



CENTRE FOR ETHICS
& HUMANISM
RESEARCH GROUP

Annual ETHU Seminar

Objects, Technology, Existence: Engaging with Graham Harman's OOO

Vrije Universiteit Brussel
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Abstracts & Bios

Ecological Humanism and Our Entanglement with Things

Hans Alma

My presentation will focus on the question of what Graham Harman's rejection of anthropocentrism means for contemporary humanism. In his book *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (2017) the political philosopher William Connolly argues that we need new ways of thinking about how humans relate to other forms of being. He criticizes the modernistic and dualistic worldview of many forms of humanism, but doesn't reject humanism as such. Connolly advocates an 'entangled humanism' that takes the inextricable interdependency of all forms of being into account, but that leaves room for human qualities and responsibilities. For the sake of clarity, I speak of an 'ecological humanism' and try to develop it in ways that are fruitful for the Belgian context. In this paper, I will study whether the archaeologist Ian Hodder's view on the entanglement of humans and things is helpful for my endeavor to rethink humanism in non-anthropocentric ways. I will confront his view with the criticism of Harman that Hodder's approach retains a nature/culture dualism and consider what object-oriented ontology contributes to ecological humanism.

Hans Alma is Guest Professor Contemporary Humanism at the Free University Brussels (VUB), department of Philosophy and Ethics. Trained in cultural psychology and psychology of religion at the Radboud University Nijmegen, her research interest focuses on the human search for meaning in life. From this perspective, she explores what humanism can mean in the face of existential questions raised by the ecological crisis.

On Waste Things: Towards an Object-Oriented Hauntology

Lisa Doeland

If anything, capitalist modernity has brought us an immense amount of waste. Having no proper place, these remnants haunt us. As Harman points out, there is a non-relational aspect to both waste and objects conceived in OOO terms. But is waste an object too, or just a remnant of it? What *are* these things we (call) waste? Although waste is both spatially and temporally detached from its surroundings, it is still attached to it in a negative way. When we want to grapple with this attachment/detachment, we should inquire into the hauntology of waste. What would an object-oriented hauntology entail?

Lisa Doeland (1982) is a PhD candidate, lecturer and programmer of public lectures and debates at the Radboud University Nijmegen. She co-authored *Onszelf voorbij. Kijken naar wat we liever niet zien* (Beyond Our Selves: Looking at What We'd Rather not See), a philosophical triptych in which she delves into waste as the night side of consumer capitalism. In her PhD research she traces the "specter of waste" and explores a hauntology of waste.

The Current State of Object-Oriented Ontology

Graham Harman

This lecture will discuss some of the recent developments in OOO. First, I consider the critique of "onto-taxonomy," or the foundation of modern philosophy in the assumption that there are two and only two basic kinds of things: (1) human thought, and (2) everything else.

This leads us to a critique of the presuppositions of transcendental philosophy and its successors. Second, I will emphasize the sense in which OOO is most fruitfully conceived as an *anti-literalist* philosophy that grants central status to aesthetics. This being the case, how do we avoid simply inverting the scientific error and reducing science and other forms of knowledge to derivative forms of poetry? To this end, I will discuss some ideas from fallibilism in the philosophy of science as well as speech-act theory. Third and finally, although the crucial role of metaphor in OOO is already well known, I will raise the question of whether or not there is a significant difference between metaphor (the realm of translation) and analogy (a realm beyond translation). The obvious precursor here is Latour's shift from Actor-Network Theory to philosophy of the modes of existence.

Graham Harman is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Liberal Arts Program Coordinator at SCI-Arc. He was born in 1968 in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, and earned his BA from St. John's College (Maryland), his MA from Penn State University, and his PhD from DePaul University. He is the author of eighteen books, most recently *Art and Objects* (Polity, September 2019). Graham is the 2009 winner of the AUC Excellence in Research Award. In 2015 he was named by *ArtReview* as the #75 most powerful influence in the international art world, and in 2016 was named by *The Best Schools* to their alphabetical list of the 50 most influential living philosophers.

Presentation, Integration, Separation: On the Essence of Technology

Arjen Kleinherenbrink

According to several contemporary materialist and empiricist philosophies, there is a double sense in which technology does not have an essence. Technology would neither have a general essence that distinguishes it from other kinds of things, nor would technological objects have individual essences that distinguish them from neighboring entities.

Based on the variant of object-oriented ontology that understands objects in terms of powers, I argue that both claims are wrong. Individual technologies have essences, and technology as such has an essence as well (though in a different sense).

I then show that whereas competing theories tend to draw attention to the *use* of technologies, an object-oriented approach would focus on their *design*.

Arjen Kleinherenbrink is assistant professor in metaphysics and philosophical anthropology at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands. His research concerns non-reductive accounts of reality and existentialist accounts of subjectivity. His most recent books are *Against Continuity*, *Avonturen bestaan niet*, and *Alles is een machine*.

The Pragmatic Value of OOO: Confronting Algorithmic Invisibility

Yoni Van Den Eede

The question “What is object-oriented ontology’s *use*?” that is, for *us humans*, seems an impossible one. Two of OOO’s foundational moves pre-empt it. First, OOO’s anti-anthropocentrism prevents an “exclusive” human focus. Second, asking about the use of things plays into the hands of one of OOO’s main conceptual adversaries: pragmatism. Harman’s philosophy is exactly founded on bypassing the pragmatist reading of Heidegger’s tool analysis, and subsequently widening its scope beyond Dasein to all things. Yet, pragmatism and OOO have more in common than we might expect, certainly in the light of current technological developments surrounding artificial intelligence and “algorithmic invisibility”: structures of algorithmic nudging and steering go hiding behind things’ everyday appearance. Despite the fact that OOO’s real core concept cannot be unilinearly applied to thinking about objects’ hidden algorithmic layers, as has been done for instance in design studies (the crucial caveat is that for OOO, the real core stays inaccessible tout court), there is still a task reserved here for OOO: it is to sharpen our senses for the invisible, for the absent – not so much as an ontological exercise, but as an existential concern. This is the pragmatic value of OOO, which we’ll start to explore along these lines in this paper.

Yoni Van Den Eede is senior researcher and lecturer affiliated with the Centre for Ethics and Humanism at the Free University of Brussels (Vrije Universiteit Brussel). He is among others the author of *Amor Technologiae: Marshall McLuhan as Philosopher of Technology* (VUBPRESS, 2012) and *The Beauty of Detours: A Batesonian Philosophy of Technology* (SUNY Press, 2019), and co-editor of *Postphenomenology and Media* (Lexington, 2017).

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

Niki Young

In *Dante's Broken Hammer* (2016), Graham Harman coins the term “ontological taxonomy.” The latter only appears in a few pages towards the middle of said text, and has to date sadly received little to no attention in the various publications broadly connected with “Object-Oriented Ontology” (OOO), including those of Harman himself. To help fill the gap in knowledge, my talk shall first examine this important yet oft-neglected critique of “ontotaxonomy,” situating it in light of other readings of the history of philosophy such as those of Quentin Meillassoux’s critique of “correlationism” and Martin Heidegger’s evaluation of Western philosophy as “onto-theo-logy.” In following, I shall then critically elaborate on what I see as Harman’s proposed threefold solution to this flawed form of thinking.

Niki Young lectures Philosophy at the University of Malta, Junior College. His areas of interest include 20th- and 21st-century Continental Philosophy, Phenomenology, Aesthetics, Deconstruction, as well as the various forms of New Realism and Materialism currently being developed by a number of contemporary thinkers. He has contributed to a number of publications related to philosophy and contemporary art, the most recent one being “On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access” (*Open Philosophy*, 2020), a paper which assesses the similarities and differences between the work of Quentin Meillassoux and that of Graham Harman. Young’s current research focuses on the points of convergence and divergence between the work of Graham Harman and that of Jacques Derrida.