriented ontology. The fact that the former can be grafted onto the latter may also lead us to reconsider the relative distance between Harman's and Deleuze's philosophies. Harman has argued that if continental metaphysicians were neatly divided into specific schools of thought, he and Deleuze would be placed in different ones.⁸⁴ Harman gives several reasons for this, but what interests us here is that one of those reasons is their apparently incompatible notions of time and becoming. In OOO, objects are the basic constituents of reality. If it is the case that nothing (except for other objects) precedes objects, then all of time must by definition be a dynamic among well-formed entities.

Conversely, Harman holds that a defining trait of "philosophers of becoming" such as Deleuze is that they put all of time prior to well-formed objects.⁸⁵ Such philosophers would hold that "entities are [...] just derivative outcroppings of some deeper pre-individual becoming."⁸⁶ Beneath or beyond our world of discontinuous objects, they posit a continuity of dynamic processes as well as a continuous time. Harman writes:

A philosopher of becoming is one who denies that the world is best understood in terms of individual things or individual instants of time. Instead, the world is a pre-individual field not fully carved up into distinct entities, and time is a continuous duration rather than a series of isolated cinematic frames.⁸⁷

On this view, *real* time has always already happened by the time one gets to actual and discrete entities, because time pertains to the continuity of pre-individual processes that give rise to such entities. Philosophies of becoming therefore place well-formed objects *at the end of time*, as time then exclusively pertains to everything that happens before an actual entity finds itself expressed in the world. Harman here finds himself in agreement with Peter Hallward's well-known reading of Deleuze's virtual realm metaphysics: "since it acknowledges only a unilateral relation between virtual and actual, there is no place in Deleuze's philosophy for any notion of change, time or history that is mediated by actuality."⁸⁸

The notions of a virtual realm and a time that fully precedes individuals are obviously anathema to OOO. Yet at the same time, we have seen that a Deleuzian theory of time is commensurable with an object-oriented ontology, and that the latter even gains in consistency if it incorporates the former. How can this be? The obvious answer is that Harman's OOO is indeed incommensurable with Deleuze's metaphysics, but this incommensurability chiefly concerns the metaphysics that we find in *Difference and Repetition*. As with

⁸⁴ Harman, "Whitehead in Schools X, Y, and Z" in Gaskill & Nocek, *The Lure of Whitehead*.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁸⁸ Hallward, *Out of this World*, 162.

any great philosopher, Deleuze's thought evolved throughout his books. We already discussed how Deleuze came to dismiss the virtual realm as theorized in *Difference and Repetition* as 'archaic.' Moreover, we saw that *The Logic of Sense* is premised on a notion of 'bodies' as substances and causes that 'withdraw' themselves, meaning that these bodies are ontologically veiled by superficial 'envelopes' or 'events.' And far from embracing a single and continuous time in a virtual depth, this ontology of bodies and surfaces implied that "time must be grasped twice, in two complementary though mutually exclusive fashions."⁸⁹ This is the point where compatibilities between OOO and Deleuzian metaphysics start to arise. And in fact, what else would one call the increasing focus on bodies, machines, and assemblages in Deleuze's works after *Difference and Repetition* than an increasing orientation towards objects?⁹⁰ In light of the preceding analysis, the question may very well not be whether or not Deleuze's and Harman's philosophies overlap, but rather how much they actually do.

One final remark, then, on the many criticisms of OOO that were mentioned at the outset of this article. If it is possible to address and remedy the problem of time in OOO, and if this provide an adequate response to what Gratton and Wolfendale consider to be the worst problem currently haunting OOO, then it stands to reason that other less damning flaws in the theory can be remedied as well. In my view at least, the notion that reality might be a multitude of malleable entities that can neither be reduced to some privileged layer, substance, or structure, nor dissolved into the manifold of their operations remains sufficiently fresh, compelling, and above all disturbing to warrant further analysis.

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⁸⁹ Ibid., 5, cf. 132.

⁹⁰ Deleuze clearly states that machines "constitute the Real in itself" (*Anti-Oedipus*, 52-53), and that the assemblage is "the minimum real unit" (*Dialogues*, 51).