INTRODUCTION

You’re on the List! (Oh, Wait —)

Roses, laser beams, Jupiter, humans, elbow noodles…

The philosophical movement known as object-oriented ontology, or oo0, has produced many lists like the one above—so many, in fact, that they’ve earned the nickname of Latour litanies;¹ after Bruno Latour, who first made them popular. They’re certainly fun to write. Think of an object, then a second object with no obvious relation to the first, then a third that breaks the pattern again. Continue as desired, and the world is quickly revealed to be vast and dense with beings of mind-boggling variety.

So what is this movement, with its name that evokes computer programming jargon in one moment and erotic novels the next, and what’s the point of making these lists?

After netting out the usual internecine disputes, the point of departure for all object-oriented ontologists, along with their cousins the speculative realists, is a rejection of correlationism. As coined by Quentin Meillassoux, correlationism is the assertion that thinking and being can never be considered separately from one another. The milder version of correlationism might be stated: What lies beyond thought can’t be known, but it can be imagined. The stronger version offers less wiggle room. What lies beyond thought, it claims, can’t even be considered without triggering a contradiction. The correlationist view is generally seen to trace back at least to Kant, gathering steam with Heidegger’s notion of concealment, and reaching its apogee in

¹ Credit for this term is due to Ian Bogost.
postmodernism, with its heavy-lidded insistence on the world as a text.

OOO rejects correlationism in any of its guises, and offers an alternative. It concedes that all objects retain some aspect that is unreachable. I can experience a cup in many ways, but there will always be some part of the cup that remains withdrawn from me. Following from this — and here is the key move — it maintains that objects remain withdrawn from each other as well. Therefore, we do know something about that which lies beyond thought, and what we know usurps us from our presumptive central position in the universe. ooo decenters the human and alerts us to a “concealed underworld of real objects” (Graham Harman), a “mesh” (Tim Morton), or a “wilderness” (Levi Bryant), in which all objects enjoy equal footing, or what some have called a flat ontology. Such is the impetus behind the litanies: the challenge that each of the objects you name has equal status as a thing that actually exists. A bear exists, as does a spelling bee, as does a toaster.

This argument has the force of logic behind it and — though it makes my job harder to say it — the folly of life in front. The problem shows up with the fourth item on my list, which both belongs and does not belong with the others, is both included and excluded, because it includes myself... and the list came from me. While drawing attention to this paradox might seem fussy, since the name of my species on a page and my actual self are pretty clearly two different things, I believe it presents a serious difficulty for anyone interested in the nature of being, especially those of us who aim to make good on claims of decentering the human. What can it mean, after all, to regard all objects as equal, if we’re the ones doing the regarding? Doesn’t that already grant us a special place in our scheme? How exactly do you remain faithful to the principle of decentering the human if not from some central human position? Conversely, on what basis can we hope to judge our success in understanding that which, by our own admission, is inexorably foreign to us? As one critic puts it in reviewing a book by vitalist Jane Bennett:
Towards the end of *Vibrant Matter*, its author asks: “…what if we loosened the tie between participation and human language use, encountering the world as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages?” In failing to suggest both why and how our current societies could feasibly encounter the world on this way, *Vibrant Matter* inadvertently raises some critical questions about the epistemic community to which its author belongs.²

Such questions aren’t easily waved away. The prevailing defense, advanced in different forms by Harman and Bryant, is to hold that all objects distort their relations with other objects, just as we humans do. If this is the case, then we are equal to other objects, and equally correlationist. *Every* object caricatures other objects, so the equality is complete.

The “decentering of the correlation” argument has the virtue of consistency, and it opens important lines of inquiry. The difficulty I have is that it seems to run past its own best idea. If we distort or caricature other objects, then we will be distorting other objects when we speak of how they distort each other, so it will be true once again that we can’t know being outside ourselves. We can agree that other objects exist independently of us, but past that we reach a discursive dead end. This looks very much like where Kant ended up when he declared the thing-in-itself off limits, and very much, too, as if we are destined to color every litany with our own, all-too-human perspective. At the very least, it undermines the rejection of correlationism that’s supposed to form the cornerstone of the ooo project.

Perhaps it’s possible, as Bryant has it, that attempts at empathy will help us to understand how other objects experience the world, so long as we remember that we are distorting them. Perhaps there’s something to be gained from the embrace of caricature. Perhaps the growing interest in an object-oriented aesthetics, and in metaphor, has merit in its own right. For my

part, I think there actually is a way out. On this count, I side with Meillassoux in taking correlationism to be a worthy adversary—worthy, that is, of both respect and ruin.

In the following pages, then, it will be my aim to resolve the contradiction triggered by our participation in the roster of being, and in so doing, to open a path that I believe has hitherto been overlooked: the possibility of decentering the human beyond mere assertion. My argument will hinge on a subtle distinction in the concept of independence. While I will do my best to defend the theoretical independence of objects from thought, the pay dirt will come if I can show independence as a variety of experience.

This emphasis on experience will entail a turn toward practice, although possibly not in the usual sense of the word. One often sees this term hitched to what turns out to be another idea: to incorporate a theory into a plan, so to speak. I mean it in a different sense—as when someone learns a passage on a violin. An object-oriented practice for me is iterative, and it vanishes, just like music does. It can be learned, but never finished, precisely because it is the practice of a thought, rather than a final resting place for it.

For reasons that will become clear, a practice of this kind will not have much to do with the internecine disputes I’ve mentioned. The field has become varied enough, however, that one must distinguish the version of OOO to which one subscribes, and to take in tow views that lie outside it as well. I’ve already mentioned Meillassoux, who doesn’t consider himself an object-oriented ontologist at all. His book, *After Finitude*, was the wake-up call for me, as it has been for many others. Although he may disagree with my thesis, I also recognize a kindred spirit in Levi Bryant, partly for his perennial disposition toward “getting something going,” and often for the specific arguments he

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Bryant has recently moved away from the term “object” in favor of the more dynamic “machine.” Insofar as this choice is meant to emphasize the functionality of an object in addition to its state, I will take the preference to be largely a matter of definition and retain the more widely used “object.”
has to make. In a kind of severe shorthand, I would point to his Ontic Principle: “There is no difference that does not make a difference.” In other words, the identity of objects can be known by the differences they generate. I hold that it’s possible to formalize this principle in such a way as to bring out the existence of another being without “overwriting” it. Given that I can’t know the totality of another object, I still can change my relation to it and so gain some knowledge about it. More to the point, I can make a change that allows another change to come from another place. That these changes can be brought about through the construction of objects (or the construction of relations to objects) is also important to my argument, and those familiar with the writings of Ian Bogost will recognize my debt to him on this count.

In thinking along these lines, I’m consciously taking up a second-phase position. OOO rightly began by emphasizing the reality of objects other than the human, in order to make a new thesis clear. The original stirring salvoes have since given way to more nuanced expositions, in which correlationist views are sometimes granted validity as realities in their own right (since correlationisms are objects too). But these redactions often have an air of haste about them, as when the city dweller praises the local museums and opera houses she will never visit. What remains to be done, here in the second phase, is to look long and hard at the human object, and to see if we might resolve our status in the litaniies, based on the kind of things we are.

My opening, then, will engage Bryant’s view as set forth in The Democracy of Objects, in order to reveal a surprising and weird relation within the human object — the apparent existence of two minds in a single body. In Chapter Two, I resolve some


5 As my argument proceeds, the reader will no doubt hear the echoes of voices that have come before me. I apologize in advance for not mentioning them all. My only excuse is that I have tried to follow the logical consequences of a premise, and to be content with allies after the fact.
ambiguities in the argument for coincident entities by casting both their normal operations and the possibility of decentering those operations in mathematical terms. That accomplished, I turn in Chapter Three to an existing method for decentering our coincident entities and, after reconciling it with my mathematical forays, identify its ethical limitations when it comes to the production of artifacts. Chapter Four is then taken up with the work of recasting colocation in terms of intention, so as to clear the way for Chapter Five, a more freewheeling section in which I break protocol and advance specific proposals for practicing an object-oriented ethics.

The dreaded word mathematics, sitting right there in my summary, is bound to set off alarms. My hope is that any fears of an impenetrable text will prove unfounded. Certainly, I’m not a schooled mathematician, but rather self-taught in almost every respect. The same goes for my philosophical training, which more closely resembles the accumulations of a medieval wandering scholar than it does the progressive conquest of degrees. My promise, then, is to advance no concept that I haven’t unraveled on my own (sometimes, admittedly, after considerable mental exertion). Show your work, the teachers say, and I have tried to do so, not only because philosophy has become increasingly compartmentalized, resulting in a profusion of different terms for similar ideas, but also because the greater project of existence, as I understand it, belongs to all of us. Again practice is the operative term, and the leveler of every good theory: After all the arguments and objections, the defeat of correlationism begins at home.