Derrida, Lacan, and Object-Oriented Ontology

Philosophy of Religion at the End of the World

There is a world within the world.

—Don Delillo, Libra

Jacques Derrida (along with Levinas) is the major point of reference for the formation of a Continental philosophy of religion that took shape in the 1990s around the work of John D. Caputo, Richard Kearney, Edith Wyschogrod, Kevin Hart, and Merold Westphal. Unfortunately, much of what passes for philosophy of religion today, whether analytic or continental, is disconnected from the pressing realities of lived existence, caught up in conceptual arguments and juridical formulations about non-existing entities. Why should we care about philosophy of religion, much less invest in the effort to rethink it? In this chapter, I reflect briefly on the history and present situation of philosophy of religion, and then suggest an ecological becoming of philosophy of religion in both generic and technical terms, in relation to the thought of Derrida and Lacan.

This thinking about philosophy of religion takes place at the edge of the world, perhaps on the precipice of a biological catastrophe that Richard Leakey, Elizabeth Kolbert, and others call “the sixth extinction.” All of our thinking in this century has to grapple with the urgency of our ecological situation, which includes resource depletion, global climate change, over-population, ocean warming and acidification, and mass extinction of many species of birds and mammals. I will return to this catastrophic horizon at the end of the chapter, by way of an engagement with Timothy Morton’s ecological thinking in Hyperobjects.

In this chapter, I engage Derrida’s philosophy with the newer viewpoint of “object-oriented ontology” (OOO) the idea that we need to shift our
attention from subjective to more objective modes of understanding. Morton provides an impressive reading of an object-oriented ontology in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, and I will engage directly with Morton’s book shortly, using Derrida and Lacan to help us think more carefully about what an object is. OOO, a phrase coined by Levi Bryant, is also associated with the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman and a philosophical movement called Speculative Realism that has emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century.3

A powerful influence on Speculative Realism, as well as a strong impetus toward this OOO is supplied by the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux in his book *After Finitude*. In this influential book, Meillassoux critiques and tries to get out of the subjectivist trap of correlationism, in which any knowledge of an object has to be correlated with a thinking subject. Correlation, he writes, “consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”4 Speculative Realism wants to effect a turn away from the subjectivism that pervades post-Kantian Continental philosophy, and turn our attention toward the strange and complex behaviors of objects. In so doing, they also bring about a re-engagement with some of the perspectives and observations of the natural sciences and mathematics.

In *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton cites Derrida a number of times with approval, but many writers associate Derrida’s philosophy with an irreducible subjectivism if not a hopeless linguistic idealism. For Harman and Meillassoux, Derrida’s work is caught in the trap of post-Kantian correlationism, where any object necessarily has to be correlated with a thinking subject.5 Modern correlationism begins with Kant’s Copernican Revolution, that claims that objects rotate around human categories of intuition and understanding. This correlationism persists all the way through most Continental philosophies of post-structuralism, including Derrida’s philosophy.6

As a way to help us think beyond the impasse of correlationism, Meillassoux introduces the notion of the arch-fossil. An arch-fossil names an object that bears traces of “the existence of an ancestral reality” that is “anterior to terrestrial life.”7 An arch-fossil is an object of thought that signifies something that occurs before any human thinking exists. Meillassoux claims that the arch-fossil is a natural artifact that testifies to a limit of human experience, but instead of drawing a conclusion about human finitude, he exploits the notion of an arch-fossil to push beyond the correlationist circle. The way that he does this is to radicalize the contingency inherent in correlationism.

Even if everything is contingent, including any object and any subject, Meillassoux argues for the necessity of contingency because it is the
“factiality” or contingency of the correlation itself that is absolute, rather than any particular entity. The arch-fossil exhibits an absolutization of facticity that Meillassoux calls factiality, because it indicates a kind of givenness of being that is anterior to any thinking of givenness. Meillassoux discovers a method of radicalizing correlationism itself to escape the correlationist circle because he claims that we cannot presuppose that any necessary being exists, but we can in fact claim that it is necessary and absolute to hold that any being might not exist. Every being is contingent: “the absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being.”

From this principle of unreason, or refusal of any principle of sufficient reason, Meillassoux addresses the appearance of stable laws in our world and how they can exist in a universe of radical contingency. Taking his cue from David Hume, Meillassoux argues that despite all scientific laws being contingent, nevertheless their chaotic flux constructs an apparent stability. Meillassoux calls this “Hume’s Problem,” which concerns how our understanding of causality presupposes the uniformity of the laws of nature. In Part VIII of his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Hume speculates about the possibility that a finite number of particles undergoing a finite number of transpositions over an indefinite period of time would generate an eternal repetition of the same situations. This scenario foreshadows Nietzsche’s articulation of the idea of eternal recurrence. If matter is put into ceaseless motion by its originating force, then this ongoing dynamism produces “a continued succession of chaos and disorder.” But Hume has his character Philo suggest that in this very situation, “is it not possible that it may settle at last, so as not to lose its motion and force . . . yet so as to preserve a uniformity of appearance, amidst the continual motion and fluctuation of the parts?”

Meillassoux adopts a similar solution in After Finitude, but he presents it in mathematical set-theoretical terms, an area where he is influenced by Badiou’s philosophy in Being and Event. Meillassoux claims that Georg Cantor’s notion of a transfinite set of numbers (basically multiple sets of infinite numbers) demonstrates that “the (quantifiable) totality of the thinkable is unthinkable.” Cantor’s set theory mathematics allows one to compare infinite sets, and to say that one infinite set is larger than another, even if both are infinite. But this series of infinite sets is unthinkable in a total sense; the series of transfinite cardinal numbers cannot be totalized because they are based on sets whose members are infinite. For Meillassoux, the possibility of a non-totalizing (in a specific quantifiable sense) possibility as exhibited in transfinite sets (sets of infinite sets) allows him to posit a certain stability of experience without the necessity of underlying laws. This is a complex technical argument, but Meillassoux is relying on
Badiou’s work to claim that reality is essentially formalizable in mathematical terms with set theory, and Cantor’s work suggests that we cannot totalize all possibilities, which means that there is a sense in which our laws are contingent but nonetheless stable. Meillassoux claims that all of our laws of reason and nature are contingent and potentially chaotic, but “it is precisely this super-immensity of the chaotic virtual that allows the impeccable stability of the visible world.”

Much of the impetus behind Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism concerns how it sustains postmodern views of religion. For Meillassoux, correlationism ends up with an irresolvable aporia between what we can know about ourselves and what we can know about the world. This leaves open the door for fideism, famously affirmed by Kant in the Preface to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant says that “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith.” This faith is the real target of Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism because in correlationism the idea of the absolute is “reduced to a mere belief, and hence to a religion, albeit of the nihilist kind.” Correlationism reaches an impasse of knowledge because it equivocates between our objective knowledge and its necessity to be correlated with the subjective processes of our knowing. We cannot know anything about the objective or real world, so we are forced to the state of mere belief. Because we lack any objective vantage point to think the absolute, philosophy reverts to a form of weak piety. “On this point,” Meillassoux concludes, “the contemporary philosopher has completely capitulated to the man of faith.”

Meillassoux does not name Derrida here, but his critique is certainly concerned with the turn to religion on the part of many Continental philosophers. Derrida does not reduce knowledge to faith, but there is this aporia or equivocation in Derrida’s thought between faith and knowledge that troubles Meillassoux and many other Speculative Realists. However, as Steven Shakespeare points out, “Meillassoux’s position comes with a price. Having set out to establish the validity of scientific statements about an ancestral past, we are left with a world of chaos in which there is no reason for anything to happen or not happen. The fossil dissolves into abstract possibility.” In his effort to avoid the indeterminacy of subjectivism, Meillassoux cannot evade the paradox of objective contingency. The only way he can escape correlationism is to radicalize contingency, but the radicalization of contingency introduces an objective equivocation that is no less disturbing.

In his opposition to contemporary philosophical fideism and its weak form of religion, Meillassoux introduces a strange return of God. In *The Divine Inexistence*, Meillassoux claims that even though he is a strict atheist,
and God does not exist in any actual or potential sense in this world, it is conceivable that God could exist in virtual terms if a new world came into existence that provided the conditions for the advent of justice. Meillasoux claims that we have experienced three fundamental advents of something entirely new, or “three orders that mark the essential ruptures of becoming: matter, life, and thought.”

Human value and morality desires another new order, one of justice, but that order does not exist, and cannot exist without the restoration and resurrection of humans who have already died. Even though this just situation is potentially impossible in any way in our own world with its current laws, Meillasoux can imagine a virtual world where such a rupture could occur that would bring about a world in which justice exists, and Meillasoux suggests that we have a messianic imperative to think and proclaim such a virtual reality.

To claim that God exists is blasphemous because it affirms our present order of injustice, but atheism goes too far in its giving up of any possibility of God. Meillasoux uses the word God to name the possibility (or virtuality) of a world in which justice is possible in a strong sense, which includes some kind of resurrection of the dead and involves a Christ-like human mediator who abandons power for the sake of justice. Meillasoux claims that authentic philosophical faith, in contrast to religious faith, consists of “believing in God because he does not exist,” and this is an option that has not yet been seriously considered.

Meillasoux’s conclusion about the inexistence of God appears incredible and bizarre in ontological terms, even if it is a provocative speculation. Why this God specifically, and why should it conform so closely with more conventional monotheistic and even Christian notions of God? Meillasoux’s God is very much a God of the philosophers, and stems from a very European Enlightenment approach to the situation of human moral existence. We may and should resonate with his deeply felt moral desire for justice, possibly even to the point of a messianic hope for an entirely new advent. Meillasoux bases his messianic hope on an affirmation of the ultimate value of the human. This humanism seems naïve, however, not only from the perspective of the deconstruction of humanism of poststructuralist Continental philosophy, but also from the ontological and cosmological perspective of the universe that emerges from post-humanist versions of technology and natural science. Speculative realism and speculative materialism has many invigorating aspects, but some of these conclusions appear escapist and suffused with a kind of wishful thinking, despite the brilliance of Meillasoux’s thinking and writing.

In our postmodern as in our modern world, then, we seem to not be able to have done with the question of religion, despite our best efforts to
be atheists. Genuine atheism is difficult, as Christopher Watkin insists, although perhaps we need to stop trying quite so hard to eliminate religion. In the modern world, philosophy of religion stems from Kant and Hegel, which makes it intrinsically correlationist in terms of Speculative Realism. In a negative sense, Kant determines the limits of a philosophical understanding of religion because he excludes it as a legitimate object of critique. Reason cannot critique religion in its pure or practical role because religion does not occupy an autonomous realm of knowledge. For Kant, a purified rational religion is a supplement to ethics, which is the realm of practical reason that corresponds to the question: “What should we do?”

In a Kantian sense, there persists a tension intrinsic to philosophy of religion because philosophy is the rational and critical function that defines the state and stakes of the situation, while religion indicates an object that in some ways resists rational and critical explanation. Philosophy of religion tries to explain what cannot be entirely explained by philosophy. Hegel, on the other hand, gives philosophy of religion a positive function because he argues in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion that religion possesses content in the form of Vorstellungen, or images, that can then be spelled out in conceptual forms according to the dynamic development of the Concept, or Begriff. For Hegel, philosophy of religion is the penultimate stage of the outworking of absolute Spirit, the point where Spirit as Subject recognizes its intrinsic form in images and then elaborates their conceptual content.

For Hegel, religion has importance, but it is only penultimate significance, and philosophy must supply its conceptual content for Spirit to become all in all. Philosophy of religion is a spiritual process that evolves the conceptual Truth that emerges from religious forms. Stereotyping very broadly, we could suggest that Anglo-American analytic philosophies of religion conform more closely to the Kantian model of religion, whether they want to redeem or repudiate religion in critical terms. In a complementary way, most Continental philosophies of religion can be viewed as Hegelian because they are more interested in elaborating religious ideas and then re-describing them in other ways, even if they are seen as post-Kantian in terms of their correlation to subjective modes of knowing. Sometimes this redescription is affirmative of religious phenomena and sometimes it is dismissive, but it is the process of conceptual elaboration that is important.

Whether seen as more Hegelian or more Kantian, Continental or Analytic, philosophy of religion is fairly specialized as a subset of academic scholarship that is increasingly marginalized in our contemporary corporate
university. Professional philosophy itself is so alienated from popular discourse that it is difficult to translate these ideas into language that can be understood by, let alone evaluated by, a broader public. At the same time, philosophy more generally struggles to justify itself before an academic tribunal that is engorged by administrative functions, and demands disciplinary currency that can be calculated ultimately in quantitative, monetary terms. These problems affect contemporary philosophy and philosophy of religion whether or not they are criticized as intrinsically correlationist.

For scholars of religion, religion is an object of academic study that is at least partly “the creation of the scholar’s study,” as Jonathan Z. Smith affirms. I disagree with Smith, however, when he claims that religion is “solely” the creation of the scholar’s study because I think that goes too far in its academicism. The philosophical viewpoints of OOO and Speculative Realism assert that such a position reflects the inherent subjectivism in the modern and contemporary academy, which they are attempting to dislodge. There are objects of and for religion. But what sort of objects are they? I will consider this question after briefly considering how religion is seen as contributing to a worldview and the constitution of a world.

Scholars like to explain a word’s meaning by appealing to etymology, and the word “religion” can be traced back to the Latin *religio*. *Religio* has two competing etymologies, and scholars have been unable to finally decide on which one is correct. The most popular meaning is *re-ligare*, meaning to re-bind or bind back. This suggests that religion is a form of re-binding of a social fabric that has been torn or broken. The problem with this understanding is that it presupposes an original harmony or unity that comes undone, after which the role of religion is to put it back together.

The other, competing, etymology of *religio* is *re-legere*, which means to re-collect or re-read. I like this meaning because it suggests a kind of repetition, and this repetition does not necessarily mean that what is re-read is the same text or the same practice. Furthermore, we could reread the first meaning of *religio* as *re-ligare* in terms of what Caputo calls “a binding to the unbound,” where life is unbound from anything other than or transcendent to life. I will return to consider Caputo’s reading of Derrida on religion more explicitly in the next chapter. Here, if this binding back is to what is originally bound, then it suggests an originary purpose or meaning to existence. But if religion is binding to the unbound, this frees up religion for other meanings, practices, and bindings.

Whatever religion as an object of study is, it has famously returned over the last few decades, and this return has falsified or at least severely problematized the so-called “secularization hypothesis.” The secularization hypothesis suggests that religion is becoming less significant for human society.
and meaningful practices, and its role is being replaced by other things. The return of religion in philosophy, politics, and culture attests to a limit of this hypothesis.

Of course, religion does not simply return because it never went away. What happens, as sociologists such as José Casanova explain, is that religion has become deprivatized. During the period of European modernity, religion was seen as a private matter of belief, in contrast to public secular reason. Religion could not be kept completely private, but the idea that it could be informs the ideology of secularism and fuels the secularist hypothesis. I argue that the return of religion indicates a postsecularism, where the simple opposition between religious and secular deconstructs. At the same time, I want to resist the postsecular narrative advocated by Radical Orthodoxy and other religious apologists, which sees religion as replacing the secular in a triumphalist way. I prefer the more nuanced approach of Talal Asad, who argues that religion and politics are both implicated in the constitution or formation of the secular. Asad concludes that “if the secularization thesis no longer carries the conviction it once did, this is because the categories of ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ turn out to implicate each other more profoundly than we thought, a discovery that has accompanied our growing understanding of the powers of the modern nation-state.”

Derrida has been one of the primary theoreticians of this intertwining of religion and politics, as we saw in Chapter 3. His analysis of religion in “Faith and Knowledge” demonstrates a kind of auto-immunity at work in the political return of religion, because adherents of political forms of religion desire to ward off attacks to the social and political body, but these efforts to protect and indemnify society end up harming it. In Rogues, Derrida says that there exists a “perverse and autoimmune” effect not only of religion, but even of democracy, whereby democratic states must “interrupt a normal electoral process in order to save a democracy threatened by the sworn enemies of democracy.” This occurs in Algeria in 1991 when the government intervened to halt an election that gave Islamists political power, and in the United States after 9/11, when the United States Patriot Act restricted citizens’ rights in the name of protecting them from future terrorist attacks.

The religious, the political, and the secular are all constituents in the composition of a world. According to Martin Heidegger, human beings are world-making beings. In his Fundamental Problems of Metaphysics, as we saw in the previous chapter, Heidegger examines three ideas: world, finitude, and solitude. In order to elucidate the first question, the question of world, Heidegger introduces three guiding theses: “the stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming.” For Heidegger, man
is Dasein, the ‘there’ of being who is capable of asking the question of being. Stones lack any ability to ask questions, and animals are locked into their worlds, at best only dimly aware of their existence in a world. Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether Heidegger is unfair to animals and rocks, we can see how this conception of world is important for Heidegger.

In his later work, he argues that rather than humans intentionally constructing worlds, it is being itself that allows worlds to be created in and through human language and activity. In his essay on “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger claims that setting up a work of art such as a temple opens up a world. “Towering up within itself, the work opens up a world, and keeps it abidingly in force.” A world is not simply what lies at hand, how we understand our perspective on or representation of the world. As disclosed in a genuine work of art, “the world worlds, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home.” Stones, plants, and animals do not possess a world because they cannot wield language or create a work of art. According to Heidegger, “a peasant woman, on the other hand, has a world because she dwells in the overtness of beings.” A human person possesses the capacity to experience a world as a world, in the becoming or worlding of this world, in which “all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits.” Setting up a work of art means setting forth a world.

To be human or to be able to ask the question of being is to participate in the creation of a world. And we are only able to take part in this world-creation insofar as we are finite beings, aware of our own mortality or what Heidegger calls “being-unto-death.” A world is temporary and finite, but it opens up and discloses itself to contemplative humans who let the world emerge into being. I think that part of what it means to be religious is to be oriented within a world, that religion as a work of creation provides a sense of orientation—the scope and limits of all things—even as it also allows for and creates a certain amount of disorientation. This orientation is provided abruptly and crudely in movie previews that invariably begin: “In a World . . .”

A world anticipates its own demise. But what if the end of a world becomes so gigantic and extreme that it calls into question not only its own existence but the existence of any possible world? This disturbing question is what Morton’s book Hyperobjects forces us to think. What is a hyperobject? It is a special kind of object, and it attests to the popularity as well as the limits of this newer philosophy of OOO. OOO, as we have seen, wants to shift philosophy’s focus from language and subjectivity to objects.
Proponents of OOO want to think about objects without their being tied to the conditions of representation given by a human subject, as laid out in Kant’s critical philosophy.

Morton embraces this object-oriented-ontology, but he expands the definition of an object to include what he calls hyperobjects. A hyperobject is something that is “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.” As examples of hyperobjects, Morton lists the Solar System, a black hole, an oil field, the Florida Everglades, and the biosphere, but his main example is global warming. For Morton, hyperobjects come into view when we abandon an anthropocentric perspective and adopt a more objective realism in our philosophy. What is ironic is that it is precisely in the era that is being called the Anthropocene where we come to appreciate the extent to which humans have transformed the planet, that we can see this shift in orientation. According to Morton, the transformation of Earth from a natural world to one where we cannot escape our responsibility for transforming nature is tied to the end of the world.

Hyperobjects emerge at the end of the world, and the end of the (natural) world has already occurred. The first instance of the end of the world happens in 1784, with the patenting of the steam engine, “an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth’s crust,” which marks “the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale.” This end of the world is repeated in 1945, with the testing of the first atomic bomb in Trinity, New Mexico. Morton says that what comes into view for humans at this moment is precisely the end of the world, brought about by the encroachment of hyperobject, one which is assuredly Earth itself, and its geological cycles demand a *geophilosophy* that doesn’t think simply in terms of human events and human significance.

Again, I want to underline the paradoxical nature of Morton’s analysis here: It is the recognition of irreducible human effects on the Earth that ushers in the Anthropocene and ends any simple understanding of Nature as a sphere apart from human activity that at the same time creates the possibility of thinking about objects in a non-anthropocentric way. In addition, hyperobjects are very strange sorts of objects, and resemble something that could also be called systems or even processes.

I note Morton’s insistence that the emergence of hyperobjects inaugurates a present and a future “after the end of the world,” because we can no longer experience a world without human beings being at the center of it. Hyperobjects bring about a quake in being that shakes us out of our sense of who and what we are when confronted with such tremendous
entities. Morton focuses mainly on very large hyperobjects in his book, and perhaps he can be accused of gigantomachy in his OOO, his desire to prioritize the very large over the very small. But what’s interesting about his analysis is his elaboration of the stakes of a flat ontology, where there is no container or horizon within which objects fit. This is the specific sense in which hyperobjects proclaim the end of the world. The expansion of our ecological awareness taken to its end brings about the realization that we no longer live in a closed environment. This means that the more we become aware of the interconnectedness of things, “the more it becomes impossible to posit some entity existing beyond or behind the interrelated beings.” These interrelated beings cannot be fitted into a container or “umbrella that unifies them, such as world, environment, ecosystem, or even, astonishingly, Earth.”

Morton argues that hyperobjects bring about the end of the world, because they make it impossible to conceive a world as a container for the set of objects that resides in it. No container, no world. Earth is one object among other objects, and all of these objects exist on the same flat plane of immanence. Hyperobjects are special objects because in their vastness they dwarf what we normally consider objects. But they are still objects for Morton, and so they contribute to an OOO.

I want to back away slightly from the extreme philosophical situation that Morton depicts. Or rather, I want to generalize it. For me, all objects are hyperobjects, which can also be called systems. The problem with objects is that they have no natural simple boundaries. And rather than accept Morton’s claim that at some determinate moment or moments in history, we experience a qualitative change that signifies the end of the world, I suggest that we already live at the end of the world. The subtitle of Morton’s book is “Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World,” whereas I want to think ecologically about philosophy and religion “at the end of the world” using Derrida as a resource.

According to Derrida, Heidegger’s three theses about the world—the stone is without world, the animal is poor in world, and the human being is a world-builder—are extremely suspect. Derrida says that for him, “nothing appears to me to be more problematic than these theses.” In his later philosophy, including *The Animal That I Therefore Am*, Derrida takes up the question of the animal to challenge Heidegger’s view that animals are poor in world while human beings are builders of worlds. As discussed in the previous chapter, in “Rams,” Derrida reflects on the recent death of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and considers the poem by Paul Celan called “Vast, Glowing Vault.” Here, the ram is a sacrificial animal that substitutes for Isaac in the famous account of the *aqedah* or binding, as narrated in Genesis.
and then famously dramatized by Soren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. In the poem by Celan, the ram charges, and the question is inverted: Into what doesn’t the ram charge? Finally, the last powerful line reads: “The World is gone, I must carry you.”

In his reading of Celan, Derrida challenges Heidegger, suggesting that the direct relation between the I and the you occurs precisely when the world is gone, in German *fort*. The world is gone. Derrida says that “as soon as I am obliged, from the instant when I am obliged to you, when I owe, which I owe it to you, owe it to myself to carry you, as soon as I speak to you and am responsible for you, or before you, there can no longer, essentially, be any world.” The immediate ethical relationship of responsibility to the Other means that the world is gone, it goes away, it becomes *fort*. And this responsibility is not restricted to human beings, as it often appears to be in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. We can be directly and ethically related to an animal, such as a ram.

But what about a stone? Heidegger says that a stone is without world; it simply does not and cannot possess a world. Furthermore, Derrida does not consider stones specifically in his attempt to complicate and refute Heidegger’s three theses. But Derrida does say that nothing seems more problematic than these theses, and he does not specify that he only disagrees with the first two. Is the pure lack of world that Heidegger accords a stone similar to the gone-ness of world that Derrida finds in Celan? It would seem not, but at the same time it would seem strange to disallow deconstruction to work on stones if it can work on and with animals. Can anyone be responsible to a stone? Can a stone be an Other in the technical poststructuralist sense? What kind of object would a stone have to be for deconstructive ethics to apply to it? According to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Heidegger assigns to stone only “agentless perdurance, a blank materiality,” but medieval perspectives, and newer philosophies of OOO along with Bruno Latour’s actor network theory, allow us to overcome the duality between nature and society. Here, stone “supports, defeats, fosters, yields, impels, risks, resists.”

This agential nature of lithic and other objects involves relations, and therefore broadly speaking ethical relations. Finally, would an object that entails, or even demands, such relations be called a hyperobject?

This is the nature of hyperobjects in Morton’s philosophy. They make a demand on us, and it is an ethical demand, even if the nature of their demand and our inability to respond adequately to them makes us hypocrites. Morton argues that hyperobjects introduce an asymmetry in relation to us, that we end up being confronted by hyperobjects as opposed to confronting them as objects that we can impose our will on and dispose of however we like. According to Morton, “hyperobjects make hypocrites
of us all” because anything we do is never commensurate with them and their threat. In the case of global warming, whatever we do only salves our conscience; buying ecological “green” products does not actually change the dynamic of consumer capitalism and the burning of carbon emissions. We do things to make ourselves feel better, like driving a hybrid car, but we are actually hypocrites because at some deep level we know that that is not going to solve the problem. Derrida similarly touches on the unavoidable structural hypocrisy of ethics in The Gift of Death when he says that

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only be sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, to all the others.

I am doing two things with Morton and Derrida and their relation to Heidegger. First, I am suggesting that Derrida’s critique of Heidegger is similar to Morton’s rejection of Heidegger’s notion of world insofar as Derrida argues that in an ethical relationship, the world disappears, it is gone. And this gone-ness of the world is what allows any ethical relation to occur. Second, I suggest that Morton’s focus on hyperobjects and ecology allows us to extend Derrida’s deconstruction of the opposition between human and animal to that between living and nonliving beings. By questioning Heidegger’s thesis about stones being poor in world, we can think about a theme that Derrida himself does not develop, but one that is developed by an object-oriented-ontology. What Derrida preserves is the explicit ethical responsibility that needs to be a part of our ecological relationships to objects and hyperobjects. And what OOO accentuates is the impossibility of restricting responsible encounters to other human beings or, at most, other conscious animals.

We live at the end of the world, always, not simply after the end of the world. This is because at the end of the world, the world is gone. And this gone-ness of world is the disappearance of a world that allows any genuine ethical encounter to occur. As Derrida argues, death is the end of the world, and mourning constitutes “a world after the end of the world.” Death is not just the end of a world, but the end of the world, which is each time or life unique and irreplaceable. For Derrida,

Death marks each time, each time in defiance of arithmetic, the absolute end of the one and only world, of that which each opens as a one and only world, the end of the unique world, the end of the totality of what is or can be presented as the origin of the world for any uniquely living being, be it human or not.
Whoever survives is alone and without world, “in a world without world, as if without earth beyond the end of the world.” There are endless worlds, and we live at the end of the world each time, all the time, insofar as we are exposed to death and going to die, and at the same time insofar as we have survived others’ deaths and have not yet died.

The question is how far we can extend life and death to inorganic objects, and whether the boundary of life marks a limit of genuine relationship. Morton suggests that hyperobjects force us to relate to them differently than we are used to relating to objects, and I am suggesting that an extension of Derrida’s thought to Heidegger’s first thesis of world provides us a different way of thinking about objects and worlds. If the world is gone in every perishing of an object, then a hyperobject is at once the force field around an object or set of objects that replaces what we used to call an ordered world, and at the same time, what a discrete object becomes at the end of the world.

Religion, understood in Morton’s terms, is a massive, complex, and distributed hyperobject. And God, too, is a hyperobject. God does not simply exist in the way that most objects do, or even most hyperobjects that Morton describes. But God inheres or insists at the end of the world because the end of the world allows a different relationship to God as a nonexistent object. This is an alternative relationship of responsibility because hyperobjects, like nuclear waste and global warming, doom us in a way similar to the way that God damns us or judges us in more traditional terms. If objects can be understood as hyperobjects, then I don’t see how any object can fail to be a hyperobject in technical terms, despite Morton’s preference for large-scale, massive objects in comparison to human beings. Contemporary cosmology considers objects and processes at intergalactic scales and over billions of years, as well as miniscule objects at the subatomic level, including particles that blink into existence for tiny fractions of a second.

I want to supplement this consideration of objects, including hyperobjects, with Lacan’s thinking about the object. According to Lacan, whose seminar lecture “On the Names-of-the-Father” I discussed at the end of the previous chapter, human beings are implicated in three realms, or registers, of existence—the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The real is first the brute pre-linguistic realm of nonsense that confronts us prior to the advent of language, although later Lacan comes to think about the Real as that which disrupts the symbolic order. The symbolic is shaped primarily by the structure of language, and the structure of language shapes human understanding and desire to such an extent that Lacan argues that our desires are not our own; they are always the desire of the Other. The
Other is a crystallization or concrescence of the symbolic field into a particular site. The Other is an abstraction, but it is necessary for us to understand how symbolic language works. Furthermore, Lacan reads Freud via Saussure’s structural linguistics to argue that the unconscious is a broad, intersubjective phenomenon that shapes the symbolic order rather than an individual possession. Finally, the imaginary exists because we always mistake the symbolic for the Real, and this naiveté marks our existence to such an extent that we are always fundamentally mistaking the nature and meaning of our desires.

As Lacan develops his dense idiosyncratic terminology, he suggests that at the level of the imaginary, the big Other that designates the symbolic register is concentrated into a little other, or what he calls in French objet petit a, the little other object. The little other is the crystallization of the symbolic big Other that forms a knot around which our imagination gets fixed. The Freudian object petit a is the mother’s breast, which is the entire existence for the infant baby until she learns to separate the breast from her own body. The little other instantiates the field of human desire at the level of a particular object that warps the entire social field in such a way as to distort it. In his later work, Lacan comes to attach more and more significance to this little other object.

Why this detour into Lacan? Well, I think that we need the idea of the objet petit a to really make sense of OOO, and I would like to suggest that it be reformulated as a-O-O instead of OOO, or object a-oriented ontology. It is important to note that, for Lacan, an object is never a simple object; it is always a strange object, and it confronts us with the limitations of our own symbolic meaning-making as well as implicates us in the Real beyond or within the symbolic. There is a trait that connects us to the object, and this trait goes from the object to us and distorts our perception and understanding in powerful ways.

So in a way, Lacan is already a theorist of OOO before the letter, the first letter, which is a for autre, or other. Despite his emphasis on language and the symbolic order, Lacan does not propose a linguistic subjectivism any more than Derrida does. His psychoanalytic theory offers profound reflections on the nature of an object, which should inform these newer object-oriented realisms.

In an essay called “Towards a Politics of Singularity,” the philosopher Sam Weber reflects on an essay by Walter Benjamin from 1919 called “Destiny and Character.” Weber’s essay is very complex, but what is interesting is how he draws a connection from Benjamin to Lacan around the notion of the word “trait,” or drive, in German Zug. According to Weber, this word Zug has a dynamic dimension that “tends to be lost in the usual English
translation, trait, unless one remembers that every trait has to be traced and describes therefore not a static trajectory but a movement away from something and toward something else.”

For Weber, this trait is a dynamic character trait, a drive from the destiny of a person to her character, constituting her singularity as a person. The genius of a person is derived from her Zug, the drive or trait that connects her to her destiny. This is what makes a person unique, according to Benjamin.

In Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, this Zug becomes a singular trait (trait unaire) that defines a subject, situating her both in relation to and in some sense outside of the symbolic order. Here, a singular trait is what Lacan calls a signifier, where

the subject of the signifier, represented by a subject to another signifier, thus inscribed the notion of the trait unaire in a network of signification that paradoxically defined singularity as a differential but fully relational notion, a trait or trace, as Derrida would later call it, to stress its temporal relation to what had gone before and what would be coming after.

The signifier indicates the trait or trace of what connects and disconnects a subject to her symbolic language. The key to this notion of the trait is that it proceeds from the object to the subject. It works in the reverse direction from that of stereotypical subjectivism. The object a is a strange little object, not simply in its size, but in its ability to establish a trait of character in a subject. This reversal of direction undercuts the correlationalism with which Speculative Realism and OOO is so obsessed.

By considering the a as a strange object, Lacan helps reverse the relation that appears to go in one unitary direction, from character to destiny or from subject to signification. By closely attending to Benjamin, Weber shows how our character is shaped by our destiny, and the trait or Zug derives from this fate. OOO wants to turn around our relationship to objects, but Lacan has already in some ways accomplished this. Here the object petit a indicates a dynamic directionality from the objet petit a to the subject. The Zug or drive is the trait that is traced from the object a to the human subject. Every object is potentially an object a. And every autre (little a) is every Autre (big A), according to Derrida—he affirms in The Gift of Death that tout autre est tout autre, or “every other (one) is every (bit) other.” Every object a is every other object, including a hyperobject in Morton’s sense.

According to Morton, we should not reduce objects to the processes that make them up. He says that “a process is just a real object, but one that occupies higher dimension than objects to which we are accustomed.”
There is a sense in which a process, a system, and an object or hyperobject can be seen in similar terms, although each has to be qualified to fit into the others. Furthermore, I do not want to pass judgment in ultimate terms and say that an object is a good or bad way to describe reality, although as already explained I do think that these objects are also what Lacan calls *objets petit a*. In any case, if we want to retain this term, we need to see objects as dynamic and changing rather than static and permanent, even if hyperobjects are more stable than we are. For me, energy can be viewed as an object, but that drastically transforms our understanding of objects in the same way that for Morton hyperobjects distort and change what we mean by objects.

For Morton, fate or destiny is named doom, and this doom is delivered to us by hyperobjects. In their ending of the world, hyperobjects deliver doom, where “doom is a decree or an ordinance: a directive.” Doom is a kind of judgment as well as discernment, and it can also mean “fate, destiny, and in a stronger sense, death.” Our character is determined by the doom of the hyperobject, and according to Morton, this character now consists of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is “a ‘secret doom,’” a pretense or an act. “But it is also simply hidden doom, a message sent from somewhere obscure.”

As Morton explains, the word “hypocrisy” comes from the Greek term for *delivery*. And this delivery is the singular trait whereby our doom shapes us and renders us hypocrites in relation to these strange objects. Hyperobjects are also objects *a*, and Morton is a little too obsessed with very big objects to notice how great a difference this little *a* makes. He approaches an object *a*-oriented ontology, but does not quite arrive. We can witness the hypocrisy of OOO, but do not simply dismiss it because as Morton affirms, we are all hypocrites. Or as Lacan claims, the non-duped are the ones who are most likely to err (“*les non-dupes errant*”).

Hyperobjects confront us at the end of the world, and they force us to reconsider what nature and ecology could possibly mean. Human beings as a species have lived and flourished during a relatively stable climate pattern, but as Michael S. Northcott suggests in *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, “on the current trajectory of greenhouse gas emissions growth, by the end of the present century . . . the planet will be a ‘new creation,’ but not by the making of God or evolution.” The apocalyptic threat of the destruction of human civilization and possibly even extinction of ourselves along with many other animals provides contemporary ecological thinking with a religious or spiritual edge, insofar as we assign spiritual value to living beings. It’s unlikely that we could cause the extinction of life on Earth, but human activity can certainly drive, and in
fact is driving, many forms of life out of existence. So there is a sense in
which we are playing God, wittingly or unwittingly.

I think that to change our fate and avoid our doom we would need to
change our nature, which may well be impossible. But we desperately need
the impossible. In *Religion, Politics, and the Earth*, Jeffrey W. Robbins and
I imagine an impossible synthesis between Hegel, for whom Earth is a sub-
stance that becomes subject, and Deleuze, who posits along with Félix
Guattari a “geology of morals” in which we are forced to ask “Who does
the Earth think it is?”51 We need to think from the Earth, not just to it, and
we need to think Earth itself as a hyperobject without simply assuming
that we can remove human self-consciousness from this picture. Morton
asserts that Deleuze, like Alfred North Whitehead, is guilty of a “process
relationalism” that “conceive[s] time as the liquid in which the image melts
and flows.”52 This is an extremely weak reading of Deleuze, who views time
in a much more complicated way than as a river in which objects dissolve.
I will not discuss Deleuze’s understanding of time here, which is treated
most explicitly in *Difference and Repetition* and in *Cinema 2: The Time Im-
age*, but I think that there is a real problem with how to think about time
in OOO, and there are significant attempts in some of the theorists of
OOO to deny and evade the reality of time in order to grant objects a cer-
tain timelessness.53

Time is entropy, and entropy gives time a directionality to what we
understand as time, even though time is not linear. We cannot escape or
avoid entropy, although we do need better ways to understand it.54 The first
law of thermodynamics is the conservation of energy. The second law says
that all systems or entities tend toward an increase of entropy, measured
statistically. This seems to imply an irreversible movement from order to
disorder, but then where does the original low entropy state come from?
Energy is infinite, it is material, and it is entropic, at universal, physical,
biological as well as psychical and metaphysical levels. We are emergent
objects (a) of entropic-energetic processes, and Earth will survive our
deaths, even though Earth will not last forever as a planetary object. We
are at the end of the world, and we always have been.

In this chapter, I am reflecting on the current status of Continental phi-
losophy of religion, as well as bringing Derrida’s philosophy into closer
relation to new materialism and OOO. Much of the time, OOO and spec-
ulative realism, as well as some forms of new materialism, represent them-
theselves as opposing what they see as the subjectivism in Derrida and other
postmodern philosophies. I am more interested in seeing how some of the
poststructuralist theorists like Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan, who along
with Foucault were previously seen as promoting the death of the subject, help us to think about objects and processes in different ways, even as the renewed attention to objects and the discourses of the natural sciences forces us to reconsider the work of Derrida and others.

My guiding thread is to think more deeply about the resonances and the connections of Derrida’s famous phrase “tout autre est tout autre.” If every other is every other, that does not simply mean all human others who exist in Kantian terms as rational moral beings. Derrida’s late work, in particular, has the purpose of questioning the status of the human and its relation to nonhuman others, in a way that has not always been fully acknowledged. Catherine Malabou, whose work I will consider more explicitly in Chapter 7, engages Derrida and deconstruction with a new materialist biological and neurological paradigm. Karen Barad theorizes quantum physics, particularly quantum field theory, with the help of Levinas and Derrida, as I will consider in Chapter 8. But first I will return to Caputo and analyze his understanding of Derrida more fully in the context of Caputo’s own philosophy and radical theology.