



**The Real and the Withdrawn: Structural Homologies between Lacanian
Psychoanalysis and Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology**

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Abstract

This article examines the structural homologies between Lacan's concept of the Real and Harman's notion of the withdrawn object in Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO). Though emerging from distinct disciplinary traditions, psychoanalytic theory and speculative metaphysics, both concepts congregate upon a shared formal topology in which the fundamental dimension of any entity is inaccessible, exceeds every relational profile, and remains irreducible to symbolic or descriptive capture. The article identifies five principal homologies: inaccessibility as a positive ontological structure rather than an epistemic limitation, constitutive non-exhaustibility, causal productivity through withdrawal, resistance to systematic integration, and non-relationality as a primary ontological determination. These homologies are cohesive under the concept of *ex-sistence*, a structural position outside but foundational to any system, which both frameworks independently articulate. The article also attends to the limits of homology, noting significant differences regarding the role of the subject, the universalisation of withdrawal, and divergent attitudes toward formalisation. The convergence of these two traditions suggests that the critique of relational ontology represents a philosophical pressure that thought is compelled to address from within its own limits.

Key Words: *Lacanian Real, Object-Oriented Ontology, withdrawal, jouissance, vicarious causation, structural homology, relational ontology*

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Few problems in contemporary philosophy are as generative as the problem of what exceeds representation. Across the diverse and often incommensurable traditions of twentieth and twenty-first century thought, the question of whether reality can be exhausted by the frameworks we bring to bear upon it, linguistic, relational, formal, or perceptual, has returned with a regularity that demands philosophical explanation. Two of the sophisticated responses to this question have emerged from quarters that rarely speak to one another: the psychoanalytic tradition descending from Lacan, and the speculative metaphysics associated with Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology. The former develops the concept of the Real as the structural outside of the symbolic order, the impasse at which signification encounters what it cannot absorb. The latter proposes the withdrawn object as an entity that harbours an interior inaccessible to every relation, every perception, and every causal engagement. That these two concepts should share a remarkable formal topology, a topology organised around inaccessibility, excess, and productive withdrawal, is the central observation from which this article proceeds.

Lacan's Real belongs to a rigorous account of subjectivity and desire. It is the mark of the subject's irreducible incompleteness as a being of language, the kernel around which symptoms form and the compulsion to repeat organises. Harman's withdrawn object, by contrast, belongs to a thoroughgoing revision of what it means for any entity whatsoever to exist and to act. It is a commitment to the autonomous reality of discrete things at every scale of the cosmos, from quarks and corporations to fictional characters and ecosystems. The disciplinary distances between clinical psychoanalysis and speculative ontology are real, and the argument of this article is not that they should be dissolved. It is that attending carefully to the formal structures each tradition has been compelled to generate in addressing the problem of excess reveals a convergence that is philosophically significant because it is unplanned.

The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real

Lacan's tripartite schema of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real is one of the rigorously sustained conceptual structures in twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory. Each register designates a distinct modality through which the subject is constituted, traversed, and exceeded. It is only through an appreciation of the irreducible interplay among all three that the full theoretical import of any one register becomes legible. The Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the



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Real are not discrete ontological zones existing independently of one another. They are mutually implicated structural dimensions whose coherence is sustained, in the Lacanian topology of the Borromean knot, through their interlinkage.

The Imaginary is the register of specular identification, ego-formation, and the dyadic relation of resemblance. It finds its privileged site in the mirror stage, the originary moment in which the infant apprehends a unified image of its own body in the mirror. Through this identification with an external image, it constructs what will henceforth be experienced as the ego.

The imaginary is the realm of the ego, a pre-linguistic realm of sense perception, identification and an illusory sense of unity. The primary relation in the imaginary is a relation with one's own body, that is to say, the specular image of the body itself. These imaginary processes form the ego and are repeated and reinforced by the subject in his/her relationship with the external world. The imaginary, therefore, is not a developmental phase – it is not something that one goes through and grows out of – but remains at the core of our experience. As the sense of original unity and coherence in the mirror phase is an illusion, there is a fundamental disharmony regarding the ego. (Homer 31)

Imaginary is structurally deceptive. The unity it confers upon the subject is an idealized fiction. It is a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) through which the subject takes the image of the other as itself. The ego, far from being the seat of autonomous agency, is an alienated formation whose apparent stability conceals an originary lack. The Imaginary does not dissolve with the passage through the mirror stage. It persists as a structural layer of experience, continuously organizing perceptual and intersubjective life through the axes of identification, rivalry, and specular projection.

If the Imaginary is the register of the image, the Symbolic is the register of structure, difference, and law. It encompasses language in the broadest sense, not spoken or written discourse, but the entire differential network of signifiers through which meaning is produced and subjects are positioned. The subject's entry into the Symbolic is marked by a fundamental loss, the renunciation of immediate, dyadic relation to the mother as primary object of desire,



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enforced by the paternal metaphor and the function of the Name-of-the-Father, which installs the subject within the chain of signification.

Lacan conceived of the symbolic order as a totalizing concept in the sense that it marks the limit of the human universe. We are born into language – the language through which the desires of others are articulated and through which we are forced to articulate our own desire. We are locked within what Lacan calls a circuit of discourse: It is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of my father, for instance, in so far as my father made mistakes that I am condemned to reproduce. (Homer 44)

The Symbolic order is radically pre-given. It precedes any individual subject and into it the subject is always-already interpellated. The big Other, Lacan's term for the locus of the Symbolic, the treasury of signifiers, is the site from which the subject receives its own message in inverted form and in relation to which desire is constituted. As Julien notes, the primacy of the Symbolic over the Imaginary is such that "the image is never quite 'fixed' in the optical sense, if one remains at the imaginary level of the ideal ego/ego. This impasse is the sign of an abstraction" (Julien 49). The Imaginary cannot stabilize itself without the anchoring function of the Symbolic, specifically the intervention of the quilting point (*point de capiton*) that retroactively fixes meaning within the sliding chain of signifiers.

The Real occupies a distinct position from both these registers. It is not a third region alongside the Imaginary and the Symbolic but the very limit that makes both of those registers necessary and that neither of them can absorb. Lacan's Real is not empirical reality, that which is ordinarily designated as the world of things, but that which resists symbolization and remains as a remainder once every operation of signification has been performed.

The Real is situated conceptually in much the same way as it operates within the life of the subject, which is to say as a remainder, an excess, and thus as something appreciable only through other concepts or notions. This is not to deny the possibility of any definition of the Real, but to signal that singular or stable definitions must be held in suspicion in favour of an appreciation of the multiplicity of ways in which the Real is figured throughout Lacan's work. (Eyers 2)



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The constitutive multiplicity is not a theoretical weakness but a structural property of the Real because it is that which cannot be symbolized, any attempt to fix it in a definition already gestures beyond itself toward that which exceeds the definition.

Lacan's most compelling formulation is that "the real is the impossible" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII* 122). It is an ontological claim, not an epistemological one. The Real resists symbolization not because we have yet to develop the proper conceptual framework, but because its very nature renders symbolization impossible. "The real, or what is perceived as such, is what resists symbolization absolutely. In the end, doesn't the feeling of the real reach its high point in the pressing manifestation of an unreal, hallucinatory reality?" (Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I* 66). The hallucinatory quality Lacan invokes is diagnostically significant. It is when the Symbolic fails to cover the Real, when the network of signifiers encounters its own limit that the Real irrupts with its most destabilizing force. "Lacan's real... occupies an undifferentiated and total space of continuous being analogous to the indifference of God. Indeed, the differences on which the reality constructed in the symbolic order is based have no bearing on the real. Remember this, regarding externality and internality—this distinction makes no sense at all at the level of the real. The real is without fissure...." (Botting 30). The oppositions that structure Symbolic reality, presence and absence, interior and exterior, lack and fullness, are themselves products of the Symbolic's differential operations. The Real, by contrast, is the undivided, continuous fabric upon which those operations are performed but which itself remains unaffected by them.

"Lacan's real is without zones, subdivisions, localized highs and lows, or gaps and plenitudes: the real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric, woven in such a way as to be full everywhere, there being no space between the threads that are its 'stuff'" (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 24). Division of this continuous fabric into distinguishable features, zones, and contrasting structures is accomplished only by the Symbolic order's incision. However, the Real does not simply precede symbolization as an inert substrate. It actively resists it. Resistance generates the structural incompleteness of the Symbolic and the dynamism of the subject's desire. "The Real is the internal stumbling block on account of which the symbolic system can never 'become itself,' achieve its self-identity. Because of its absolute immanence to the symbolic, the Real cannot be



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positively signified; it can only be shown, in a negative gesture, as the inherent failure of symbolization” (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 191). The Real is not external to the Symbolic but its internal limit, the constitutive exception that prevents the Symbolic from achieving closure. Fink adds: “The real... does not exist, since it precedes language; Lacan reserves a separate term for it, borrowed from Heidegger: it ‘ex-sists’. It exists outside of or apart from our reality” (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 25). The neologism ex-sistence marks the Real’s radical exteriority from within. It is not nothing, but its mode of being is distinct from and irreducible to the existence that language bestows upon objects.

The topology of the Borromean knot, which Lacan develops in his later seminars, provides a spatial figure for the interdependence of the three registers.

The Borromean knot, insofar as it is supported by the number 3, belongs to the register of the imaginary. What imaginary are we talking about? Not the all-too-familiar corporeal imaginary that, because of its dependence on the mirror stage and specular image, gives us only representations situated more easily in flat space, in two dimensions... Consistency lies in its oneness: the one keeps it together; the one gives it body. Now, with the Borromean knot, consistency is neither symbolic nor real, but imaginary. (Julien 177)

Julien illustrates the extent to which the three registers, though conceptually distinguishable, cannot be separated without catastrophic consequences for the subject’s structural coherence. The dissolution of any one ring of the Borromean knot releases all three, a model that Lacan applies in his late theorization of psychosis as a foreclosure that unties the register linking the subject to the social-linguistic world.

Mechanics of the Real: Trauma, Jouissance, and Return

Having established the structural position of the Real as the foundational fracture of subjectivity, let us turn to the mechanics of the Real, the modalities through which it operates within psychic and social life. Three interrelated concepts organize this dimension of Lacanian theory: the distinction between *automaton* and *tyche*, the concept of jouissance, and the structural logic of the objet petit a. Each illuminates a distinct aspect of the Real’s mode of operation, and together they articulate the specific way in which the Real produces effects without ever becoming directly available to the subject.



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The distinction between *automaton* and *tyche* is developed principally in Seminar XI, where Lacan recasts Freud's concept of repetition through an Aristotelian lens. Automaton designates the regular, rule-governed repetition of the signifying chain, the emphasis of signifiers that return in accordance with the structural logic of the unconscious and the pleasure principle. *Tyche*, by contrast, designates something altogether more disruptive, the encounter with the Real as such, an encounter that is constitutively missed.

Automaton... corresponds to the automatic unfolding in the unconscious of the signifying chain. It involves 'the return, coming back, or insistence of signs by which we turn out to be commanded by the pleasure principle.' ... *Tuché* on the other hand, involves the encounter with the real, which is beyond *automaton*: The real is that which always lies behind *automaton*, and it is quite obvious, throughout Freud's research, that that is the object of his concern. (Fink, *Reading Seminar XI* 227)

The critical asymmetry here is that *tyche* is not a more intense or more disruptive version of automaton. It belongs to an entirely different register. Where *automaton* operates according to the principle of signifying substitution and displacement, *tyche* marks the point at which signification encounters what it cannot metabolize, a traumatic kernel that lies outside the circuit of representation.

This missed quality of the encounter with the Real is designated as the structure of trauma. The Real is never encountered directly, only in its aftermath, in the displaced, symptomatic formations that encode its presence without representing it. Anxiety provides one of the most reliable indices of the Real's proximity:

The Real is never encountered directly — only in its aftermath: in symptoms, compulsions, anxiety, and the uncanny sense that something has gone wrong that cannot be named. ... Anxiety is the appearance, within this framing, of what was already there, at much closer quarters, at home, *Heim*. It's the occupant, you'll say. In a certain sense, yes indeed, of course, this unknown occupant that appears in an unexpected way is absolutely related to what's encountered in the *Unheimliche*. (Lacan, *Anxiety*, Book X 76)

Anxiety is distinct from fear because it lacks an object in the ordinary sense. Its correlate is not an identifiable threat but the proximity of the Real, the emergence of that which has no place



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within the Symbolic order. Its *Unheimliche* dimension, its uncanny quality of something familiar that returns as foreign, points to the way in which the Real is not simply external to the subject but installed at the subject's very core, as the excluded kernel of its constitution.

The concept of repetition is central to understanding the Real's temporal logic:

The real always returns to the same place — its defining feature is stubborn, unmodifiable recurrence. It does not change in response to interpretation; it simply insists. ... The real is that which always comes back to the same place—the place where the subject, insofar as he thinks, the *res cogitans*, does not encounter it. Repetition involves something which, try as one might, cannot be remembered. (Fink, *Reading Seminar XI* 224)

The Real returns to the same place because it has never been encountered there. It is the site of a missed appointment, an absence that organizes the subject's circling movement around it.

The Lacanian real, as manifested in the patient's discourse, is that which makes the analysand come back to the same subject, event, or notion over and over, revolve around it endlessly, and feel unable to move on. The patient dwells on it and feels stuck, something essential remaining unformulated. ... The real... is what has not yet been put into words or formulated. (Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 48)

The Real is the unformulated, the not-yet-spoken that drives the subject's discourse without itself entering it. It is not a content to be expressed but a structural impossibility that orients the subject's speech toward its own limits.

Jouissance is the somatic registration of the Real, the modality through which the Real is inscribed in the body as an excess of excitation that exceeds and overwhelms the regulative function of the pleasure principle.

This excitement, whether correlated with a conscious feeling of pleasure or pain, is what the French call *jouissance*. ... This pleasure—this excitation due to sex, seeing, and/or violence, whether positively or negatively viewed by conscience, whether considered innocently pleasurable or disgustingly repulsive—is termed



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jouissance, and that is what the subject orchestrates for him or herself in fantasy.
(Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 60)

Jouissance, in this account, is neither pleasure nor unpleasure in the ordinary phenomenological sense. It is an energetic surplus that the signifier approaches but cannot fully tame, a somatic remainder that exceeds every attempt at symbolic capture.

Jouissance is thus the ontological aberration, the disturbed balance (clinamen, to use the old philosophical term) which accounts for the passage from Nothing to Something; it designates the minimal contraction... which provides the density of the subject's reality. Someone can be happily married... and yet absolutely hooked on some specific formation (.sinthome.) of *jouissance*, ready to put everything at risk rather than renounce that. (Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 60–61)

Jouissance is compulsive and non-negotiable. It is not a contingent preference that the subject might revise given sufficient motivation, but a structural attachment whose grip is precisely proportional to its opacity to meaning.

The relationship between *jouissance* and repetition is foundational. It is *jouissance* that binds the subject to the circuit of repetition, drawing it back again and again to the drive, not in order to attain satisfaction but to reconstitute the condition of the drive's circulation.

We are not dealing with a transgression, an irruption into some forbidden field through the wearing away of vital regulatory apparatuses. In fact, it is only through this effect of entropy, through this wasting, that *jouissance* acquires a status and shows itself. ... Only the dimension of entropy gives body to the fact that there is surplus *jouissance* there to be recovered. (Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII* 50)

The concept of surplus *jouissance* (*plus-de-jouir*), developed in Lacan's engagement with Marx's notion of surplus value, designates the residual, ever-deferred satisfaction that keeps the drive in circulation without ever resolving it. It is this structure of deferred, perpetually reconstituted loss that produces the subject as a desiring being. It is a being whose desire is organized around a lost object that was never possessed in the first place.

Objet petit a is a privileged concept through which Lacan theorizes the metabolized fragment of the Real that persists within the subject's economy of desire.



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One defines *objet petit a* as the mediatory element that, paradoxically, is resistant to any dialectical relation with the subject or the Other. ... *Objet petit a* acts as the embodiment of the general tension of the Real discussed throughout this book; viewed from different angles, the object-cause of desire is both the object that fills the void of the absent subject of the unconscious and the 'cause' of that division itself. (Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the 'Real'* 86)

Objet a is not the Real but the Real's trace within the Symbolic. It is the object that desire circles around without ever attaining, because what it figures is not any particular satisfaction but the structural impossibility of satisfaction.

What the obsessional subject seeks in what I called its recursion — and you can see why that word was chosen — in the process of desire is well and truly to re-find the authentic cause of the whole process. And since this cause is nothing but the ultimate object, the abject and paltry object, he keeps seeking out the object... which make the search turn endlessly around and around. (Lacan, *Anxiety, Book X* 251)

Circularity, the recursive, centripetal movement of desire around an object that perpetually withdraws, is the phenomenological correlate of the Real's structural impossibility.

Fantasy plays a mediatory role in this economy. Rather than providing access to the Real, fantasy stages a scenario in which the structural impossibility of satisfaction is temporarily bracketed, and the subject is positioned as though it might attain *jouissance*.

Fantasy is the attempt to bring the two elements of the choice — the subject of language and *jouissance* — together in such a way that they are 'compossible'. Fantasy thus attempts to overcome the either/or, the choice made that was responsible for the advent of the subject and for a loss of satisfaction; it stages the attempt to reverse that loss. (Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* 235)

Fantasy is the Symbolic's response to the Real. It is an attempt to suture the wound that the Real's resistance opens within the subject's experience of desire. However, the very compulsive, repetitive quality of fantasy, its structure of staging, endlessly, and the same fundamental scenario, betrays the impossibility it seeks to overcome. Fantasy does not resolve the tension



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between the subject and *jouissance*. It sustains and manages it. It keeps the subject oriented toward an object that is, by structural definition, unreachable.

The traumatic dimension of this structure is fidelity to the Real.

“The traumatic Real is thus that which, precisely, prevents us from assuming a neutral-objective view of reality, a stain which blurs our clear perception of it. And this example also brings home the ethical dimension of fidelity to the Real *qua* impossible: the point is not simply to ‘tell the entire truth about it,’ but, above all, to confront the way we ourselves, by means of our subjective position of enunciation, are always-already involved. (Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 276–277)

The Real is not a theoretical category but an existential demand. It is a pressure upon the subject to reckon with the impossibility that subtends its desire and that no amount of symbolic elaboration can dissolve. In the analytic context, this confrontation is the *telos* of the therapeutic process. The traversal of fantasy, in which the subject comes to acknowledge the *objet a* is the structural cause of desire rather than its potential object. It assumes a different, less alienated relation to its own *jouissance*.

Lacan’s elaboration of the *sinthome*, the singular formation through which a subject organizes its relation to *jouissance* in a manner that bypasses, than traverses, the Oedipal structure, represents a further development of these concerns.

The *objet a* that emerges from *jouissance* as it pushes language *lalangue*-ward is a Real object. This Real object can also be thought as a *sinthome* that holds the three orders together. ... The Real is what ex-sists when the letter bores holes in it. As the third in relation to the Symbolic and the Imaginary, it ex-sists by pushing the structure from inside out. (Chattopadhyay, *Beckett, Lacan* 138)

The *sinthome* is the knot that holds the three registers together when the paternal metaphor fails to perform this function. Its analytic status is not that of a symptom to be dissolved through interpretation but of a mode of organization to be sustained and inhabited. In this later development, the Real is no longer simply the impossible but the very substance of a singular mode of being, the *jouissance* that constitutes a subject’s irreducible particularity.



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Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology

Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO) posits a thoroughgoing revision of what it means for an entity to exist, to act, and to relate. Individual discrete entities, rather than processes, relations, fields, or material substrates, form the irreducible fabric of reality. "Individual entities of various scales (not just tiny quarks and electrons) are the ultimate stuff of the cosmos; these entities are never exhausted by any of their relations, or even by their sum of all possible relations. Objects withdraw from any relation" (Campbell et al., "Graham Harman, *Immaterialism*" 7). Such a perspective asserts the primacy of discrete objects at every scale of existence, and introduces the concept of withdrawal as a structural and universal feature of those objects. The withdrawal Harman identifies pertains to stones and corporations, algorithms and ecosystems, stars and social institutions alike. Every entity, regardless of its material composition, temporal duration, or relational embeddedness, harbours an interior that remains inaccessible to every other entity that encounters it.

The philosophical genealogy of withdrawal draws from Husserl's analysis of intentional objects and Heidegger's account of tool-being. Harman's innovation consists in radicalising and redirecting the insights of both thinkers toward a fully realist and non-anthropocentric ontology. Husserl's contribution lies in identifying a fundamental tension within conscious experience between objects and the qualities through which they manifest. "Husserl's truly revolutionary step... was to identify a tension between objects and their qualities within conscious experience itself... He remains Hans, and I look straight through his transient hidden qualities and see Hans himself" (Harman, "An outline of object-oriented philosophy" 43). Experience does not encounter a bundle of discrete qualities that the mind then assembles into an object. The object presents as a unified whole through successive adumbrations or profiles, each of which offers a partial perspective on an entity that consistently exceeds its momentary appearance. Husserl's analysis thus refutes what Harman regards as the empiricist reduction of objects to qualities: "human experience is broken up into countless discrete objects in its own right, each of them



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showing different profiles or adumbrations in different moments. In this manner Husserl quietly demolishes the empiricist ‘bundle of qualities’ theory of the sensory realm” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 59).

Harman’s engagement with Husserl is not an adoption of phenomenological insights. It is a significant reworking of them. While Husserl limits his investigation to the sphere of conscious experience, maintaining that to exist is to be “the possible object of conscious awareness” (Harman, “An Outline of Object-Oriented Philosophy” 35), Harman relocates the tension between objects and their qualities from the realm of consciousness to the structure of reality. In doing so, tension operates independently of any experiencing subject and characterizes all entities within the world. The move from phenomenology to ontology is accomplished through Heidegger’s account of equipment. “For the most part, our involvement with things does not consist in being consciously aware of them... Usually, we notice objects only when they malfunction. When this happens, the previously hidden entity erupts into view and becomes consciously accessible for the first time” (Harman, “An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 35). In the familiar transparency of successful tool-use, the hammer withdraws from conscious attention into operational anonymity. It is in breakdown, in the hammer’s snapping or the nail’s bending, that the tool achieves thematic presence. For Harman, the phenomenological observation indexes something deeper than the structure of human attention. It signals that objects possess a reality that systematically exceeds whatever specific mode of presence they achieve in any given encounter.

The notion of withdrawal serves as the theoretical basis for excess, with Harman extending Heidegger’s insight beyond the context of broken tools and reconceptualizing it as a universal condition of being that applies to all objects. “Heidegger’s tools always remain hidden from the mind, just like Kant’s things-in-themselves. In Heidegger’s terminology, they ‘withdraw’ (*entziehen*) from all access: they remain veiled, concealed, or hidden” (Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 187). Objects do not withdraw from human cognitive access, nor from particular forms of measurement or observation. They withdraw from *any* relation whatsoever. “Objects exist as ‘entities . . . quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world’” (Bennett, “Systems and Things” 226). Inaccessibility of the real object is absolute rather than relative and constitutive than contingent. “Real objects withdraw



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behind any of the specific qualities through which they are manifest. Heidegger's hammer is always more than the colors, shapes, and practical functions through which we know it" (Harman, "Realism without Materialism" 60). Surplus of the real object over its manifest qualities is neither a temporary gap to be closed by more sophisticated investigation nor a deficiency of some particular epistemic approach. It is intrinsic to the being of the object as such.

Without an integral excess in objects, change would be impossible. "Unless there is some excess or surplus in objects that is currently unexpressed in the world, there would be no reason for anything ever to become different from what it is right now. The world would be exhaustively deployed in each moment, with nothing hidden from anything else and nothing capable of inducing change" (Kimbell, "The Object Strikes Back" 107). Withdrawal is the ontological condition of possibility for novelty, transformation, and contingency. A fully transparent world, one in which every object is entirely exhausted by its current relations and present qualities, would be a static and self-identical world, incapable of generating anything genuinely new. The withdrawn interior of each object, the reserve that is held back from every actual relation, constitutes the ontological reservoir from which change emerges. Objects are, for Harman, "sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve" (Campbell et al., "Graham Harman, *Immaterialism*" 7).

The excess of the real object over its relational presence is structurally organised within Harman's fourfold structure, which distinguishes four irreducible poles of object-constitution. The fourfold coordinates two fundamental axes: the real versus the sensual, and objects versus qualities. Real Objects designate the withdrawn, non-relational cores of entities, what any given object is quite apart from how it appears to or acts upon anything else. Real Qualities designate the intrinsic features of the real object that are not directly accessible but gives the object its determinate character. Sensual Objects designate the profiles, adumbrations, or caricatures through which real objects present themselves in any given encounter. These are the phenomenologically available faces of entities within experience or relation. Sensual Qualities designate the surface properties that cling to sensual objects in any given moment of appearance. "The fourfold structure emerges... Husserl's tension between a sensual object and its real qualities ... is what we have already called *eidōs*... the fourth tension [is] between the hidden real object and its hidden real qualities ..., which is traditionally known as essence" (Harman, "An



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outline of object-oriented philosophy” 49). The fourfold structure is a topological map of the gaps that constitute any object’s existence. It is the gap between its sensual face and its real depth, unified identity and its plural qualities, and appearance in one encounter and its appearance in another.

The fourfold structure establishes that objects are fundamentally dual entities, accessible as sensual profiles and withdrawn as real cores. The duality is irreducible. “Real objects are not bundled together as a set of discrete qualities, but have a certain unity and autonomy from these qualities” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 60). Unity of the real object resists decomposition into either its component qualities or its relational effects. Harman systematizes the commitment by specifying that genuine realism requires recognition of four distinct modes of autonomy: “the world is made of objects, and they are autonomous from their relations, accidents, qualities, and moments” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 60). Autonomy from relations means, an object is what it is independently of what it currently acts upon or is acted upon by. Autonomy from accidents means, transient features do not constitute the object’s identity. Autonomy from qualities means, even the most stable and characteristic features of an object are not identical to the object itself. Autonomy from moments means, the object persists through temporal change as something more than the aggregate of its successive states.

The universality of withdrawal, its applicability to every entity and not only to human subjects, grounds Harman’s commitment to flat ontology. “Flat ontology means a theory of reality that grants dogs, trees, factories, and governments the same ontological status as protons or the human mind” (Harman, “An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 34). The levelling of the ontological field dismantles the hierarchy between the micro-physical and the experiential that has organised much of modern philosophy and natural science. “This brand of harsh scientism simply assumes that anything made of smaller components cannot itself be real. A contrary view holds that there are emergent realities at all levels of the cosmos, so that diamonds, rivers, and the German national anthem are just as real as the tiniest subatomic particles” (Harman, “An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 33). Flat ontology involves a critique of undermining. It is the reductive philosophical strategy of dissolving higher-order entities into their micro-physical components and a correlate critique of overmining, the strategy of dissolving entities into their relational effects, discursive constructions, or phenomenal



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appearances. “Object-oriented philosophy is a method of exploring gaps between objects and their components, objects and their appearances, objects and their relations, or objects and their qualities. A table is not the same thing as the quarks and electrons of which it is made” (Harman, “An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 35). The double refusal, of reduction upward to appearances and downward to components, secures the reality and autonomy of objects at every scale of the cosmos.

The critique of overmining is critical given its dominance in contemporary philosophical culture. “In short, human experience has become the Almighty God of mainstream philosophy. Overmining has become the central dogma of our time: everything is relations, or language, or appearance to the mind” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 71). The dominance of relational and discursive approaches, across pragmatism, structuralism, social constructionism, and certain strands of analytic philosophy, produces, in Harman’s assessment, a philosophy incapable of accounting for the autonomous reality of things: “what is missed in both cases is the autonomous reality of individual objects: dogs, trees, flames, monuments, societies, ghosts, gods, pirates, coins, and rubies” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 71). The list is deliberately heterogeneous, encompassing natural kinds, artefacts, social institutions, and fictional entities, in order to underline the universality of OOO’s ontological commitments. Every entity, regardless of its ontological category, participates in the structure of withdrawal.

In Harman’s ontology the flat democratic distribution of withdrawal includes the human subject’s ability to hold no transcendental privilege. “Withdrawal, in such a reading, is not a reflexive capacity that humans have, nor a pessimistic capitulation to our solipsistic affliction, but a feature of all objects” (Campbell et al., “Graham Harman, *Immaterialism*” 86). Withdrawal of the real is not a function of human cognitive limitation, cultural situatedness, or the finitude of embodied perspective. It is a universal feature of entity-being as such. As a consequence, human beings are repositioned within Harman’s ontology as one class of object among an indefinitely large plurality, stripped of the constitutive or world-disclosing role that phenomenology and idealism had assigned to them. “If the world is filled with entities, the real ones by definition withdraw from one another, or fail to make contact with one another’s full reality” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 70). Inaccessibility of the real is a universal condition of entity-to-entity encounter, applicable symmetrically across the entire field of existing things.



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Vicarious Causation: How Withdrawn Objects Interact?

The ontological structure of withdrawal raises a question that Harman acknowledges: if every real object is hermetically sealed within its own withdrawn interiority, if no object is ever directly accessible to any other, then how does causation occur? How does the fire burn the cotton, the asteroid alter its orbital trajectory, the cultural institution shape its members, the landscape affect the organism? If contact between real objects is impossible by definition, then the very possibility of a causally active world appears to be foreclosed by the ontological framework that is meant to account for it. “The point, that is to say, is how objects that lie outside each other (whether they be human or non-human) could also come to be inside each other in the sense that they affect one another. Lacking this, we would have a totally fragmented multiverse in which nothing would be even remotely in contact with anything else” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 70).

The solution Harman develops, vicarious causation, preserves the absoluteness of withdrawal while generating a coherent account of causal interaction. The basic move is to deny that causation requires direct contact between real objects and to propose instead that causal relations are always mediated through a third entity, specifically through the interior of a sensual object that serves as the common medium for otherwise mutually inaccessible real objects. “Real objects withdraw from all human access and even from causal interaction with each other... relations must always be indirect or vicarious rather than direct. No object relates with others without caricature, distortion, or energy loss; knowledge of a tree is never a tree, nor do two colliding asteroids exhaust one another’s properties through this contact” (Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 188). Even in the most direct physical encounters, two bodies colliding, two chemicals reacting, a predator capturing its prey, the real objects involved do not touch one another in their full withdrawn depth. Each translates the other into a sensual caricature, a simplified profile adequate to generate causal effects without disclosing the full reality of the entity encountered.

Causation proceeds via vicarious or indirect contact: “in my philosophy, for example, real objects withdraw into private vacuums and make only indirect contact through metaphorical signals to one another, which is not exactly your grandfather’s realism” (Kimbell, “The Object Strikes Back” 110). The phrase “metaphorical signals” is philosophically deliberate than simply



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rhetorical. It designates a mode of contact that preserves the surplus of the real object, its excess over any particular representation or effect, while permitting genuine causal transmission. The metaphor communicates something of the real without converting it into the literal. Analogously, the sensual caricature through which one object relates to another transmits something of the other's causal force without exhausting its withdrawn depth.

The structural mechanics of vicarious causation are rendered through the concept of allure, which Harman identifies as object-object interaction and aesthetic experience. "The broken hammer alludes to the inscrutable reality of hammer-being lying behind the accessible theoretical, practical, or perceptual qualities of the hammer... I call this structure allure... it is the key phenomenon of all the arts, literature included" (Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer" 187). Allure designates a moment within sensual encounter in which the sensual surface of an object trembles with the pressure of its withdrawn real depth. It is a moment in which the caricature becomes oddly insufficient and the encountering entity is drawn toward a real that its sensual profile can only hint at. "Allure alludes to entities as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world. This deeply non-relational conception of the reality of things is the heart of object-oriented philosophy" (Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer" 187).

Allure is the closest that any entity achieves to another's real being, while remaining irreducibly short of full disclosure. The encountering object does not gain cognitive or causal access to the withdrawn real. It registers a kind of pressure or hint. It is a signal of depth that the sensual surface cannot contain. "The real problem is not how beings interact in a system: instead, the problem is how they withdraw from that system as independent realities while somehow communicating through the proximity, the touching without touching, that has been termed allusion or allure" (Bennett, "Systems and Things" 228). Allure is a contact that preserves the structure of withdrawal. It is a proximity that does not collapse into presence, a communication that does not resolve into transparency.

This account of vicarious causation has implications for what Harman regards as the two extreme and equally inadequate solutions to the problem of relational ontology. One extreme holds that there are entities but no genuine relations. It is an atomistic position that produces the fragmented multiverse Harman's own theory of withdrawal might initially appear to involve.



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The other holds that there are relations but no genuine entities. It is a position characteristic of process philosophy, radical relational ontology, and certain structuralist positions. “There are two possible extreme solutions... One extreme solution is to say that there are entities but no relations; the other is to say that there are relations but no entities” (Harman, “Realism without Materialism” 70). OOO refuses both. It insists upon the reality of discrete withdrawn entities and upon the reality of genuine, if always indirect and partial, causal relations between them. Vicarious causation is the theory that makes this double insistence coherent.

The philosophical errors of both extremes are, furthermore, practically consequential as well as theoretically misguided. The dominance of relational thinking, overmining in its most thoroughgoing form, produces a philosophy constitutionally incapable of accounting for change, novelty, and the transformation of existing systems. “The future can be viewed as a counterfactual version of the present... The danger of relationist thinking is that it focuses too much upon reciprocal interactions in the ‘now’ and too little on what things should be doing that they are prevented from doing by the accidental set of physical and social relations in which they are now entangled” (Kimbell, “The Object Strikes Back” 115). A relational ontology that identifies entities entirely with their current relational configurations cannot account for the latent potentialities that objects carry within their withdrawn interiors, and may be actualised when the relational configuration changes, when a new context places new demands upon an object, or when an object’s constitutive tensions generate new and unexpected effects. “If the hammer were nothing more than its set of current hammer-uses, without any non-relational surplus of reality, then it could never do anything new nor unexpected” (Harman, “An outline of object-oriented philosophy” 35).

The productive excess of the withdrawn object, its reserve of capacities, tendencies, and potentialities not currently actualised in any given relational network, is, moreover, what grounds Harman’s insistence that objects possess an inherent vitality that extends well beyond their effects upon human subjects. “Objects do not just obstruct human action, but have an inherent liveliness that allows them to act in the world at large, not just on us” (Harman, “Autonomous Objects” 125). The inherent liveliness of objects, their capacity to generate effects that exceed any specific relational configuration, to form unexpected alliances, to resist absorption into established systems, follows directly from the structure of withdrawal. A fully transparent and



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relationally exhausted object would be entirely passive. It is a function of the forces applied to it. Withdrawn object, by contrast, holds in reserve a surplus that constitutes the source of genuine ontological agency.

The critical reception of vicarious causation has, predictably, engaged with the tension between the radical inaccessibility of the real and the apparent necessity of causal interaction. Harman's framework, by distributing agency so broadly across non-human objects while asserting upon their fundamental inaccessibility, may function ideologically to redistribute responsibility and to obscure the specific agency of human actors in producing crises such as climate change. "The concept of withdrawal is what Harman names a 'psychological alibi'... At the very moment when humans have caused a state shift in the earth's biosphere... we are witness to the ascendancy of a social theory that massively redistributes agency to the nonhuman and promotes withdrawal as the primary mode of being" (Campbell et al., "Graham Harman, *Immaterialism*" 8-9). The critique raises substantive political questions about the ideological valences of ontological positions. Harman's response, implicit in his theoretical framework, is that the redistribution of ontological agency is a philosophical requirement of an adequate account of reality, and that the refusal to grant genuine agency to non-human entities ultimately impoverishes both ontology and politics. Objects are agents not as surrogates for human intention but as irreducible centres of causal force in their own right.

The theory of vicarious causation illustrates Harman's understanding of the relationship between knowledge and reality. Since every encounter with an object, including the most sophisticated scientific investigation, functions through sensual caricatures rather than through direct contact with the withdrawn real, knowledge is constitutively indirect, partial, and perspectival. "Objects are not convertible into knowledge, since knowledge inevitably translates or distorts their reality by abstracting certain principal features from their total reality" (Harman, "An outline of object-oriented philosophy" 35). This position is decidedly realist rather than skeptical. Harman does not conclude from the inaccessibility of the real object that knowledge is impossible or that truth is relative to perspective. He concludes that the relationship between knowledge and reality is always one of allusion than identity. The rigorous and comprehensive knowledge of an entity remains a sensual caricature, adequate for generating reliable causal



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effects and provisional descriptions, but fundamentally short of exhausting the real object's withdrawn depth.

Structural Homologies: What the Real and the Withdrawn Object Share

The Real anchors the Lacanian account of the subject's incompleteness, while the withdrawn object grounds Harman's emphasis that entities harbour an excess irreducible to their relational profiles. These two concepts are not analogous in a loose or suggestive sense but share a series of determinate formal structures whose convergence demands rigorous philosophical attention. To identify structural homology is not to conflate the projects from which these concepts emerge, nor is it to elide the genuine and substantive differences between psychoanalytic theory and speculative metaphysics. It is to demonstrate that both concepts respond to a common philosophical pressure, the pressure exerted by the persistent inadequacy of relational, linguistic, and epistemic frameworks to account for the being of entities and the constitution of the subject. The five structural homologies examined below, inaccessibility as internal structure, constitutive non-exhaustibility, causal productivity through withdrawal, resistance to systematic integration, and non-relationality as a positive ontological determination, together constitute a philosophical topology that the Real and the withdrawn object share, a topology that marks a genuinely novel contribution to the philosophy of immanence and the ontology of excess.

a) Inaccessibility as Structure, Not Limitation

The fundamental homology between the Lacanian Real and the object-oriented withdrawn object resides in the nature of their inaccessibility. In both frameworks, the hidden core of an entity or of the subject's foundational impasse is not concealed by the contingent limitations of a finite knower who might, in principle, be replaced by a more adequate cognitive apparatus. The inaccessibility in question is not epistemic but ontological. It belongs to the structure of what these concepts designate, and it would persist regardless of the sophistication of the investigative method brought to bear upon it.

In the Lacanian account, the Real is distinguished from the merely unknown. The Real "remains external to all forms of thought and order" and is defined precisely as "that which resists symbolization absolutely" (Botting, "Relations of the Real" 24; Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, 82). Resistance is not the resistance of a difficult object that awaits a more refined hermeneutic



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but the resistance of that which is constitutively exterior to the symbolic order in which all knowledge is produced. The Real, in Lacan's formulation, "ex-sists" outside the symbolic. It is not absent from within the system but stands prior to the system as its enabling limit. For Lacan, "reality, as we consciously understand it, is a melange of image and word or the Imaginary and the Symbolic orders, respectively. What this reality excludes is the Real, as an immanent beyond of language" (Chattopadhyay, *Beckett, Lacan* 11). The Real is therefore not a content that has been repressed and that psychoanalytic labour might eventually recover. It is the structural outside of every content, the "unspeakable is, an impossible, inexpressible, ineffable and undifferentiated space outside language" (Botting, "Relations of the Real" 24).

Object-oriented ontology articulates a formally parallel claim at the level of general ontology. Harman argues that objects withdraw from all perceptual and causal relations, and withdrawal is not an accidental feature of the human subject's limited access but a condition of every relation whatsoever. "Object-oriented philosophy has a single basic tenet: the withdrawal of objects from all perceptual and causal relations" (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 19). The withdrawn object is not hidden from humans while remaining fully available to other objects. Withdrawal is, rather, the fundamental ontological condition of every entity insofar as it enters into any relation at all. Harman elaborates this point by extending the structure of withdrawal beyond the human-world relation: "the rift between things and our encounter with them is not the contingent product of a human, alien, or animal 'mind,' but occurs automatically in any relation at all" (Harman, *Art and Objects* 20). When a stone strikes a pond, neither the stone exhausts the reality of the pond nor the pond the reality of the stone. The withdrawal of objects is not a perspectival limitation but an ontological feature of relationality as such.

The two frameworks share a fundamental reorientation of inaccessibility, from a failure of knowledge to a positive structure of being. In neither case does the hidden dimension await discovery. In both cases it constitutes the very being of what is at stake. The reorientation carries significant consequences for philosophy more broadly, since it forecloses the aspiration to an exhaustive account of any entity, whether a subject's desire or a hammer lying in a workshop, in terms of its accessible, relational, or representable properties. The inaccessibility of the Real and of the withdrawn object is not a problem for philosophy to overcome but a datum philosophy is obligated to theorize.



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b) Non-Exhaustibility: The Constitutive Excess

Closely related to, yet conceptually distinct from, inaccessibility is the property of non-exhaustibility. Where inaccessibility designates the structural character of withdrawal, non-exhaustibility designates the inexhaustible surplus that every attempt at description, formalisation, or relation leaves behind. Both the Real and the withdrawn object are characterised by an excess that is not a remainder to be progressively reduced by the accumulation of knowledge but a constitutive feature of what they are.

Lacan's account of the Real's non-exhaustibility is articulated in relation to the limits of formalisation. The Real is "a remainder, an excess, and thus as something appreciable only through other concepts or notions" (Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the Real* 1). "Remainder" designates what is left over after every operation of symbolisation, the residue that symbolisation necessarily produces and necessarily cannot absorb. Lacan acknowledges: "we can only reach odds and ends of the real" (Lacan, *The Sinthome* 371). The mathematical turn in Lacan's later work is motivated by the aspiration to formalise the remainder, to find in mathematical notation a mode of inscription that does not translate the Real into meaning but rather marks its impasse. However, even the aspiration encounters a structural limit. As Fink notes, "there is always a limit to formalization: the progressive symbolization of the real always leaves a remainder" (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 200). The Real is not exhaustible in principle. It cannot be reached by the progressive refinement of symbolic resources because it is constituted by the failure of that very enterprise.

Object-oriented ontology articulates a structurally parallel account of the object's non-exhaustibility. Harman insists that an object is always more than any description, relation, or event in which it participates. "In every field, the object-oriented method reminds us that an object is more than its constituent pieces, more than its relations, more than its qualities, and more than the events in which it happens to have participated so far" (Harman, "An Outline of Object-Oriented Philosophy" 18). The object's excess over its current relational profile is not a gap that future relations will close but an ongoing structural feature of what objects are. No accumulation of further relations, further descriptions, or further scientific analyses will exhaust an object's being, because the object is constitutively more than the sum of its relational engagements. Objects are "boxes of surprises, never fully catalogued by the other objects of the



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world” (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 78). The image of the box of surprises is not merely rhetorical. It designates an ontological structure in which the interior of an object is permanently in excess of what any external relation can draw out.

The convergence of the two frameworks insist that the excess in question is not a gap produced by current ignorance but a constitutive feature of the entity. In neither case is better science, more refined analysis, or more comprehensive description a solution to the problem of non-exhaustibility. The excess is not a deficiency of knowledge but a property of being. It is a property that philosophy, rather than eliminating, is called upon to take seriously as a first-order ontological determination.

c) Causal Productivity Through Withdrawal

Perhaps the most counterintuitive structural homology between the Real and the withdrawn object is the homology of causal productivity. In both frameworks, the withdrawn or inaccessible core is maximally active precisely as withdrawn. It generates effects, symptoms, desires, and causal relations while remaining outside every relation it produces. The paradox, that absence is the condition of maximum productivity, challenges the common assumption that agency and causality require presence, accessibility, or positive determination.

Lacanian account of causal productivity through withdrawal is most explained in the concept of the object a as the object-cause of desire. “The notion of cause belongs to this outside, the locus of the object, prior to any internalization... this is where the veil is drawn back on the dimension of the object as cause of desire” (Lacan, *Anxiety* 100). The object a does not function as the terminus of desire, the object toward which the subject strives and which, once attained, would satisfy desire. It functions, rather, as the cause of desire, the structural absence around which desire organises and which desire perpetually circles without ever incorporating. “The object a is not the end, the goal, of desire, but its cause. It is the cause of desire inasmuch as desire is itself something non-effective, a kind of effect founded and constituted upon the function of lack, which only appears as an effect at the exact spot where its cause is not” (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 208). Lacan identifies the constitutive structure of causality through absence. The cause operates in its very not-being-there; its withdrawal is the condition of the effect it generates. Žižek argues that “the trauma qua real is not the ultimate external referent of the symbolic process, but precisely that X which forever hinders any neutral representation of



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external referential reality” (Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 279). The Real, in Žižek’s account, is not an obstacle that stands in the way of representation but the internal obstruction that makes the symbolic process run, that gives desire its direction and the social field its antagonistic structure. Causality, in the Lacanian framework, is not a relation between two present terms but a productive asymmetry in which one term operates through its constitutive absence.

Object-oriented ontology arrives at a formally analogous conclusion by an entirely different route. Harman argues that the withdrawal of objects from their relations is not merely a metaphysical curiosity but the very condition of causality. If objects were fully present in their causal interactions, if the stone fully exhausted the pond and the pond fully exhausted the stone, there would be no reserve from which future causal interactions could draw their novelty. “Unless a thing holds something in reserve behind its current relations, nothing would ever change” (Harman, *Prince of Networks* 187). Change, on this account, presupposes excess. It presupposes that an object is more than its current relational profile and therefore capable of generating effects that its current profile does not predict. The withdrawn object is causally productive precisely because it is not reducible to its effects, its inexhaustible reserve is what makes every new causal engagement possible. Morton reinforces this point by invoking Husserl and Heidegger’s shared insight that “things have an irreducible dark side: no matter how many times we turn over a coin, we never see the other side as the other side” (Morton, “Here Comes Everything” 165). The dark side of the object is not a surface not yet encountered. It is a structural feature. It is the inexhaustible dimension of the object that guarantees that every encounter is an encounter with something that exceeds the encounter itself. The structure of productive excess is, at the level of formal ontology, in the object *a* as the cause of desire: a structural absence that operates as the engine of production.

d) Resistance to Systematic Integration

A fourth structural homology concerns the characteristic behaviour of both the Real and the withdrawn object with respect to systematic frameworks of understanding. In both cases, the concept in question marks a limit that cannot be interiorised by any system, a point of resistance that returns insistently whenever a system attempts to absorb it, and that, in returning, reveals the system’s constitutive incompleteness.



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Lacanian Real is characterised by its persistent resistance to the symbolic order. Far from being a static absence, the Real is dynamically disruptive. It punctuates the symbolic wherever the symbolic attempts to achieve closure. “The Real is precisely the phenomenon which punctures systemicity” and that Lacan himself exhibits “a symptomatic propensity to problematize systemic thinking” (Chattopadhyay, *Beckett, Lacan* 12). The Real does not stand outside the symbolic order as a neutral limit. It actively resists the order’s aspiration to self-sufficiency. “In its sistence outside of the imaginary and the symbolic, it knocks up against them, its play is something precisely in the order of limitation; the two others... offer it resistance” (Lacan, *The Sinthome* 125). The Real, in other words, exerts a pressure upon the symbolic that the symbolic cannot neutralize. It returns in the form of symptoms, failures of signification, and the compulsion to repeat precisely because it cannot be symbolised once and for all. Fink observes that “the chain never ceases to not write the numbers that constitute the caput mortuum in certain positions... One could go so far as to say that what, of necessity, remains outside the chain causes what is inside; something must, structurally speaking, be pushed outside for there to even be an inside” (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 27). The image of the *caput mortuum*, the dead residue that every alchemical process leaves behind, captures the Real’s structural position. It is that which every systematic operation necessarily excludes and which, in being excluded, constitutes the system as a system. The system requires the Real’s exclusion to achieve whatever internal coherence it possesses; the Real, in turn, marks the system’s limit.

Object-oriented ontology develops a structurally parallel account of the object’s resistance to relational and systematic absorption. Harman argues that the reduction of objects to their relational profiles, “overmining,” is a philosophical error that eliminates the very features of objects that make them philosophically interesting and ontologically real. An object is always “more than its relations, more than its qualities, and more than the events in which it happens to have participated so far” (Harman, “An Outline of Object-Oriented Philosophy” 18). The excess of the object over its relational profile is not a gap that better relational analysis will close but a structural feature that every relational analysis necessarily produces as its remainder. Objects resist absorption into relational networks not because they are poorly described by current science but because their being exceeds any relational description in principle. Harman’s critique of “duomining,” the combined reduction of objects both to their components and to their



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relational effects, identifies the double failure of systematic thinking with respect to objects: “these two types of reduction are known in OOO as ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining,’ while their combination—which happens more often than not—is called ‘duomining’” (Harman, *Art and Objects* 2). Object resists both reductive directions. It resists systematic integration from every possible angle. The double resistance is formally analogous to the Real’s resistance to symbolization. Just as the Real cannot be captured by progressively refined symbolic resources, the withdrawn object cannot be captured by progressively refined relational or material analysis. In both cases, resistance to systematisation is a positive ontological feature, not a problem awaiting resolution.

e) Non-Relationality as a Positive Ontological Determination

The fifth and most philosophically provocative structural homology concerns the status of non-relationality in both frameworks. Against the dominant tendency in contemporary philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences to understand entities through their relations, to hold that what a thing is is exhaustively determined by the network of relations in which it participates, both the Lacanian Real and the object-oriented withdrawn object assert the primacy of a non-relational core. In both frameworks, non-relationality is not a deficiency or an absence of determination but a positive ontological feature, the genuine locus of reality, the dimension of the entity that exceeds and subtends every relational profile.

Lacan states that “the mark as such of this real is that it doesn’t tie on to anything. This at least is how I conceive of the real” (Lacan, *The Sinthome* 374). The Real is not merely difficult to relate to other elements. It is non-relational, defined by its failure to enter into the connecting operations that characterise the symbolic and imaginary registers. “The Real is impossible because it is not related to anything else. Its logic is all about non-relation. The Real interrupts the Symbolic and Imaginary logic of relationality in which words and images associate with one another to produce sense” (Chattopadhyay, *Beckett, Lacan* 13). The Real’s non-relationality is not a contingent feature of its current position in some network but a constitutive determination, the Real is what it is insofar as it does not connect. Non-relationality is further developed through Lacan’s formula concerning the absence of the sexual relation. The formula “there is no sexual relationship” describes not the empirical failure of two subjects to achieve full communication or mutual satisfaction but the structural impossibility of a relation that would be



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complete, without remainder. The formula is tied directly to the Real: “this non-relation, coterminous with the absence of sexual relation, is the truth of Y a d’ l’Un: ‘The function of the One, the One insofar as it is only there to [...] represent solitude’” (Chattopadhyay, *Beckett, Lacan* 50). The One is not the unity of a synthetic totality but the solitary mark of the Real’s irreducible singularity. It is the point at which the relational fabric of the symbolic order encounters an impenetrable interruption.

Object-oriented ontology presents a formally similar account of non-relationality at the level of general metaphysics. Harman argues, against what he identifies as the dominant “relational fashion in philosophy, the arts, and nearly everywhere else,” that “OOO upholds the counter-tradition that takes relations to be external to their terms, so that, in all but exceptional cases, an apple remains the same apple no matter the context in which it occurs” (Harman, *Art and Objects* 3). The object’s identity is not constituted by its relations. It persists through changes in its relational environment because it withdraws from every relation into an interior that no relation can penetrate. “Just as Latour teaches, there are countless actors of different sizes and types, constantly dueling and negotiating with each other. But objects are not defined by their relations. Instead they are what enter into relations in the first place, and their allies can never fully mine their ores” (Harman, *Prince of Networks* 132). Harman describes the object as the pre-relational substrate that makes relations possible without being exhausted by them. The pre-relational substrate is not an abstract substratum in the classical metaphysical sense but a concrete, individual entity whose being exceeds its relational profile. Harman extends the claim beyond the human-world relation by insisting that withdrawal is a feature of all relations: “the body treats blood cells as mere circulable units, ignoring many blood-related features... in the same way, our lungs reduce air to breathability, unconcerned with its majestic color at sunset. The same thing happens in purely inanimate cases: when rocks collide with windows... these objects recede from each other just as much as from our human bodies and souls” (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 171). Non-relationality is not a feature of a special class of entities, the subject, the human, the conscious being, but a universal ontological condition. Every entity, in every relation, withdraws from that relation into an interior that the relation cannot access.

The conjunction of the two frameworks at the level of non-relationality is significant because it runs against the most powerful tendency in contemporary theory. The claim that what



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is real is what relates, that entities are constituted by their relational networks, that the subject is an effect of discourse, and that objects are bundles of sense-data or assemblages of component parts, is among the most widely shared commitments of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century philosophy. Both the Lacanian Real and the object-oriented withdrawn object mount a principled resistance to the claim by asserting that the genuine locus of reality is precisely that which does not relate, that which exceeds every relational profile, that which persists as an irreducible remainder when every relation has been mapped. In both frameworks, non-relationality is not a deficiency but an excellence, the mark of genuine ontological weight.

f) Shared Formal Structure: Ex-sistence, Knotting, and Productive Core

The five homologies identified above meet upon a single overarching formal structure that both the Lacanian Real and the object-oriented withdrawn object instantiate, the structure of “ex-sistence.” To ex-sist is to stand outside while remaining constitutively connected. It is to be neither simply inside nor simply outside a system but to occupy the position of the structural outside that enables the system’s internal organisation. The concept, developed primarily in relation to the borromean knot in Lacan’s later seminars, proves to be a remarkably precise description of the formal position shared by both concepts.

In Lacan’s topology, the Real ex-sists with respect to the Symbolic and Imaginary registers. It stands outside them while providing the necessary structural support for their knotting. “The knot consists, it is Imaginary, and where it ex-sists, it is Real: ‘The real cannot be just one of those rings of string. It’s the way of presenting them in their linked-up knot that, in and of itself, forms the real of the knot’” (Chattopadhyay, *Beckett, Lacan* 61). The Real is not a fourth element added to the triad of Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. It is the way the three registers are knotted together, the structural fact of their conjunction. Its ex-sistence is not an absence from the system but a structural position at its outer boundary that determines the system’s coherence from without. “The real actually lies, the real does not entail the hole that subsists within it, given that its consistence is no more than the consistence of the entirety of the knot that it forms with the symbolic and the imaginary” (Lacan, *The Sinthome* 89). The claim that the Real “lies,” in the double sense of being situated and of being deceptive, is philosophically rich. The Real presents as a stable core, but its stability is entirely a function of



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the knot it forms with the other registers. It has no consistency of its own independent of its structural position. This is not a concession to anti-realism but a topological precision. The Real is real as the structural outside that the system requires to be what it is, and its seeming interiority is always already an effect of its constitutive exteriority. The Real “is always an odd or an end, a core. It is certainly a core around which thought embellishes, but the mark as such of this real is that it doesn’t tie on to anything” (Lacan, *The Sinthome* 372). Lacan designates “core” not as a central presence but a structural pivot around which the elaborations of thought circulate without ever incorporating it. Thought embellishes the Real rather than grasping it. It produces increasingly sophisticated circumscriptions of the Real’s position without ever reducing the Real to a content that thought could possess.

The formal structure of ex-sistence, as developed in Lacan’s topological account, maps onto Harman’s account of the object’s withdrawn being. For Harman, the object occupies a structural position formally analogous to that of the Real in the borromean knot: it is the interior that enables every relational encounter while remaining outside every such encounter. “Object-oriented philosophy is a frank realism which views objects or things as genuine realities deeper than any of the relations in which they might become involved. This realism is what prevents the sin of ontotheology or metaphysics of presence, since objects are so deeply and inexhaustibly real that no form of access can ever do them justice” (Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer” 196). The object is a “genuine reality deeper than any relation.” It is the structure of ex-sistence. It is a real that stands outside and beneath the relational network while providing its structural support. Moreover, Harman’s account of the object’s relation to its qualities and its effects exhibits a structural parallel to the Lacanian account of the Real’s relation to the Symbolic and Imaginary. Just as the Real’s “consistence is no more than the consistence of the entirety of the knot that it forms with the symbolic and the imaginary,” the object’s intelligibility is constituted by the play of its sensual qualities and relational effects while its withdrawn being remains permanently in excess of that play. The object, like the Real, is accessible only through its manifestations, and those manifestations are always both expressive of and inadequate to the being they express. As Harman frames it in a formulation that resonates with the Lacanian account of the subject’s impossible access to the Real: “like science, the object-oriented position avoids the notion... that the human-world relation is the ground of all others” while insisting that



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“the world can only be known allusively rather than directly” (Harman, “An Outline of Object-Oriented Philosophy” 11). Allusiveness is not a deficiency of knowledge but an ontological structure. The Real is approached allusively in psychoanalytic practice, just as objects are approached allusively in every perceptual, causal, or aesthetic encounter.

The formal structure shared by both concepts may be schematised as follows. Every entity has an inaccessible core; this core is structurally, not accidentally, withheld from every relation. It produces effects without presenting itself in those effects; and no system, symbolic, relational, material, or formal, can fully integrate or exhaust it. The fourfold structure constitutes an ontology of productive withdrawal, a philosophical account in which the most real dimension of any entity is the dimension that withdraws from every attempt to grasp it, and in which this withdrawal is the engine of every significant effect, desire, causality, change, and the compulsion of thought itself.

Implications and the Limits of Homology

The identification of structural homology between the Lacanian Real and the object-oriented withdrawn object is an intellectually productive philosophical gesture, but it demands a corresponding attention to the limits that prevent homology from collapsing into identity. The two concepts share a formal topology. They do not share a theoretical context, a set of aims, or an account of what ultimately grounds the structure they both exhibit.

The significant difference concerns the question of the subject. For Lacan, the Real is always the Real of a subject. It is the impasse of the subject’s inscription in language, the mark of the subject’s irreducible incompleteness as a being of the symbolic order. The Real generates symptoms, desire, and repetition in a subject who is structured by its encounter with an impossible kernel. Object-oriented ontology, by contrast, is committed to a “flat ontology” in which the human subject occupies no privileged position. As Harman argues, “human beings make up just a few billion objects among others, and are not special guests at the table of Being whose absence would simplify the universe immeasurably” (Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* 244). The withdrawn object withdraws from all relations equally, regardless of whether those relations involve conscious subjects. There is, in OOO, no sense in which the experience of withdrawal is specifically subjective, symptomatic, or productive of desire.



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A second significant difference concerns the question of scale. Lacan's Real is a singular concept. It designates a single structural position with respect to the subject's constitution, not a property distributed across all entities. Object-oriented ontology, by contrast, distributes withdrawal across all entities without restriction of scale or type, stones, societies, fictional characters, and chemical condensates all withdraw from their relations in formally the same way. Harman is explicit that OOO "treats artificial, social, and fictional entities in the same way as natural ones" (Harman, "An Outline of Object-Oriented Philosophy" 11). The universalisation of withdrawal is a feature that Lacanian theory does not pursue. The Real is not a property of objects in general but a specific structural position within the topology of the subject.

A third difference concerns the role of formalisation. Lacan's engagement with mathematics, his attempt to formalise the Real through topology, set theory, and the theory of the knot, is motivated by the aspiration to reach, even if asymptotically, a mode of inscription that is not contaminated by imaginary meaning. Object-oriented ontology does not share the aspiration to formalization. Its method is predominantly descriptive and analogical, proceeding by the accumulation of examples from diverse domains rather than by the construction of formal models. These methodological differences are not merely stylistic. They reflect deeper differences in what each framework takes itself to be doing when it theorises withdrawal.

To acknowledge these differences, however, is not to retract the claim that a genuine structural homology obtains between the two concepts. The homology identified functions at a level of formal generality that is compatible with significant differences at the level of theoretical context, disciplinary aim, and philosophical method. What the homology reveals is that two major currents of contemporary thought, psychoanalytic theory and speculative metaphysics, have independently converged upon a set of formal structures that resist the dominant relational and constructivist tendencies of late twentieth-century philosophy. Both the Lacanian Real and the object-oriented withdrawn object insist that what is most real is what cannot be captured by any network of relations, any system of signification, or any accumulation of descriptive resources. Both insist that the inaccessible core is maximally productive, that its withdrawal is the condition of every significant effect, and philosophy's task is to theorise this structure rather than to dissolve it into more manageable categories.



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The convergence carries implications that extend beyond the comparison of two theoretical frameworks. It suggests that the critique of relational ontology, far from being the idiosyncratic preoccupation of a particular school of thought, represents a philosophical pressure that multiple traditions have been forced to address from within their own resources. The fact that psychoanalytic theory and speculative metaphysics, proceeding by entirely different methods and toward entirely different ends, have each generated a concept that shares the formal topology is philosophically significant. It indicates that the topology corresponds to something significant in the structure of thought's encounter with its own limits, something that Lacan identifies as the Real and Harman identifies as the withdrawn object, and both identify as the irreducible core of what it means for something to be at all.

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