



CENTRE FOR ETHICS  
& HUMANISM  
RESEARCH GROUP

Annual ETHU Seminar

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

-online-

Wednesday February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021, 6–10 PM CET

### 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 Full Professor Religious Humanism and Compassion at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam). 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: Towards an Object-Oriented Hauntology

Lisa Doeland

We tend to think of technological objects as things that are shiny, new and useful. But what about their afterlife? What about the e-waste they will become? As Graham Harman points out in an interview by Daniel Fetzner (2016), there is a non-relational aspect to both waste and objects conceived in OOO terms. However, can waste itself be conceived as an object and conceived in OOO terms? Waste accumulates, it leaks, it sticks, it remains and it haunts. Waste muddies our sense of *being* and *presence* and forces us to inquire not so much into the ontology, but the hauntology (Derrida) of waste. Drawing on Timothy Morton's notion of the "hyperobject," that allows us to think of being as both haunting and haunted, I will argue for an object-oriented hauntology.

**Lisa Doeland** lectures at the Radboud University Nijmegen and the University of Amsterdam. In her PhD research she problematizes the current anthropocentric, managerial approach to waste, that takes it for a resource and dreams of recycling without remainders, but cannot account for the ways in which waste eludes our grasp and has even started to haunt (us). Instead, she suggests a dark ecological approach to waste that allows us to explore its unruly, spectral qualities. She is interested in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Continental thinkers such as Freud, Derrida and Morton and concepts that pierce (eco)modernist dreams of progress, wholeness and control, such as the uncanny, hauntology and the hyperobject. She co-authored *Onszelf voorbij. Kijken naar wat we liever niet zien* (2016), a philosophical triptych in which she delves into waste as the night side of consumerist capitalism, and is currently working on a book on the ethics of waste for a general audience.

## 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 twenty books, most recently *Skirmishes: With Friends, Enemies*,

*and Neutrals* (punctum, 2020). 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.

### **Getting Real About Technology**

**Arjen Kleinherenbrink**

In his well-known *What Things Do*, Peter-Paul Verbeek proposes a philosophy of technology that puts the spotlight on what individual technological artifacts contribute to our world. This is a welcome alternative to classical theories that treat all of technology as a single, alienating force.

Verbeek fittingly sees his theory as heeding Husserl's call to go 'to the things themselves.' He claims that doing so requires a theory that is neither realist nor idealist about technology, but rather goes beyond that dichotomous pair.

I argue that Verbeek's theory fails to meet its own criterion and remains wholly idealist about technological artifacts. I then show that the aversion to realism in *What Things Do* comes from the mistaken assumption that realism about technology would imply unmediated cognitive access to artifacts. Finally, I argue for an object-oriented and unapologetically realist theory of technology.

**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).

### **Onto-Taxonomy and Object-Oriented Thought**

**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 “onto-taxonomy,” 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 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-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.