

*\*Author's manuscript, May 8, 2017. Forthcoming in Philosophy Today, 63:1, Winter 2019.*

**Abstract:** If philosophy in the wake of Kant's transcendental revolution tends to orient itself around a subjective principle, namely the human subject, then recently various schools of thought have proposed a counter-revolution in which philosophy is given an objective, non-human starting point. In this historical context, 'object-oriented ontology' has sought to gain the status of first philosophy by identifying being in general with the object as such—that is, by systematically converting beings to objects. By tracing the provenance of contemporary object-oriented philosophy to a key moment of late 18<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophy, this paper develops the idea of the difference between being and object in order to demonstrate that object-oriented thinking, contrary to its anti-Kantian claims, adheres to the central axiom of transcendental idealism, that this axiom is an unsolvable paradox, and that Kant and Novalis give us the resources for a transformative philosophical project that meets the challenge of the cultural and theoretical turn to objects.

## **On the Difference Between Being and Object**

James Osborn

*For it is vain to assume an artificial indifference concerning inquiries the object of which cannot be indifferent to human nature.*

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*<sup>1</sup>

*The more the object—the greater the love for it—an absolute object is met with absolute love.*

Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*<sup>2</sup>

### I. Introduction

This paper is an inquiry into the difference between being and object. It is expected that, before getting to the heart of the subject matter, one should introduce the topic with preliminary remarks to orient the reader and a direct presentation of the thesis to be demonstrated, so that a secure course is charted out beforehand. That is, the starting point for our topic is to be conditioned by the object of our philosophy, and the introduction must itself already achieve the goal of the whole work. Our particular object has set for us quite the formidable task: to present the difference between being and object in the manner of being as no longer merely an object. Further, since "being" refers to that with which we must already be familiar and itself the way by which we would search for it, we can claim no indifference to this difference. In philosophy, not mere ideas but nature itself and we ourselves in our nature are implicated,

and the subject is always inextricably caught up with the fate of the object. We come upon a striking thesis: if the difference between being and object exists, then that difference must be realized in the philosophical practice that would search for it—and if philosophy is to think being beyond the domain of objects, this entails that the philosopher is to be no longer a mere subject. Thus, the goal of our philosophy is not only *discursive* but also *transformative*. *If the difference between being and object is to be sought, the overturning of the domain of objects in general is to be experienced.*

Where is the domain in which objects and subjects come into being? What is their unconditioned ground? How could we ever begin the search for such a non-objective “object”? How could we achieve such a standpoint without being familiar with it, and how could we come to know it without first achieving it? One might recognize this as the perennial problem of establishing a foundational principle: where does philosophy begin? More troubling still for us, the topic of this paper questions the traditional starting points, as the task of our investigation rules out the object, while our transformative thesis rules out the subject. The impasse that appears to impede our inquiry from its very inception is captured in the following thought experiment.

We are searching for the difference between being and object. The object of our search is the difference, or being insofar as it is not an object. But if we have made the difference the object of our search, we have already determined it to be such an object, and our search is ipso facto a proof of the identity of being and object, not their difference. Philosophy, in the very act of its search for being, is the proof of the non-existence of the difference between being and object. The search ends the moment it begins. If, however, the difference between being and object truly exists, then being insofar as it is not an object could not be an object of any inquiry, and it would be impossible to ever begin our search. We cannot begin a search for something whose nature precludes it from being the object of a search. It seems, then, that there are only two conclusions possible: our inquiry is either unnecessary—for in the mere act of positing being as the object of philosophy we already know that the difference does not exist and we need not search for it—or impossible—because the difference, as existing, and being what it is, could not be the object of our inquiry. This dilemma threatens to lure thought into a conceptual snare that would destine philosophy to inaction. *Everywhere we search for being, but we only ever find objects.*

Faced with the worldview from which everything is an object and aspects of existence are properties of objects, a philosophical investigation of being now appears obsolete. We will thus have to overcome this object-oriented worldview in order to get to our goal, i.e., we will have to pass through the identity of being and object on the way to their difference, and this not as a mere theoretical exercise but as a practical need grown out of the everyday reduction of beings to objects in a post-Kantian information-technological world. Therefore, this paper presents the following three movements aimed to clear a path through the passage from object to being. First, we turn to the school of thought that claims to represent the standpoint of objects and ask what an object-orientation means for philosophy and for a search for being. Second, we will find that what is at stake in object-oriented thought is not objects per se but a division of nature into subjects and objects that is axiomatic for philosophy since Kantian transcendental idealism, and Kant will aid us in wresting this axiom from the shadows. Third, though in Kant we find the difference latent in conceptual form, it is Novalis through his interpretation of Kantian philosophy who will teach us how to carry out the concept toward the achievement of our transformative thesis. Finally, each of these movements in its own way is guided by the idea *that the object of philosophy makes a difference to the philosopher and that the philosopher cannot be indifferent to the object of philosophy*. This idea, when put into practice, is the philosophical proof of being beyond the dialectical conflict between subjects and objects, and for this reason it

constitutes the dissolution both of the classic “paradox of inquiry” and of object-oriented thinking. In this way, we aim to demonstrate that the “object” of philosophy is being not object, and that as such the idea of philosophy entails the transformation of the philosopher and philosophical practice.

## II. The Identity of Being and Object

We begin with what appears as the most natural starting point in an object-driven world, with the theoretical expression of that world in what is called “object-oriented ontology.” The goal of this speculative metaphysics is exactly what its name suggests: an onto-logy according to a system of objects, or, a logic of being as object. Object-oriented ontology says that the object in itself (in opposition to the subject) is the unconditioned principle and proper concern of philosophy and, therefore, that the search for being (insofar as it is not object) is either impossible or irrelevant. But this central doctrine of object-oriented ontology produces an unattainable goal and a duplicitous thesis: for the identity of being and object entails an indifference between subject and object, an unbridgeable gap between philosopher and philosophical task. And if the central doctrine of object-oriented ontology can be shown to be unattainable and duplicitous, this would mean not only the failure of the idea of an object-oriented philosophy but, more importantly, a path will be opened toward the difference between being and object, since it was the object-oriented worldview that threatened to stall our inquiry by reducing every possible starting point to an object. If the identity of being and object does not stand up to scrutiny, then the paradox of the inquiry into being insofar as it is not object immediately dissolves. Thus, to better understand what is at stake in this thesis and what it means for our search for the difference, we will look briefly at the thought of the recent founder and popularizer of object-oriented philosophy, Graham Harman.

The origin of Harman’s turn to objects is his encounter with Heidegger in *Tool-Being*, which marks a crucial point in Heidegger scholarship and in contemporary philosophy in general. Some of its conclusions with regard to *Being and Time* seem so foreign to the views commonly attributed to Heidegger that followers of the latter are tempted to reject it as either a misunderstanding or an intentional spoof of the question of being. But any out of hand dismissal of Harman’s project would miss an opportunity to follow the trail of a formidable challenge to the Heideggerian canon toward a positive thinking anew of the relevance of the *Seinsfrage* for philosophy. Because it identifies a formal resemblance between being and object, Harman’s object-oriented ontology brings “being” to its conceptual boundary and, for this reason, provides a point from which the non-objective dimensionality of being can be thought.

Harman says that there is a “latent subjectivism” in the common readings of *Being and Time*, provoked at times by Heidegger himself, that tends to limit the *Seinsfrage* and the analysis of existence (*Dasein*) to human praxis, to give priority to the human standpoint and reference everything back to a human *Dasein*.<sup>3</sup> The consequence is that objects themselves are excluded from transcendence, which is solely assigned to *Dasein* and, at times, to the things of *Dasein*’s world. *Dasein*’s transcendence, the “nihilitating ‘not’ between being and beings,” so the argument goes, passes over and negates non-*Dasein* entities. *Dasein*, as subject and observer, “nihilates” objects themselves, conforms beings always to and for itself and *its* being.<sup>4</sup> Further, the tendency of Heidegger and his interpreters to reference everything back to *Dasein* is only a modified version of a key trait of the Kantian revolution: “a deep suspicion of any attempt to philosophize about anything beyond the pale of human experience.”<sup>5</sup> Harman wants to counter this subjective strain of thought—both in Heidegger and in contemporary philosophy in general—by assigning being and transcendence to *objects*. His goal is thus to formalize the central insights of

Heidegger's philosophy into an ontology that no longer needs to make any explicit reference to Dasein or the human being, an ontology which would serve as the foundation of a counter-revolution to Kant's critical-transcendental philosophy. He wants to filter out all traces of the effects of subjectivity in order to allow objects themselves to stand on their own and to be thought on their own terms. Harman's "objects" are thus "entities considered in their liberation from the contexture," i.e., from the world of meanings and ready-to-hand things in which Dasein always finds itself thrown.<sup>6</sup> That which belongs to being in general is to be "inscribed in things" themselves as objects, considered in isolation.<sup>7</sup> Harman must distill the "internal mechanism" of Heidegger's "central discovery, a discovery that has no need for any special human entity," and apply this mechanism to things in general as mechanical objects.<sup>8</sup>

The discovery to which all the details of the *Seinsfrage* point is what Harman calls Heidegger's "two world theory," found in the tool analysis of *Being and Time*.<sup>9</sup> In short, "*the meaning of being is tool-being*," says Harman, the "reversal" between the two modes of every entity, *Zuhandenheit* (ready-to-handness) and *Vorhandenheit* (present-at-handness), the dual sense of every object as in-itself and appearance, withdrawn and visible.<sup>10</sup> Harman takes this system of tools and equipment to be universally applicable—"Equipment is global; beings are tool-beings"—and since there is no ontological difference between human beings and any other types of entities, for being in general means only every entity's "reversal" between its two modes, he bids us to think objects, instead of Dasein, as the true *agents* of being.<sup>11</sup> We will not go into the details of these modes of being or of Heidegger's analysis of tools, as I trust the reader is already familiar with these and the commentaries and interpretations thereon. The point for us here is that Harman takes the question of the meaning of being to be a question about the being *of* objects, and his answer is that their being is "tool-being," or the endless "reversal" between *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit*. By objectifying the dual sense of the "object" of Dasein's experience, being, Harman claims to have found a way to reinterpret the whole Heideggerian corpus without explicit need for the interpreter, Dasein—a way to think being without thought and a strategy for displacing the human from philosophical inquiry. In thus relocating the domain of fundamental ontology from Dasein to objects in general, Harman projects the meaning of being onto a metaphysical field of Dasein-like entities that are nevertheless unrelated to the Dasein that originally experienced the question of being.

However, to achieve his overcoming of the subject and turn to being as object, Harman must make several moves that call into question the goal of his philosophy and the very possibility of the identity of being and object. First, the ontological difference, the difference between being and beings that for Heidegger is a key to the *non-dialectical nature of being*, must be turned on its head. Instead of drawing our attention to the transcendence of beings with respect to their reduction to present-at-handness, instead of bidding us to consider beings out of their being *undetermined by objectivity and thinghood*, in object-oriented ontology the difference is interpreted from the side of beings *already taken in their being to be objects*. The difference becomes a mechanism internal to beings as objects, i.e., the same as their "tool-being": the opposition between *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit* is "precisely the same as that between *ontological* and *ontic*."<sup>12</sup> This definition of difference as a *property* of objects is problematic for his goal to find in Heidegger an alternative to the Kantian revolution, because Harman's projection of ontological difference, which for Heidegger is proper to *being*, onto a field of *objects* reveals an implicit reliance on exactly that which he would aim to overcome: a Kantian dialectical concept of difference. In an effort to isolate objects in their being from all human relation, the "ontological gap" that haunts all things becomes "the difference between things in themselves and any presentation of them," a "permanent dualism" between the noumena and phenomena of every object.<sup>13</sup> Second, Harman's ontology brings the focus of philosophy away from a multidimensional

sense of being toward being as *formal* or *mere being*, a move that will become critical for us later. For now it is sufficient to note that where Heidegger differentiates between something as “absolute” and the same as “formal” or “theoretical,” Harman conflates these meanings. That is, for Heidegger the most fundamental and universal meaning of being must be related to “lived experience,” namely, “the index for the highest potentiality of life” and “the fullness of life itself,” but for Harman it is that of science, namely, precisely the “formally objective” meaning that lifts something out of lived experience.<sup>14</sup> Third, since it defines ontological difference dialectically, from the side of *beings taken as objects*, and because the being of such beings is mere being, object-oriented ontology entails a contradictory determination of that same being that practices its science (i.e., the philosopher). Dasein can only be a topic of concern for object-oriented philosophy insofar as the being of Dasein is taken in its formal sense of the mere “is,” stripped of understanding and any relation to objects of philosophical activity. Because all objects are Dasein, all transcend, the concern of philosophy is no longer the peculiar transcendence of Dasein but the formal-grammatical operation of the “is” of all objects.<sup>15</sup> In attempting to counteract the subjectivist strain in Heidegger, Harman overreacts and throws objects over and against all human relation, with the effect that being is no longer essentially related to understanding, which means that the object of philosophy is no longer related to the philosopher.<sup>16</sup> “Equipment,” which for Harman is “tool-being” or being in general, “is an autonomous province that could hardly care less about Dasein.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, object-oriented ontology establishes the domain of philosophy as *a province of indifference*, and anywhere that Heidegger would broach the subject of Dasein’s care or responsibility, any sign of a relation between the philosopher and the object of philosophy, Harman must convert such traces of *philosophical praxis* into an ontological logic to which Dasein has no significant relation.<sup>18</sup> Object-oriented ontology thus entails the duplicitous thesis that *the philosopher is indifferent to the object of philosophy*.

In summary, Harman wants to ask the question of the meaning of being without reference to the beings for whom that question is meaningful, and being in general becomes synonymous with a logic of being in which the philosopher has no interest. If this formulation of the goal of Harman’s philosophy seems contradictory, it is because I want to draw our attention to a central problem of object-oriented philosophy: in flattening and formalizing the ontological difference such that it can serve as an internal logic of things as objects, a great many beings and things are passed over, not the least of which are *us and our ability to translate Harman at all*. When reference to a dimension of being beyond its mere form is explicitly forbidden from the start, a genuinely philosophical engagement and understanding is proscribed, since the philosopher must restrict her thought and her being to the two dimensions of being as object. To achieve its goal, Harman’s object-oriented philosophy must employ words such as “being” and “object” with no concern for their meaning. Whereas for Heidegger “being” is overloaded with meaning, and the task of philosophy is to seek the full dimensionality of that meaning (“the highest potentiality of life”), even when that task takes Dasein beyond its own projected meanings, in object-oriented ontology words must be, as Harman says, “liberated” from all contexture. In strict adherence to Harman’s goal, then, the system of object-oriented ontology is *meaningless*.<sup>19</sup> This passing over of beings and meanings toward objects and their mechanisms, this “nihilating” difference through which Harman translates Heidegger’s question of being, is *the founding transcendental gesture of all object-oriented thought* and thus the meaning of the turn to objects in the information-technological age.

What we learn from Harman is that in order to achieve the identity of being and object, object-oriented ontology must have already made a decision about the meaning of being. Being is determined as pure form, *mere being*, cut off from any non-dialectical dimensionality of being. Harman’s objects

are truly *Gegen-stände*, against and in opposition to the subject and *any other being that would not reduce to the mechanism of objects*, to the logic of “tool-being.” His turn to objects is not a critique of the primacy of the human subject—a critique already explicit throughout Heidegger’s thought—but a denial of the human relation to being. In other words, Harman’s “liberation” of objects from the contexture is a revolt against *Da-sein itself*, that is, a “being against” the possibility of “being there” in a transformative relation between being and beings, and “objects” and “subjects.” As such, Harman abandons the sense behind every relational description of being in the Heideggerian corpus, e.g., *In-der-velt-Sein*, *Mit-Sein*, *Seinsverständnis*, *Ereignis*.

This has not only theoretical but also practical consequences for Harman, for it frustrates his own central thesis. For example, it is typical of Harman’s reading of Heidegger that he makes arguably correct, and often insightful, assertions about the meaning of being, while at the same time showing a complete lack of awareness of the relation of those assertions to the surrounding sentences and to his own object-oriented perspective. So in conclusion to his critique of Dreyfus, Harman gives a lucid and plausible formulation of the transcendence of being in general with respect to human machinations: “[For Heidegger] the problem with presence-at-hand is not that it claims to exist outside of human contexts. The problem is that what exists outside of human contexts *does not have the mode of being of presence-at-hand*.”<sup>20</sup> And yet in the surrounding paragraphs he defends an account of being as object in the sense of thing-in-itself cut off from subjects, which to all but Harman means precisely *a present-at-hand-style determination of being* within a schematic of the philosopher. Which schema? It could not be more obvious and uncontroversial that the schema in play in object-oriented ontology is that which first gives the “object” and “thing-in-itself” the definition which Harman relies on: the subject-object schema of the Kantian *Kritik*. Not only does Harman’s attempt at a naïve view of objects to which the philosopher must be indifferent lead to a text in which there is no coherence between one sentence and the next nor between its form and content, but, further, one of the principle goals of his project—to provide an alternative to the Kantian transcendental schematization of reality—is discredited by his choice of a determinative plan for his ontology, namely, that plan according to which being is one term in the subject-object conflict. As such, object-oriented ontology assumes an antagonism between the philosopher (taken as “subject”) and the first principle of philosophy (taking as “object”), and thus the practice it cultivates is not a love (philosophy) but a transcendental logic (science) of its object, being.

Like all such sciences, the science of being as object must proceed according to a path secured in advance, an original determination of being that solves its own conflict and guarantees the success of the entire edifice. The transcendental gesture required for the identity of being and object reveals a decision space in which objects, and by extension subjects, come into being. This encounter with Harman and object-oriented ontology in our search for the difference between being and object leads us through their identity to the decision in which being is determined in advance according to a plan. With its turn to objects over against subjects and its rejection of a non-objective relation to being, the plan according to which object-oriented ontology determines the identity of being and object is called the subject-object schema. Could it be, then, that Harman’s turn to objects, which was supposed to offer an alternative to the “philosophy of access” and subjectivism that flourished in light of the Kantian revolution, actually shares a common origin and plan with Kant’s attempt to found philosophy as a science of transcendental subjectivity? If so, then our search for the difference between being and object leads us beyond not only objects but the whole domain of the subject-object conflict. In the coming into being of this domain we should find that which is yet unconditioned by the schema—a dimension of being beyond objects and, therefore, a proof of the existence of the difference.

### III. The Provenance of the Subject-Object Schema

Our inquiry leads us to the provenance of that domain in which being is divided up into subjects and objects, and for that we must return to Kant, because although the subject-object schema can be traced back further historically, to Descartes and even earlier, Kant makes this schema the foundation of an entire methodological edifice for philosophy and thus brings what is at stake in it to a singular clarity of expression. The goal of Kantian philosophy, as announced in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is to put philosophy on a secure foundation like science. What characterizes modern science, says Kant, is that it conforms nature to human reason and frames its results according to rational principles—or said differently, because reason already conforms an object of knowledge to itself in some way, science directs itself toward nature explicitly according to the dictates of reason.<sup>21</sup> Because we can then always be sure that the results of science will conform to some rational plan, science enjoys a secure path (*sicheren Gang*), able to operate from clear and certain principles. Thus, nature is taken to be “the sum total of the objects of experience,”<sup>22</sup> and the question of the being of nature apart from the relationship to a rational subject is foreclosed. Nature as the object of knowledge comes into being concurrently with the human being as knowing subject, determining the terms according to which reason compels nature to answer becomes the method of transcendental critique, and the subject-object schema that defines much of the discourse of Kantian (and post-Kantian) philosophy is thus laid out.

Yet, there is a problem, which is given in the opening words of the first edition: “Our reason has the peculiar fate that, with reference to one class of its knowledge, it is always troubled by questions which it cannot ignore because they are prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, and which it cannot answer because they transcend the powers of human reason.”<sup>23</sup> The peculiar fate of reason is that, despite its knowledge being limited to objects as they are given to us, it seeks knowledge of objects as they are in themselves. Reason searches for something that it cannot find. We everywhere seek an absolute ground beyond experience, an unconditioned source of things and their conditions, and in this search reason posits something beyond its purview, it pretends to turn into an object of investigation that which cannot be such an object at all. This should be troubling to us, because in positing an object which cannot be known, that is, an object which cannot be an object of philosophy as science and of the philosopher as rational subject, philosophy is put in the peculiar and embarrassing situation of having no firm ground from which to progress with certainty and clarity in its knowledge.

That Kant grounds his project in this peculiar and troubling nature of human reason gives us insight into, not only the structure, method, and ultimate meaning of transcendental philosophy, but also the provenance of the subject-object schema in general. First, the structure and method of the *Critique* can be derived from the *original transcendental differentiation* of the world into nature and object, on the one hand, and human beings and rational subject, on the other. We call it “original” because it is “a priori” with respect to all experiences of subjectivity and objectivity; it is “transcendental” both in the strictly Kantian sense, i.e., as the condition of possibility of knowledge, and because it is the necessary first act of the transcendental subject, and it thus always marks the moment of the coming into being of transcendental philosophy. Second, the very act of this differentiation entails the positing of a “supersensible” realm of the thing-in-itself. That we conceive of our knowledge as a representative relationship necessitates an object with a dual sense, for although our knowledge be limited to objects as they appear to us, we cannot help but ask about the status of those objects as they are in themselves. Thus, in order to put philosophy on the secure path of science, Kant must always and everywhere establish “the necessary distinction” between things as objects of the

knowing subject, and things-in-themselves, and the central “teaching” of his criticism becomes this: “to take an object in two senses.”<sup>24</sup> Thought from the side of the subject, this is the difference between knowing and thinking; while thought from the side of the object, this is what we could call *the doctrine of the binary object*. In other words, our determination of nature according to the relation between object and subject produces a third term, and the unknowable thing-in-itself, the object cut off from the subject, is an artifact of the coming into being of the subject-object schema. Though he try to tame its spirit in the Transcendental Dialectic by providing a solution to reason’s conflict with itself, the thing-in-itself haunts every move of Kant’s philosophy. Third, this transcendental differentiation and determination of nature precedes the *Critique*, even though in Kant’s thought it takes on an explicit, methodological role for philosophy. It can be traced back to the arrival of the modern scientific worldview and, even further, to a certain aspect of the nature of human beings themselves. In his attempt to found philosophy as a science of the human as rational being, Kant develops the subject-object schema and its consequences more clearly than any other thinker, and, for this reason, Kantian philosophy also points beyond this original transcendental division to its provenance.

What exactly is, then, the provenance of the transcendental determination of nature according to the subject-object schema? If we have said, following Kant, that we can trace it back to human nature as expressed in modern science, then it would be tempting to conclude that the subject-object schema is the most natural expression of the human drive to know, and that philosophy equipped with this framework would best be able to comprehend everything that is. It would be left to us only to decide between the subjective and objective sides, to determine which is more true to being. These are the terms under which much of philosophy since Kant has operated, and this is the crossroads at which we part ways with the subject-oriented schools of thought and with Harman’s alternative. For while Harman remains within the Kantian transcendental differentiation, merely reversing its polarity and determining being in favor of the object, we however are compelled to go beyond this entire dialectic itself and search for its coming into being. We are guided by the truest of scientific intentions, to trace back the conditions of things to their cause, to not rest until we reach the ground of all such determinations of being. The subject-object schema comes into being and determines being—to what does this fact point?

The answer is there in the *Critique* wherever Kant’s concern is reason’s conflict with itself over the ultimate status of the determinate things of experience. What compels us into this peculiar and troubling situation of human nature—the subject-object schema of knowledge coupled with a contradictory desire to go beyond—is what Kant calls *das Unbedingte*, which for the moment we will translate as “the unconditioned.” It occupies a unique dual role in Kant’s thought as both source and goal of philosophical activity. Our reason, he says, demands that we go beyond appearances and search for the unconditioned in things-in-themselves (*Dingen an sich*), in order that the endless regression of the series of conditions (*Bedingungen*) among conditioned things (*Bedingten*) may find rest.<sup>25</sup> The unconditioned is both that which compels us to go beyond the realm of appearances (i.e., of knowledge as the relation between subject and object) and that “alone which reason is looking for.”<sup>26</sup> Further, as the unconditioned in the chain of conditions of all conditioned things, it is the ultimate reason for the totality of things in general and their thingly character. But, Kant will say, we do not find the unconditioned anywhere—it “can never be met with in experience” for we only ever find conditions and conditioned things.<sup>27</sup> Though our searching for it produces the illusion of knowledge of a thing-in-itself, we are always “directed only at appearances and must leave the thing in itself as real for itself but unknown to us.”<sup>28</sup> The unconditioned leads us to think, to posit, that which we cannot know, and, therefore, the unconditioned is the reason why reason is constantly in conflict with itself over

transcendental ideas, and why critical philosophy must guard against transcendental illusions which pretend to find the unconditioned in objects as things in-themselves.

With the unconditioned, we arrive at a turning point which will determine much of post-Kantian philosophy as well as be a key to the resolution of the central problem of our investigation. For despite Kant's attempt to subject the unconditioned to the rigors of critical method and confine its meaning to the realm of the transcendental subject, he at times suggests a different prioritization, namely, that the transcendental subject is derivative of the unconditioned. Thus, his use of *das Unbedingte* in Book II of the Transcendental Dialectic equivocates between two perspectives: that of the transcendental (the difference between subject and object) and that of the transcendent (beyond the transcendental differentiation). On the one side, the unconditioned is a product of the transcendental subject: the goal of dialectic, that highest of ideas toward which reason is compelled, and it constitutes the totality of conditions for objects of experience.<sup>29</sup> Yet on the other side, it seems to precede transcendental subjectivity, for the unconditioned is the source of what Kant earlier called our "peculiar fate": the "natural and inevitable dialectic" that is "inseparable from human reason."<sup>30</sup> Kant further concedes with Plato that transcendental ideas appear as "original causes of things," even of "nature itself."<sup>31</sup> Now, one could interpret this latter definition within the bounds of the former, i.e., within the schematic of transcendental subjectivity, and keep philosophy on the "secure path" of transcendental-critical method by filtering the unconditioned, as Kant does to Plato's ideas, through the strict distinction between objects as they can be known by us and objects as they are in themselves. But one could also step back from the whole Kantian transcendental realm and into the "unconditioned" space of, not, to be clear, objects or things-in-themselves, but *the coming into being of subjects and objects at all*. In other words, we find that Kant's unconditioned mediates between "transcendental" and "transcendent" meanings of the ideas of reason, and insofar as it is a transcendent principle, it is the tendency of human reason to transgress the limits of the realm of experience of the transcendental subject and "to claim a perfectly new territory which does not recognize any demarcation at all."<sup>32</sup> Either way, it is clear that for Kant the unconditioned is a necessary principle of reason, and, for that reason, in its role as the highest aim of human thought in general, it is also the inevitable object of philosophy.

It would be an error at this point to assume that, because Kant gives a critique of pure reason and of its transcendental ideas, he does not affirm but denies the centrality of the unconditioned to the task of philosophy. Whereas he would dispense with it, we are attempting to force it back in. This objection, though understandable, is misplaced, for it confuses what Kant sometimes says and what he actually does. It is precisely because for Kant all knowledge eventually leads to the unconditioned, leading from sensibility to the rules and concepts of the understanding to the ordering and synthesis of these around a *principle*, that the critique of pure reason is necessary. Indeed, Kant is interested in giving a foundation for philosophy as scientific knowledge, but to do this he devotes half the *Kritik* to an explication of the nature and role of ideas and principles, i.e., to the unconditioned with respect to the conditions of knowledge, and this not because he would have them out of the way and done with, but rather because these lie in the nature of human thinking itself, and they lead to error insofar as they are *taken for granted and not made the explicit object of philosophical inquiry*. In other words, the unconditioned is the *natural* object of human thinking and, whatever else it might do, philosophy must be concerned with the unconditioned, whether implicitly or explicitly. It is Kant's idea of philosophy, demonstrated in the very practice and results of the *Kritik*, that the success of philosophy as a science depends on the preliminary, foundational work of making the nature of human thinking in its highest ordering principle an *explicit* concern. Now, whether the principles and ideas of philosophy are taken to be transcendent or transcendental, whether they are mistaken for things themselves, is another question,

one which will occupy much of post-Kantian philosophy. But what is never under question in Kant is whether human thinking, and consequently philosophy, naturally and necessarily seeks the unconditioned. And while Kant proscribes the transcendent use of the ideas of reason, and the task of the Transcendental Dialectic is to demonstrate the error of interpreting the peculiar tendency of reason toward the unconditioned as a determination of things themselves, he says nothing, however, about the meaning of the *Unbedingte* as transcendent with respect to the entire transcendental realm. Indeed, he cannot say anything in this regard, because he does not think the provenance of the subject-object schema as an original transcendental differentiation of nature which always and everywhere is already decided in the *Critique*.

What we mean by the transcendence of the unconditioned, then, is something more than what Kant means; we are no longer speaking of a move within the framework of the dual sense of an object over and against a subject. Rather, we are speaking of this unconditioned with regard to the series of conditions of Kantian philosophy, which extends to the original transcendental differentiation of nature into objective and subjective aspects for the purpose of its being known according to certain principles. Thinking the transcendence of the unconditioned thusly, in a way that is suggested by but goes beyond Kant's definition, *das Unbedingte* could be understood from the perspective of the indeterminacy out of which nature is first determined as subject and object, and thus the unconditioned would not be an artifact of the rational subject but would approach something more like *being in general*.

It is of no small significance, then, that immediately following this account of the dual meaning of the unconditioned as both transcendental, in that it must be interpreted within the bounds of transcendental subjectivity, and transcendent, in that it compels us to transgress those bounds, Kant attempts a definition of the "absolute." It is the absolute nature of the unconditioned that most clearly demonstrates the conflict at the heart of Kantian philosophy, and it will be the key to our transition from the transcendental realm of the subject-object schema to the unconditioned realm of being in general. Kant makes a distinction between two uses of the term "absolute," insisting that only one is true to the idea of the absolute: on the one hand, it can refer to "a thing considered in itself," or "that which is possible in itself"; on the other, it can mean something considered "without limitation," or "that which is possible in all respects, in any relation." The former is "the least that could be said of an object," while the latter is "the most that can be said of the possibility of a thing."<sup>33</sup> Kant then says of these two meanings of "absolute" that their difference is "infinitely wide" (*sind sie unendlich weit auseinander*), and that the preservation of this difference cannot be of indifference to philosophers concerned with that to which the term refers.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this decision about the absolute nature of the unconditioned will take center stage in many of the crucial debates of post-Kantian philosophy, and, as we will soon see, be the key to the nature of the subject-object schema and its transformation into the difference between being and object.

We now arrive at a crossroads for both Kantian philosophy and for our own inquiry. In searching for the difference between being and object we have traced the identity of being and object (i.e., object-oriented ontology) to the original transcendental differentiation that founds philosophy on the subject-object schema. We then found that Kant suggests the provenance of this schema in his identification of the unconditioned as the source of reason's conflict with itself over the ultimate status of objects as things-in-themselves, and he indicates the character of the unconditioned as absolute but does not carry the idea through to its completion. As such, the ultimate status of being with regard to the subject-object schema is left to post-Kantian philosophy to decide. We will now attempt to think this absolute in a way that brings us out of the rule of subjects and objects and into a philosophical activity that corresponds to being *more absolutely*. That is, we will attempt a solution to the conflict of

human nature represented in the dialectic of the unconditioned—but, to be clear, a solution that reduces to neither transcendental idealism nor transcendent dogmatism. If Kant’s insight into the transcendental constitution of the objects of knowledge was a revolution that put philosophy on a secure path, and if Harman’s ontology from the perspective of the self-constitution of the object is a counter-revolution, then the indeterminate path (*unbedingt Gang*) that we aim to chart is not that of another revolution—not a mere reversal of either previous position—but, rather, a crossing over (*Übergang*) from the entire domain of the formation of objects to the transformation of both subjects and objects into their greater possibility of being.

#### IV. Thinking the Absolute with Novalis

The crossroads at which philosophy found itself in light of Kant’s transcendental critique is best captured in the first fragment of the first philosophical endeavor of Novalis. What is powerful about this fragment is that it not only serves as a summary of the key debates in the community of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy, but it also transports the reader—of whatever time—into an immediate experience of what is at stake in those debates through the paradoxical character of what is said.

The fragment reads: *Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge.*<sup>35</sup> This phrase is certainly one of the most difficult to translate in the whole of Western philosophical writing, but not due to a lack of conceptual clarity nor to any obscurity in the use of language on the part of the author. Rather, the difficulty results from the positive capacity of the phrase to bring us into an experience of the subject-object conflict and its provenance. In English, a standard translation is: “We seek the absolute everywhere and only ever find things.”<sup>36</sup> This is a fine translation and serves its purpose to give the reader a sense of what is said. But, as a translation, it has inevitably made a decision for the reader by flattening the content of the saying, and thus some of the power to transport the reader into the decisive experience of the original problem sphere is lost. Thus, when we read of “the absolute” in English, our thought may seek immediate satisfaction in more familiar post-Kantian interpretations, like Fichte’s absolute subject or Hegel’s absolute spirit, passing over the provenance of all such discourse in *das Unbedingte*. Consequently, we miss the connection with Kant’s “unconditioned,” which we have said is the key to overcoming the challenge of object-oriented philosophy. But when read in German, the domain of the original problem that occupied post-Kantian philosophy opens up into its full dimensionality—and this not because of any special characteristic of the German language, but simply because the original saying of a thought still carries with it a background world of meaning that gives life to what is being said.

What we are faced with is an experience which is best described for us in our current context by Gadamer, for whom the difficulty with translation and interpretation is the difficulty with *dialogue*. In the work of translating, the translator “cannot simply convert what is said out of the foreign language into his own without himself becoming again the one saying it.”<sup>37</sup> Becoming the one saying it means that the translation goes beyond linguistic conversion and mental representation, that the translator not only must come to terms with what is said in an analysis of subject and predicate but must also step into the role of the sayer. He or she must experience the saying and not merely represent it. The work of the translator is to “gain for himself the infinite space” of the saying in question. This space beyond representation that the translator must bring into play Gadamer calls a “third dimension from which the original (i.e., what is said in the original) is built up in its range of meaning.” To preserve this dimensionality, the task of the translator is “to place himself in the direction of what is said (i.e., in its

meaning) in order to carry over what is to be said into the direction of his own saying.”<sup>38</sup> The image of the translator as eventful participant in the original saying and its subject matter, in contrast to the idea of a mere mental operation of copying and conversion, calls our attention to a third dimension of meaning available to the reader—a transformative experience beyond that of representational knowledge. Let us say that the translator must, for lack of a better word, *embody* the original saying, bringing the experience of what is said into its fullest dimensionality possible in a new saying for a new reader. If what we have in mind when we talk about a philosophical text being “difficult” to read or translate is the ambiguity of its ideas or lack of clarity in its expression, then for Gadamer the difficulty is quite the opposite. Despite any genuine grammatical issues that a text may have, the principle difficulty has not to do with obscurity but with the overabundance of truth that shines through in the experience of the saying at stake. To participate in that truth as in a dialogue and to allow the infinite space of a saying to be experienced—finding and renewing the full dimensionality of meaning is the challenge of translation and of the interpretive work of philosophy.

It is in this sense that the fragment of Novalis is difficult to translate. As its readers, we are faced with the task of gaining the space in which what the fragment says can be experienced. But this difficult task is also what provides us with the positive potential in our current context, for the fragment conveys the meaningful and decisive world-space of philosophy in the immediate aftermath of Kant’s *Critique*. In a single stroke, the fragment brings together the debates around freedom and necessity, self and world, subjectivity and objectivity, appearance and reality, and being and thought that define the post-Kantian era. Yet in addition to transmitting information about a period in the history of philosophy, the fragment presents us with an aporia with the power to transform the reader from observer into participant in the original problem that gave rise to its saying. Therefore, we want not merely to represent the saying to ourselves in the mental operation of a knowing subject grasping an object, but we want to *experience the meaning of the fragment*. That is, we are searching for what Novalis calls its “absolute meaning,” an interpretation that is both “means and end at the same time.” The fragment itself gives us insight into how it is to be read, i.e., not just the content but also the method of translation, for “every thing is *itself the means* whereby we can come to know it—to experience it or have an effect on it.” “In order to feel or come to know a thing completely,” Novalis contends, “I would have to *vivify it*—make it into my own.”<sup>39</sup> That knowledge entails appropriation is one of the central themes in Novalis’s thought, and leads him to a vision of philosophy as an essentially transformative (i.e., absolute) task. In this vision of philosophy lies Novalis’s criticism of Kant, Fichte, and the primacy of the subject-object schema. Therefore, in translating the first fragment of Novalis’s first philosophical project, and in accord with the view of philosophy and the absolute that Novalis himself elaborated, we are searching for an experience of that post-Kantian world which gives life to the fragment and in which the subject-object schema—that which we have said is determinative for the question of the difference between being and object—comes into being.

*Wir suchen überall das Unbedingte, und finden immer nur Dinge.* What immediately stands out in this sentence, even before its last syllable rolls off the tongue and well before we are able to make it an explicit object for translation, is the interplay between *Unbedingte* and *Dinge*. This interplay opens up the space in which we first come to inhabit the saying. It seems that everything is at stake in this space between the terms, and the question becomes, how do we translate *Unbedingte* and *Dinge*? What exactly is being sought, and what is being found? Further, what is the difference between these two objects of inquiry and how do we resolve their tension? Novalis has given us a restatement of the Kantian conflict of reason at the center of transcendental philosophy. We are reminded of the opening of the *Critique*—“*Our reason has the peculiar fate that...*”—and the fact that we are compelled to

search for the *Unbedingte* even though we only find *Dinge* is a problem to be solved through transcendental critique.

Thus, contrary to the English version we quoted initially, the most obvious translation for Novalis's *das Unbedingte* within the Kantian context is "the unconditioned." This decision about the unconditioned then sets us on a course toward *Dinge*, for the *Un-bedingte* is that thing which is itself not conditioned but serves as the original condition for conditioned things (*Bedingten*), and since the unconditioned is nowhere to be found—though we search for it—we can translate things in general (*Dinge*) as "conditioned things," "objects of experience," and "appearances." *We search everywhere for the unconditioned, but we only ever find conditioned things*. Beautiful in its succinct, epigrammatic form, yet nonetheless serious in its adherence to all the essential elements of Kantian critical philosophy, the fragment teaches us, in one quick blow, transcendental idealism. First, there is the foundational distinction between things in themselves and things as they appear to us, what we have called Kant's doctrine of the binary object. Second, the fragment speaks to the fact that in experience we only find things as they are conditioned, not as they are in themselves or unconditioned. Third, we nevertheless search for something beyond this experience, and we are left with the unavoidable conflict driven by the search for the unconditioned. Kant's solution to this conflict is the doctrine of the binary object and the transcendental-transcendent distinction in the unconditioned, and Novalis's fragment seems initially to support this solution. Human reason has two possible objects: those of empirical knowledge and those of transcendental ideas, those that we always find and those that we do not find but nevertheless search for. Whether we take the latter to be transcendent or transcendental does not matter, for whether the idea is posited in some object (even in the thing-in-itself) or in some subject (even in the transcendental subject) it is nonetheless *a determinate thing*. Thus, Novalis shows that whatever interpretation of the unconditioned one may have, the battle always comes out on the side of things. Novalis's statement would seem to support, then, something like an object-oriented ontology. We simply drop the search for any non-thingly (*un-be-dingte*) thing, for it is clear from experience that what always and everywhere exists are thingly (*be-dingte*) things, whether transcendent with respect to us or not, or things in general (*Dinge*). It is true that these things have a dual sense—as knowable by us and as hidden from us—but this does not change the fact that they are objects nonetheless, for senses of things are defined vis-a-vis the transcendental subject. Thus, Kantian transcendental philosophy and Harmanian object-oriented ontology converge in the predominance of things and the corresponding binary logic of the object. Both schools of thought, though supposedly diametrically opposed, could stake a claim to Novalis's analysis of Kantian philosophy, because both stand on one side of the dialectical schema inherent in the *Critique*.

Yet, Novalis's saying resists both claims, for the overwhelming persistence of the *wir suchen* to remain in play with the *finden* speaks against a one-sided solution in which nature itself is converted to *Dinge* as objects. So there must be another way to translate Novalis such that the *Unbedingte* is allowed to be what it is, unconditioned and unthingly.

In our focus on the *Unbedingte* and *Dinge* we inevitably arrive at a solution in terms of objects, for what are these but the two possible objects of the *wir suchen* and *finden*? However, we remember that the *Unbedingte itself* is precisely that which resists being reduced to an object because it resists being securely grounded and *determined* in favor of this or that type of thing. If, then, we are to consider the subject matter according to the nature of that matter itself, the original problem must be transformed: instead of presenting us with a choice between two potential objects of knowledge, Novalis's saying now becomes a statement of the nature and provenance of philosophical activity. Novalis is reinventing the Socratic paradox of inquiry, a version of which began this paper. The classic

form, given by Plato in *Meno*, says that one can never begin a search for something because “he cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.”<sup>40</sup> Novalis’s fragment suggests a reformulation of the paradox once the focus is turned away from the objects of knowledge to the *source* of the subject-object domain of knowledge. In our searching, he wants to say, we necessarily determine something as an object of inquiry, and thus the result of our search must always be a *determined* thing. In searching for the *Unbedingte*, however, we are searching for precisely that thing which is excluded from all determinate searching, which does not admit of being an object: *the undetermined*. So it would seem that we cannot search for the *Unbedingte*—and yet we are compelled to search for it.

Philosophy’s search for being as *unbedingte* runs aground in two ways, through two illusory acts: (1) the *mimetic* identification of *Unbedingte* with *Dinge*, in which the terms are brought together only after the *Unbedingte* has been represented as something separated from *Dinge*, i.e., as something conditional and non-absolute; (2) and the formal separation of the *Unbedingte* and *Dinge*, in which the absolute relation of the unconditioned to conditioned things is preserved in a dialectical concept but not carried out in practice. First, we may presuppose that the undetermined is a determinate object and that we would find it among the determinate results of inquiry. In this case, we collapse the difference between the *Unbedingte* and *Dinge* and resolve all being on the side of determinate things, objects of knowledge. This is the error of the presupposition of knowledge of the thing-in-itself to which Kant applies his critical solution.<sup>41</sup> But the critique can also be applied to Kant himself insofar as his solution to the conflict is to locate the undetermined in a certain type of determinate being, namely, the transcendental subject. Thus, second, we may recognize the insufficiency of the Kantian critique to do justice to the *Unbedingte*, i.e., to think it with respect to its unthingly character, and be under no illusion that it could be reduced to this or that determinate object nor even to objectivity in general. In this case, though we try to hold the difference open, we nevertheless find that the results of our search always contradict the original object of our search, and we get nowhere. Despite our intentions, we are still expecting the *Unbedingte* as some object, when what we search for is no object at all but that which is *unthingly* and *indeterminate*. With the first error, we forge ahead along a path whose first step has, unbeknownst to us, always set us out in the wrong direction; with the second error, we give up too soon, our frustrated search bringing us to some version of skepticism. Both options, along with our inability to think our way out of Novalis’s paradox of inquiry, stem from a more original failure *to act in accordance with the absolute nature of the unconditioned*.

Socrates’ solution to the paradox of inquiry is to concede the intractability of the problem as given by *Meno*, within the logic of knower and known, and then to expand the meaning of inquiry to include a domain of existence in which knower and known are no longer in conflict. He demonstrates that a problem whose logic has forced us into inaction is best “solved” through a transformation of the terms of discussion and our concepts of world and self that condition them. Similarly, Novalis will concede the dialectical conflict between the knowable object and the unknowable object under the terms of Kant’s transcendental method, but he will insist that these terms are themselves conditioned and thus, according to the law of the unconditioned, refer to a prior sphere of determination. This sphere in which things are determined and come into being through the unconditioned Novalis will call the absolute, or being. By resolving the paradox through reference back to a transformative, rather than antagonistic, domain of existence, Socrates and Novalis show us that the determination of the subject matter of philosophy as meanings of *things*, or as the logic of the binary object, is not absolute and thus not properly philosophical, for it presupposes a prior decision about being and nature in terms of subjects and objects. If what we search for is to be truly unconditioned, then the “object” of philosophy

can be no object at all but a mediative activity and absolute space of being prior to the original transcendental differentiation, and thus *the carrying out of the Kantian idea of the absolutely unconditioned entails the overturning of the subject-object schema into the absolute dimensionality of un-be-dingte being*. The development of the concept of the absolute in Novalis's thinking is, then, nothing less than a demonstration of the difference between being thought absolutely (in its greatest possibility) and being thought as subject or object (in its least possibility).

So how does this help us translate Novalis's fragment? Initially we quoted the passage in English, "we search everywhere for the absolute..." and we said that this translation gets ahead of itself by naming the *Unbedingte* the "absolute," causing us to miss the original Kantian meaning. So we decided to step back and take a lesson on translation from Gadamer and then from Novalis. We found that the translator seeks the full dimensionality and absolute meaning of the saying, a search that enacts a transformation of both the object of inquiry and the inquirer. Reading Novalis's fragment again, we found that the interplay between *Unbedingte* and *Dinge* transported us into the meaning space of Kant's *Critique* and the transcendental method that puts philosophy on a secure path by separating subject from object and the unconditioned from conditioned things. However, this only brought us back to Kant's conflict of reason, now understood as a crossroads at which the *Unbedingte* and *Dinge* of philosophical inquiry meet, and neither the operation of identification nor of division could get us past the impasse of these two terms. Following Socrates and Novalis, we had to let the paradox be transformed by the character of the *Unbedingte* as *absolute*. Have we now ended up where we started, having taken a long, circuitous path through Kant and Novalis toward that which was directly and plainly there before us with the initial English translation of the fragment? But our understanding of the "absolute" is now different than it was at the beginning and is in fact intimately tied to the step back and subsequent traversal of meanings that was allowed to transform *us and our method* along the way. To be clear: we can no longer even think the *Unbedingte* at all apart from the transformation through which we have arrived at its absolute meaning. In other words, we cannot think it within the terms of the subject-object conflict. The *Unbedingte*, as absolute goal of philosophical inquiry, lies on both sides of the divide between the unconditioned and conditioned things and between the search and its results, and thus it is not representable in terms of a transcendent object or a transcendental subject.

Novalis's saying said exactly this all along, though we had to step back from a hasty translation and traverse the full dimensionality of its meaning. Where do we find the absolute? There it is, in the saying. Where in the saying? In the unconditioned, of course. But we do not find the unconditioned anywhere, since we only ever find conditioned things. The unconditioned is in the *wir suchen*, or, as Kant says, in the task of searching for it. And so the absolute is not found in the saying as a free-floating concept to be grasped by representation between subjects, nor as the object of a verb. It is found in the saying of the saying, insofar as the saying of a saying must, following Novalis and Gadamer, accord with the nature of that which is said. Thus, if in philosophy our object is the absolute *Unbedingte*, it is found in the absolute operation of the saying of what needs to be said. If we were to freeze the operation at any moment, the *Unbedingte* would break apart into the "unconditioned" and "things," subjects and objects, producing the illusion of a non-absolute result, of two *Dinge* that must be brought together or divided according to some schema. Such a suspended philosophical moment makes a knowledge of objects possible and indeed is the source of the paradox of knowledge, but it does not do justice to the *absolutely* unconditioned, which is not one side but the whole, not subjects or objects but their provenance. Thus, Novalis's fragment does not present a choice between one side or the other but demonstrates the absolute nature of the subject matter of philosophy in the irreducible interplay of philosophical activity. The absolute is there in the interplay between the "unconditioned"

and “things.” It is itself not a thing, not an appearance nor even a thing in itself, not an object of knowledge but the search, not a first principle on which to found a philosophy but the nature of human activity insofar as we seek nature itself. The absolute is the demand of the unconditioned to not rest in the intractable conflict between knower and known nor in the domain of nature determined as subject and object, but to go all the way to the widest expanse of existence, being.

Therefore, if the *Unbedingte* is what we search for in philosophical inquiry, then the “object” of philosophy is not some object of knowledge; rather, it must be the transformation that happens between the searcher (subject) and the searched for (object), and between the unconditioned (the goal) and conditioned things (the results) in the interplay of the search. The result of this interplay, being neither a subject nor an object but “the absolute center of these divided worlds,” their “absolute copula,” is, says Novalis, “consciousness of the laws of existence” (or being), and “through the discovery of this consciousness the great puzzle is largely solved.” That is, instead of a decision always between types of objects, what is at stake in the search for the unconditioned is a transformation of the “object” of knowledge in accord with the nature of the very activity of philosophical inquiry, i.e., a transition from the unconditioned as some object, whether in itself or conditioned, as in transcendental philosophy and object-oriented ontology, to the absolute meaning of the unconditioned according to the full dimensionality of existence in general. The search for the *Unbedingte* entails, or in fact is, the philosophical transformation of human existence, or, life according to philosophy and philosophy according to life.<sup>42</sup> It is for this reason that, in his critique of Fichte, Novalis says that the absolute nature of the unconditioned means that it cannot be obtained positively as an object or first principle of knowledge but only negatively through the search for it.<sup>43</sup> Like food is to life, he will say later, a philosophical problem is properly solved “when it is destroyed as such,” for the goal of philosophy is not a solution but an “absolute operation”: the activity aroused by the search itself.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, the paradox of inquiry is “solved” through the transformation of the aim of philosophy from some object of possible knowledge to the *Unbedingte as such*, now understood as the pre-transcendental “consciousness” of the transformative nature of existence in general, or being. The conflict of reason with itself—what we have called, following Kant, the peculiar fate of human nature—is “solved” through the consciousness of transformative action as the goal of our inquiry, and according to the absolute nature of the *Unbedingte* the proper object of philosophy is neither a subject (not even the transcendental subject) nor an object (not even the thing in-itself), but the overturning of the subject-object schema into the indeterminacy of the existence out of which it first comes into being.

Only now can we properly translate Novalis’s saying as: *We seek everywhere the absolute and only ever find things*. The *und* is not a “but,” and the fragment does not say, “we search everywhere for the absolute, but, unfortunately, we only find things.” The fragment is a positive statement of an existential fact. Certainly there is a difference between the *Unbedingte* and *Dinge*, and this is indeed the difference between being and object that our inquiry seeks. But while the *nur* makes it clear that the *Unbedingte* cannot be a thing among things but the un-thingly, the conjunction *und* resists any attempt to treat the difference as an opposition between two terms. Therefore, we must conclude that *the difference does not consist in a separation but in an absolute, constant conjunction*, a pre-transcendental relation that precedes and thus determines the search for the unconditioned. The fragment thus points us to the “laws of existence,” or being, from and through which things as such come to be. Because in philosophical inquiry we find proof of that which is neither a subject nor an object but their provenance, to think being absolutely necessarily brings about what Kant could not achieve from his standpoint within the *Critique*: an alternative to the original transcendental schematization of being.

## V. Being and Mere Being

In our search for the difference between being and object, we followed the trail of Kant's claim that the *Unbedingte*, as both source and goal of philosophical activity, must be unconditioned and absolute. We found that the interpretation of the unconditioned offered by transcendental philosophy was insufficient because, whether looked at from the transcendental or transcendent side, it remained a thing, a term within the subject-object determination of nature. Yet Kant did offer a clue to the indeterminate nature of being by insisting that the unconditioned must be absolute, in the greatest possible sense. Novalis picked up on this clue and made the absolute the key to resolving the tension within reason and between self and world and subject and object that was inherent in Kant's *Critique*. For Novalis, the trail of the unconditioned in transcendental philosophy leads him to think the absolute "object" of philosophy as existence in general, or being, out of which the concepts of subject and object are later derived. Consequently, our inquiry has found a way through the idle worldview of dialectical objects and found reason to keep on the search for being insofar as it is not object.

However, our mere arrival at a concept of being does not secure the goal of our inquiry, for there is still a danger that "being" would be determined as itself an object, in our case the result at the end of a process or the form of a relation between concepts, and thus the distinction between being and object would still be consumed by the very transcendental system that it was supposed to overcome. Our problem here—which, the reader will notice, is a reiteration of the dispute with the object-oriented worldview that launched this inquiry—is similar to that experienced by Novalis, who, in light of the tendency of Fichte's "absolute I" to revert into itself, was challenged to give an account of being beyond the all-consuming rhetorical force of the two dimensions of a transcendental system. A brief look at this account will serve to clarify what we do and do not mean by "being" and to demonstrate the task of this paper to present the difference of being beyond the object-oriented worldview and the subject-object schema.

The key to understanding being as absolute and the relation of both to a transformation of Kantian transcendental philosophy is to think the distinction between formal or mere being and being (as such), or to put it differently, between "being" and *being*. This, according to Dalia Nassar, is the distinction that Novalis makes. Nassar argues that in his critical appropriation of Fichte, Novalis finds it necessary to distinguish between two senses of being, and that this distinction is determinative for the idea of the absolute for which he is known and through which he attempts to go beyond the transcendental systems of Kant and Fichte. The crucial distinction is between being (*Seyn*) and what Novalis calls "mere being" (*Nur Seyn*). "Mere being" is a concept of being to which nothing real adheres, no distinction or content. It is being beyond all consciousness and presentation, a "pro forma" copula expressing logical identity. It expresses "a handful of darkness." But being, as the aim and concern of philosophy, must include difference and determination, for philosophy always begins with some original determination of being through which being is presented, expressed, or differentiated.<sup>45</sup> Though "mere being" would appear to be the most basic expression of ultimate reality, that which could serve as the first principle of an ontology, says Nassar of Novalis's view, "in fact it is not *real*—it has no ontological reality. Mere being is not being—it is not what is in the world, it is not that which constitutes and underlies reality. There *is* no mere being, or, 'nothing in the world is merely'."<sup>46</sup> Against this concept of "mere being," Novalis will insist that because existence in general cannot reduce to its formal "in-itself" principle, being as the concern of philosophy cannot be such a formal principle. Thus, as Nassar explains, being for Novalis is not "mere," "not something that is beyond all differentiation

and determination.” If it is to be absolute and not merely “mere,” being must not be opposed to determinate things, nor outside any relation to beings and consciousness, but rather it must be the “absolute relation.”<sup>47</sup>

Novalis uses the image of mediation or oscillation (*das Schweben*) to describe the nature of being as reality instead of as mere object:

All being, being in general, is nothing but free-being—oscillation between extremes, which are necessarily to be united and separated. Out of this light-point of oscillation streams all reality—in it everything is contained—object and subject come into being through it, not it through them.<sup>48</sup>

In this way, Novalis is proposing an “object” for philosophy quite distinct from the binary object of Kant and Harman: *being*, neither an aspect of the transcendental subject nor a thing-in-itself beyond the subject, but *the domain of an absolute relation between subject and object, their provenance and determination*. As such, it is not a different type of thing over and against objects and subjects, but it is the overturning of the subject-object schema into the sphere of their mediation and source, the full (absolute) dimensionality of existence. The consequences of this conception of being for philosophy are clear: philosophy can no longer be conceived as striving after the unconditioned as first principle or secure foundation, for insofar as its concern is being, and insofar as being is thought absolutely, the aim of philosophy is a “groundless ground.” The goal of philosophy is “to grasp being as reality... the goal of philosophy is life.” Thus, this difference between being and mere being leads Novalis to “a different way of doing philosophy.”<sup>49</sup>

That his account of being as absolute leads Novalis to a different idea of philosophical practice accords with the guiding thesis of our inquiry. First, the search for the difference between being and object, as for the difference between being and mere being, necessitates a transformation of the philosopher and the way of doing philosophy. Consequently, what is at stake in these distinct “objects” of philosophy are more than topics of discourse; rather, they involve differing purposes for the philosopher, plans for philosophy, and schematizations of existence in general. Second, Novalis’s critique of mere being and his thesis of an absolute sphere of nature in which the Kantian conflicts of reason are resolved suggest a solution to the challenge of the identity of being and object that we face. The absolute refers us beyond the epistemological conflict of objects and subjects and points to the domain in which such transcendental differentiations come into being. Philosophical activity, insofar as it searches for the absolute *Unbedingte*, becomes the solution to all versions of the paradox of inquiry because its goal is decidedly not some object but being in general, by which we mean being not as a form or logical operation but in its full dimensionality. Through the philosophical labor of our inquiry, we demonstrate that dimensionality of being which cannot reduce to the dialectical discourse of objects, and in this way we put object-oriented ontology to rest. Finally, then, the difference between being and object is the difference between the absolute and either side of transcendental experience (the object “in itself” and the object “for us”). Since in aiming to overturn the reduction of being to object we are necessarily displacing the philosopher as subject, this difference puts to us a choice about philosophical practice: on the one hand, in our inquiry, the “object” of philosophy is being and thus transformative, while on the other, in a science of being determined as object, it is mere being and thus the object “in itself” to which the philosopher, as subject, is contradictorily indifferent. Our search for the difference between being and object has led us past their identity to the absolute *Unbedingte* and the choice that defines philosophy.

## VI. Philosophy and Object-Oriented Ontology

Through a “speculative metaphysics” that takes being as mere being and treats all things, irrespective of their nature, as objects against a subject, object-oriented ontology is supposed to provide an alternative to the Kantian revolution which prioritizes human beings over things-in-themselves.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Harman claims that a turn to objects also solves the problem of the “philosophy of access,” a contemporary restatement of the paradox that, since Kant’s transcendental turn, has trapped philosophy in a self-reflexive circle of thought. The basic version of the “philosophy of access” says that “we cannot think something without thinking it,” and that all questions about reality refer back to the human subject and its foundational relation to world, and thus the problem is the same as that which Quentin Meillassoux calls “correlationism.”<sup>51</sup> But notice that for these thinkers of “speculative realism” the problem is not that there is a gap between us and the world or between subject and object, but that the “subjective” term in the relation is given priority in all philosophical questions. So even if he has brought our attention to a pernicious one-sidedness of Kantianism that constrains philosophy, Harman’s solution demonstrates a deep misunderstanding of what is problematic in the paradox, for because its central principle is “to put object-object relations on exactly the same footing as subject-object relations” and thus “reverse Kant’s Copernican Revolution,”<sup>52</sup> object-oriented ontology proposes to merely shift our focus to the “objective” side *within the same dialectical schema that originally creates the problem*. Harman says that the solution to the problem of “access” is to separate what we know and what we don’t know about the object of thought, giving us “tool-being” and the Kantian doctrine of binary objects. Socrates’ solution to the same problem, in contrast, is to dissolve the power of the dialectic between knower and known by referring us back, not to one of the terms in the relation, but to a more absolute domain of being, beyond human being as we know it.<sup>53</sup> Harman’s solution requires an indifferent philosopher that labors endlessly over the transcendental differentiation and the dual meaning of “object” before being able to begin any search, while Socrates says that it is precisely such a “debater’s argument” that produces an idle philosopher and a frustrated search. The point for Socrates is that a consciousness of our pre-epistemological familiarity with being and thus of our transformative relation to the “object” of philosophy makes us “energetic and keen on the search” and, for that, better philosophers.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, he is right to say that “the solution offered by Socrates remains the true solution,”<sup>55</sup> but, because the object of his philosophy is mere being, or object, Harman remains within the transcendental-transcendent dialectic of the epistemological conflict as given by Kant, and he completely misunderstands the nature of that solution.

We have found that the true solution to the paradox of inquiry as well as the only alternative to Kantian transcendental philosophy is to be found in the carrying out of the absolute meaning of Kant’s *Unbedingte*, which leads us in each case to that with which we are most familiar, being, not to objects. Now the object-oriented ontologist would likely protest our solution as follows: but if we turn away from objects, are we not abandoning the possibility of the existence of entities independent of the philosopher? By denying priority to the very concept (“object”) through which we divide the world into transcendent and transcendental realms, so the argument goes, we are left with no resources for talking about things themselves apart from the philosopher’s pretensions, and our philosophy can never rise above self-interested half-truths. In other words, are we aligning ourselves with the humanisms, pragmatisms, and anti-realisms at which the critical force of Harman’s speculative metaphysics is aimed?<sup>56</sup> And we would answer: on the contrary, in making being the goal of our philosophy we are stepping back from the transcendental differentiation of nature into subject and object which abandons

beings to the schemes of the transcendental philosopher. If this turn brings us away from objects, it is because it orients us toward beings as they themselves are and the way in which nature itself is, beyond the machinations of both objects and subjects. This is not the self-referential activity of the absolute I of idealism, for we are concerned more than object-oriented ontology with the object of our search and the transformative thesis it entails. Of this thesis we can say what Nassar says of Novalis's account of nature, that "this transformation, however, does not imply—as it does in Kant—a subjectification of knowledge. Rather, it aims to disclose the principles that underlie and inhere in nature itself."<sup>57</sup> Said differently, and anticipating a second objection from Harman, the transformational turn which our inquiry calls for is not the pragmatic conversion of beings from *Ereignis* to *Vorgang* of which Harman, perhaps rightly, accuses Dreyfus;<sup>58</sup> but nor is it a turn away from Dasein to Harman's province of indifference. Instead, the turn to the difference between being and object is the exact movement that Harman pretends but fails to practice, insofar as the goal of his ontology is a formal mechanism of objects (*Vorgang*) rather than the transformative event of being (*Ereignis*). Thus, if it is true, as Harman says, that the full meaning of being only appears when "we take our bearings" from the nature of things themselves,<sup>59</sup> then it follows that in turning to being as *Ereignis* we are not "subjects" searching for an "object"—terms that have power only where the transcendental differentiation is the foundation of a discursive edifice—but beings of being. It is of this meaning of "the turn" that Heidegger speaks in what is the clearest statement of the consistent subject matter of his thought:

The *true* turn, namely, that which belongs to *Ereignis*:  
the transition from the schematization of being into the provenance of schematization  
as harbinger of the transformative event of being.<sup>60</sup>

Both our transformative thesis and *die Kehre als Ereignis* are concerned with that which is absolute in being, rather than with mere being or *being as law*. Kant and Harman each discover such a law, but they cannot carry out their respective discoveries insofar as each adheres to a one-sided stance within the subject-object schematization of being.

Therefore, on the one hand, our thesis follows Harman in rejecting "deflationary realism" and both the strong and weak "philosophy of access"—the assertion that nothing exists outside the knowing subject and the weaker claim that any attempt to think something outside the knowing subject turns it into an object and nihilates it—as well as the dialectical dilemma they produce.<sup>61</sup> Both assertions presuppose a one-sided determination of being that renders being itself meaningless. On the other hand, parting ways with Harman, and following Kant's insight that a dialectical conflict is resolved not through one side but through the unconditioned of the terms, we further find the determination of being as mere being (object-oriented ontology) just as meaningless and impossible as the paradox of inquiry. Harman's object, product of his conversion of *der Sinn von Sein* into "tool-being," falls into the same dialectical scheming about being as does the reduction of being to thought by the "philosophy of access." So whereas Harman's alternative to Kant is a counter-revolution, a turn to those transcendent objects of the transcendental domain (the supposedly neglected things-in-themselves), our search for the difference of being leads to a transformation: being is not object just as we are not subjects. Thus, our guiding thesis since the introduction has been that the search for the difference between being and object entails an experience beyond the subject-object domain. This is a possibility that Kant himself did not consider but which results from the application of the task of the *Unbedingte* to the shared presupposition of both object-oriented ontology and transcendental philosophy: that dialectical domain in which philosophy as science attempts to go out ahead of being to secure its results in terms of

objects and subjects.

We saw that through a search for the absolute meaning of the unconditioned in Novalis's saying, the difference between being and object took on a new light. The difference is no longer *transcendental*, an idea that regulates the transcendental subject and its objects, nor *transcendent*, an elusive thing in itself cut off from the subject, but the difference is now thought as the third dimension through which the terms in the dialectical conflict can come into being at all. So to the possibilities for resolving the conflict of reason and the peculiar fate of human nature as given by Kant—the transcendental and transcendent interpretations of the *Unbedingte*—we now add a third, which we have called the *transformative*. It is necessary to add this third category because, as we noted in our discussion of Kant, the transcendent can be reduced to the transcendental, even though we would intend it as *really transcendent*, i.e., *absolute*. This reduction is the self-assigned fate of object-oriented ontology, for it attempts to go beyond Kant's transcendental philosophy precisely through a reversal of the dialectic between subject and object. As happens in such reversals, Harman's orientation toward objects intends to do justice to the supposedly neglected side (things-in-themselves), while what it achieves is a deeper entrenchment in the original transcendental differentiation which reduces nature to subjects and objects for the purpose of charting a secure course for a logic of being as object. Because he wants to overcome the ontological correlation between being and human being, and because he sees no third option that would resolve the conflict of human reason *within being itself*, Harman rejects a relational sense of being (being as absolute) for a substantial-formal sense (being as object).<sup>62</sup> This ensures that every sentence of *Tool-Being*, despite its contributions toward overcoming certain subjectivist tendencies in Heidegger scholarship, is locked in the very type of metaphysical dual that the *Seinsfrage* was from the start aimed at displacing—and, therefore, Harman misunderstands the key to *Sein selbst* in Heidegger's thought: ontological difference.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, our discovery of a third sense of Kant's unconditioned, implying as it does a third dimension of being, entails a dimension of ontological difference beyond Harman's two-axis concept. Beyond the mechanical dualisms of "tool-being" and the difference between nothing and something at all (non-being and mere being) of object-oriented ontology, we have found in Kant's distinction between "the least of an object" and "the greatest possibility of a thing" a difference between mere being and absolute being. This final "ontological difference" is nothing other than the difference between being and object.

Failing to consider this third dimension beyond the transcendental-transcendent distinction, beyond subjects and objects, and beyond the meaning of being as mere being, object-oriented ontology neglects the possibility of a transformative relation between the philosopher and the object of philosophy, and offers a vision of philosophy which is no *philosophy* at all, for the proper response to Harman's object is not *love* but *indifference*. The love of the absolute object of philosophy, being, can only exist in a practice that allows itself to be transformed by the absolute nature of that object. Without a relation to its object, there is no possibility of transformation, and without the possibility of transformation there is no love and thus no philosophy. From the perspective of the object of object-oriented ontology, the existence of the philosopher makes no difference at all. Though this proposition of the "realism" (thing-in-itself-ness) of objects may be true, it can be of only *juridical interest*, because it is a statement about mere being that requires only formal acknowledgement and nothing more. What the proposition of indifference proposes is that there is no practice, no philosophical activity, consequent to the concept of its object of philosophy. Aiming toward such an object that never reaches a practice is, to paraphrase Kant, the same as missing the point of philosophy altogether, and thus the concept deserves the charge that it is a *mere idea* (*ist nur eine Idee*).<sup>64</sup> To posit the indifference of objects as the central doctrine of an ontology implies the abandonment of philosophy, since it

implies that the philosopher could just as well exist as not exist, could just as well hate as love, tear down as build up, do injustice as do justice, remain idle as be keen on the search for the unconditioned.

In contrast, the absolute object of philosophy entails the difference, and the point of philosophy is not an object *per se* but a transformation of ourselves and the world as we know them. Thus, the difference between being and object as goal of philosophy is a *practical* idea, by which we do not mean that it is “useful” in the ordinary sense, that it is advantageous like a technique or of economic value like a commodity. It is not first subjectively practical like a tool nor objectively like the bit of information technology, but it is truly *fruitful*. The difference has the peculiar character of “actually bringing about what is contained in its concept.”<sup>65</sup> So while it is true, as Kant says of the transcendental idea, that no *object* is adequate to the concept of being (insofar as it is not an object), to grasp its conceptual formation is to have already gone beyond the limits of transcendental experience, which in turn is a demonstration, within a concrete experience, of the existence of the difference in nature. In that sense the difference is an absolute idea, bringing together aspects of transcendental and practical ideas of Kant. So while the object is defined by its indifference to all human practice, being is essentially related to a practice. The goal of our inquiry is a philosophical practice—not a theory *about* nor an internal mechanism *of* an object, but a love between *sophia* and *phronesis*, a mutual transformation of philosopher and “object” of philosophy in the search for the *Unbedingte*.

In this way, the claim that began this inquiry—that the presentation of the difference between being and object entails a transformative thesis—bears fruit. As a task for philosophy, the difference is that idea of which Novalis says that it “cannot be grasped in a proposition” but only in a “living demonstration,” cannot be described at all but only “represented in a practice,” and therefore “the idea must contain the complete law of its own dissolution.”<sup>66</sup> The difference prescribes the law that being is not object. But being, insofar as it is not object, cannot be comprehended as a law nor described in terms of subjects and objects. The law of being prescribes the dissolution of being as law. Thus being as the “object” of philosophy is found only in the practice which entails the difference—the carrying out of being entails the overturning of mere being. Therefore, if the law of being, or being as object, is called ontology, what then do we call the carrying out of being, or the overturning of philosophy as ontology? We have called it the difference between being and object, but Novalis often calls it *love*: the absolute love of an absolute object, it is the idea of philosophy.<sup>67</sup> In this transformative practice of the law of being—in the *Unbedingte* of all *Dinge*, where subjects and objects, the antimony of human reason, and the paradox of inquiry are resolved—exists the “object” of philosophy.

## VII. Conclusion: The “Object” of Philosophy

We began this paper with a thought experiment that threatened to thwart our search for the difference between being and object. We decided to forge ahead anyway with the hope that the search would reveal a solution to the conflict. What has the search revealed? What can we now say about the “object” of our inquiry? We have found that *we can no longer even think the difference between being and object apart from our search for it and the traversal of the world of things and meanings that brought us to our current station*. This is not a claim about an object, whether “in itself” or “for us,” nor about the properties, capacities, and limits of subjects. It is a statement about the nature of philosophical activity and the decision about being that it portends. If philosophy always seeks the *Unbedingte*, then the “object” of philosophical inquiry must become the means by which one searches for it. But if the “object” of philosophy is the difference between being and object, then it can only be sought in the domain of the coming into being of the differentiation of subject and object. To thus seek the

provenance of the subject-object schema, philosophy is compelled to traverse the absolute dimensionality of being. To begin such a search, one must release the conflict of reason and the paradox of duplicitous objects, and allow one and one's search to be transformed by the *Unbedingte* of all being. Philosophy, insofar as its "object" is being, is this activity of absolute transformation.

The difference between being and object contains a difference in the nature and concern of philosophy. In the first introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1797, Fichte declares a plan for philosophy in the wake of Kant. He defines philosophy as the task of explaining experience through abstracting from experience to its ground, and he distinguishes two possible starting points resulting from this original philosophical act, namely, the "thing in itself" and the "intellect in itself."<sup>68</sup> The "object of philosophy" is thus not experience but its "explanatory ground," which must be one of two opposing terms that the philosopher brings into existence with the founding act of abstraction. There is no other possibility, he says, if we are to proceed "consistently" according to the concept of philosophy as the turn from experience to an "in itself" principle, and the *Wissenschaftslehre* issues a challenge to the post-Kantian world to find any different foundation and goal for philosophy, whether in experience or by abstracting from it, that does not reduce to one of the two given principles, thing and intellect. Anyone who would dispute the claim that idealism and dogmatism are the only possible systems for philosophy "must prove that consciousness of experience contains some additional component beyond the two already mentioned."<sup>69</sup> For the reader that has discovered Kant's *Unbedingte*, thought the absolute with Novalis, and experienced the transformative meaning of the difference between being and object, let the preceding investigation stand as such a proof.

As they distill transcendental critique into its most primitive decision, Fichte's two paths are just the two possible worldviews (subject-oriented and object-oriented philosophy) offered by the original transcendental differentiation, and Fichte unwittingly makes explicit what we have identified as the founding act of the Kantian revolution: the determination of being that sets philosophy on a secure course by guaranteeing its results in terms of certain principles of reason, namely, subjects and objects. However, neither Kant nor Fichte can see this their own original transcendental plan, for reasons that the *Wissenschaftslehre* makes clear. Because reason is "absolutely self-sufficient" and nothing exists outside of reason, insofar as it is the ground of philosophy, then the type of being that corresponds to this absolute "in itself" principle must be everywhere presupposed and cannot be called into question.<sup>70</sup> That unassailable and foundational being at stake in philosophy as "science of knowledge" is the rational subject. Consequently, the search for the unconditioned in transcendental idealism, despite the apparent dialectical conflict between transcendental and transcendent meanings, never gets past the subjectivity of the subject, and much less does it question the differentiation of being into subjects and objects at all. The "object of philosophy" is, then, the "laws of the intellect" or the "self-reverting acting" of the "I," the only principle that can satisfy the search for the unconditioned of experience *given the bounds prescribed by that same "original act of the subject."*<sup>71</sup>

Yet in a second, strikingly distinct description of philosophy, reminding us more of Socrates' response to Meno than of a transcendental system, Fichte says that every philosophy is a "standpoint," and every "standpoint" chooses a "first principle," and every "first principle" entails a decision about the nature and ultimate concern of the human species. Then he declares that "the philosophy one chooses thus depends upon the kind of person one is. For a philosophical system is not a lifeless household item one can put aside or pick up as one wishes; instead, it is animated by the very soul of the person who adopts it."<sup>72</sup> Here Fichte goes beyond the language of "thing" and "intellect" and thus says more than he knows. For although Fichte's philosopher is a *Vernunftwesen* whose ultimate concern is to affirm itself in argumentation, and his first principle is thus *der Satz des Grundes* and the "laws of

the intellect,” all leading to the philosophical standpoint of idealism<sup>73</sup>—he also brings our attention to the contingency of this ground of philosophy. While, on the one hand, philosophy is animated by the very being of the philosopher—*what being?*—on the other hand, the philosopher is animated by the search for the unconditioned, which is in turn animated by the *absolute* “object” of philosophy. Now we glimpse philosophy conditioned by something outside of both the transcendental subject and the act of abstraction that supposedly founds philosophy and grounds experience—i.e., we understand this ideal act to also be a “standpoint” to which there corresponds a decision about being and thus a more absolute ground.

Fichte’s objection would be that having moved outside the realm of the transcendental choice and the law of reason, we have rejected the essence of the human as philosopher and abandoned philosophy itself. But such a response only goes to show the extent to which Fichte takes for granted precisely that which in philosophy must be demonstrated in practice: the absolute ground of existence. At the moment when the *Wissenschaftslehre* (and by implication the *Kritik*) is supposed to reach its clearest exposition and most irrefutable ground, the truly foundational act of all “science of knowledge” is hiding in plain sight: if the presupposition of transcendental idealism is that “all consciousness,” by which is meant *being as knowledge*, “is based upon and conditioned by self-consciousness,” by which is meant *absolute subjectivity*, then it is our discovery that this is only possible through the proto-philosophical act in which being is divided into a dialectical conflict between “the thinking subject” and “the object of thought.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, the *Wissenschaftslehre* raises the question—surreptitiously, and precisely to the extent that Fichte himself does not raise it but presumes it to be definitively solved in the standpoint of the human species as *Vernunftwesen*—as to whether the goal of philosophy is not a mere principle of reason but, as Novalis claims, an “absolute postulate” or “a connection with the whole,” out of which comes “all reality” and through which subject and object, intellect and thing, can first be posited at all.<sup>75</sup> Just as Fichte is permitted—according to “the supreme law of reason,” which is only the subjective side of the Kantian philosophical task to seek the absolutely unconditioned—to pose the question of the ground of experience (or “being for us”), so we are compelled, *according to that same Kantian task*, to widen our scope for the “object of philosophy” beyond both “being for us” and being as object.<sup>76</sup> By posing the question of the difference between being and object, and having identified the original transcendental differentiation of nature into subject and object that conditions Kantian philosophy, we have demonstrated the existence of a principle that grounds existence beyond Fichte’s two paths and the transcendental-transcendent dialectic and, therefore, carried out a philosophical practice in the spirit of the absolute meaning of the *Unbedingte*. Philosophy no longer begins with abstraction to subjects and objects, but rather it begins with a truly absolute principle, namely, being insofar as it is not object—a principle which does not first come into being through philosophical argumentation but is realized in our traversal of the transformative synchrony between subject and object, philosopher and “object of philosophy.”

Therefore, we can affirm with Fichte that the philosophy one chooses depends on “the kind of person one is,” but it is equally true that *the kind of person one is depends on the Unbedingte of their philosophy*. The “object” of philosophical inquiry depends on the origin and manner of the search; likewise, the search is animated by the “object.” This incontrovertible dual of truths, this antimony, only *appears* to destine philosophy to an irresolvable conflict, for the illusion of a strange fate of reason pressing down upon us, forcing us into idle conflict, is dispelled through the absolute meaning of the unconditioned, and the challenge to philosophy of the object-oriented worldview, like Meno’s challenge to Socrates, immediately dissolves in the practice of the law of being. Thus we apply Kant’s

“critical decision” in The Antimony of Pure Reason back onto the foundation of the *Critique* itself, onto Fichte’s one-sided absolute, and onto that “transcendental illusion” in the shadow of which object-oriented philosophy quarrels with Kant: *the subject-object antimony of being*. “For when we allow the arguments of reason to oppose one another with perfect freedom, something valuable and useful for the correction of our judgments will always result, though it may not always be what we were searching for.”<sup>77</sup> When we direct the Kantian plan at its own original transcendental antimony, something unexpected happens: the result is not a regulative principle, transcendental idea, maxim of reason nor any other power or principle of the subject, but an entirely different interest and mode of thought appears, namely, a domain of inquiry whose “object” defies the division of nature into subjects and objects. But like sketching a three-dimensional terrain onto a two-dimensional plane, we come to an awareness of this domain through the swing back and forth across the forms of schematization of being, which is to say, through the trans-formational activity of philosophy. The conflicting determinations of being point to the *Unbedingte* of all philosophical practice: the absolute copula of beings beyond the philosopher’s distinctions. Accordingly, in our inquiry into the difference we realize a transformative law: being is not object just as we are not subjects. In this the goal of philosophy, nature itself prevails in both thought and deed, and beings themselves—and not just the “rational creature”—fulfill the absolute law (i.e., the difference) of being.

We can recapitulate the course of our investigation with a renewed clarification of the difference between our thesis and the claim that founds transcendental philosophy. Ours is not the claim that the “object” of philosophy must refer back to an aspect of the human subject and its activity, but nor is our “object” some “thing” over and against the philosopher and philosophy, for the difference between being and object is neither transcendental nor transcendent—it cannot be consumed by either side of the subject-object antinomy. We are not concerned with whether and the extent to which we can know things merely “in themselves.” That question and its results we happily surrender to rigorous Kantians like Harman who, having stopped at the letter of the law, would “bring down what is high instead of raising up what is low” and thus convert beings into *Formularwesen*.<sup>78</sup> Kant set for philosophy a secure course according to the original transcendental differentiation of nature, and Harman, despite his counter-revolution, does not veer from that plan but only fills out the schematic even further. But even within the plan, in the heart of the *Critique*, Kant also suggests a higher possibility of being and left to philosophy the idea of a more absolute task. Novalis identified this task as the activity of philosophy *par excellence* and proposed a transformative sphere in which the search for the unconditioned and the things themselves coexist, consequently freeing the absolute from both the absolute subjectivity of Fichte and, as if anticipating object-oriented ontology, the reduction of being to mere being. Novalis thus answers the challenge of the *Wissenschaftslehre* by removing its basic presupposition: instead of searching for laws that explain consciousness, philosophy seeks a transformative consciousness of the laws of existence. But it is not enough that we know such laws, since, as being itself, they implicate ourselves and everything that could be construed as subjects and objects in their full dimensionality. Thus, the task of this paper, that of the philosopher’s *Unbedingte*, compels us beyond the letter of the law of being to its spirit, for the law of the difference is not grasped except through the *anima* that achieves the difference. The result of this task is not merely *discursive*, not a knowledge of ourselves as subjects or beings as objects, but an experience of the absolute dimension of being which is consequent to the idea of the difference between being and object. Both our “object” and we ourselves have been transformed in the course of the inquiry, and we can no longer imagine a genuinely *philosophical practice* that disavows this transformative dimension in order to remain in the idle domain of dialectical objects and their province of indifference.

Just as the paradox of inquiry in its various forms results from a failure to act in accordance with the nature of philosophy's "object," so the turn to objects and objectivity in the information-technological age, far from achieving an alternative to the primacy of subjectivity, is a direct result of the failure to envision the philosopher, and the human being, as anything other than a subject. The great irony of object-oriented thinking, as well as of new "realisms," is that in their struggle against Kant the results of the *Kritik* are shifted onto beings as objects, the original transcendental differentiation of nature is further covered over and entrenched, and the image of the human as *Vernunftwesen* is thus reproduced in a more insidious form. And this happens not because we are destined to the cruel fate of "correlationism," not because the philosopher is unable to think beings outside the circle of the subject's thought, but because one does not escape a circular path by reversing directions.

If the subjectification of being in the wake of Kant's transcendental revolution produced a universal philosophical disregard for the things themselves apart from the human subject, what would its reversal produce? What does an object-oriented ontology always "pass up" in its sweeping transcendental gesture toward being as object? *Beings insofar as they are not objects*. Having presented our inquiry and participated in the achievement of its thesis, it is evident that a philosophy oriented toward objects and their mere being proposes nothing less than the annihilation of beings themselves in their highest possibility, and because such a loss would be of great concern to philosophy, the philosopher can claim no indifference to the difference between being and object.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fichte, J. G. *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*. Trans. Daniel Breazeale. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994.
- Versuch einer neuen Darstellung der Wissenschaftslehre*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1984.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Trans. David E. Linge. Berkeley, University of California Press: 1976.
- Harman, Graham. *The Quadruple Object*. Winchester: Zero Books, 2011.
- Tool-Being*. Chicago: Open Court, 2002.
- Heidegger, Martin. "The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldview," in *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*. Trans. Ted Sadler. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Zum Ereignis-Denken, Gesamtausgabe*, Band 73.2. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2013.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Marcus Weigelt. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Kants gesammelten Schriften, Akademie Textausgabe*, Band III: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Nassar, Dalia. *The Romantic Absolute*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2014.
- Novalis. *Fichte Studies*. Trans. Jane Kneller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Notes for a Romantic Encyclopaedia*. Trans. David W. Wood. Albany: State University of New York, 2007.
- Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar. Albany: State University of New York, 1997.
- Werke*. Fünfte Auflage. München: C. H. Beck, 2013.
- Plato. *Meno*, in *Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> CPR, 6; Ax. References to Kant cite the English translation (if used) followed by A and B edition pagination.
- <sup>2</sup> *Philosophical Writings*, 102; *Werke*, 407. References to Novalis cite the English translation (if used) followed by German *Werke* page numbers.
- <sup>3</sup> Harman, *Tool-Being*, 28-29.
- <sup>4</sup> This argument that transcendence in Heidegger means a nihilation and abandonment of beings other than human Dasein is made in the critical section 9 of *Tool-Being*.
- <sup>5</sup> *Tool-Being*, 103-105.
- <sup>6</sup> *Tool-Being*, 49.
- <sup>7</sup> *Tool-Being*, 47.
- <sup>8</sup> *Tool-Being*, 41.
- <sup>9</sup> *Tool-Being*, 35.
- <sup>10</sup> *Tool-Being*, 16-26.
- <sup>11</sup> *Tool-Being*, 36, 30-31, 21.
- <sup>12</sup> *Tool-Being*, 31, 67.
- <sup>13</sup> *Tool-Being*, 120, 145.
- <sup>14</sup> See Heidegger, "The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldview," 88-89 and Harman, *Tool-Being*, §8.
- <sup>15</sup> *Tool-Being*, §3, particularly p. 42.
- <sup>16</sup> An example of this over-reaction is found in *Tool-Being*, 126-135.
- <sup>17</sup> *Tool-Being*, 142.
- <sup>18</sup> See, for example, *Tool-Being*, 145-147, where temporality and care undergo such a conversion.
- <sup>19</sup> We could imagine the following experiment. Rewrite the entire Harmanian corpus replacing "object" with any other word or phrase. Though the words change, *the meaning of his system remains exactly the same*, because the meaning of his system is its logic, and "object" is a vacant identifier for, not things themselves, but a program, a *schema*. This is why Harman's metaphysics has the unique character that it applies to everything yet seems to never really say something about anything. To say something meaningful, he would have to admit that the object of his philosophy has an essential relation to the philosopher and his activity, to something like human Dasein—a relation he explicitly denies. Thus, the system inflates in size and rises in height precisely in proportion to the amount of hot air blown into it.
- <sup>20</sup> *Tool-Being*, 126.
- <sup>21</sup> CPR, 16-17; Bxiii-Bxiv.
- <sup>22</sup> CPR, 19; Bxix.
- <sup>23</sup> CPR, 5; Avii.
- <sup>24</sup> CPR, 23-24; Bxxvi-Bxxvii.
- <sup>25</sup> CPR, Bxx (my translation).
- <sup>26</sup> CPR, 385; B443.
- <sup>27</sup> CPR, 380; B436.
- <sup>28</sup> CPR, 20; Bxx.
- <sup>29</sup> CPR, 295, 304; B365, B379.
- <sup>30</sup> CPR, 288; B354.
- <sup>31</sup> CPR, 301; B374.
- <sup>32</sup> CPR, 287; B352.
- <sup>33</sup> CPR, 305; B381.
- <sup>34</sup> CPR, B381-B382 (my translation).
- <sup>35</sup> Novalis, *Werke*, 323.
- <sup>36</sup> Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 23.
- <sup>37</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 67.
- <sup>38</sup> Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 68.
- <sup>39</sup> *Philosophical Writings*, 62; *Werke*, 387.
- <sup>40</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 80e.
- <sup>41</sup> Namely, in The Antimony of Pure Reason, Section VII, where the dialectical conflicts of reason are solved by removing the presupposition that transcendental ideas refer to things-in-themselves of which we could have knowledge.
- <sup>42</sup> Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 52.
- <sup>43</sup> *Fichte Studies*, 167-168; *Werke*, 312-313.
- <sup>44</sup> Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 68.
- <sup>45</sup> Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 26; Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, 5-6; Novalis, *Werke*, 295-296.
- <sup>46</sup> Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 28.
- <sup>47</sup> Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 27.

- 48 Novalis, *Werke*, 310 (my translation).
- 49 Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 29-31, 36.
- 50 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 44-46.
- 51 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 61-68 and Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.
- 52 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 140.
- 53 Plato, *Meno*, 86a.
- 54 Plato, *Meno*, 81d-e and 86b.
- 55 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 67.
- 56 Harman, *Tool-Being*, 103-127.
- 57 Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 61.
- 58 Harman, *Tool-Being*, 126.
- 59 Harman, *Tool-Being*, 142.
- 60 *Zum Ereignis-Denken*, 1479 (my translation).
- 61 Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 65-66. See also *Tool-Being*, 122-123. I cannot agree, however, with Harman's dismissal of hermeneutics as a "deflationary realism" or "philosophy of access." On this point, as on the issue of the difference between being and object, Harman misses the point and is naïve to a critical fault.
- 62 That Harman pretends to think being without relation is especially clear in his criticisms of pragmatism and phenomenology (*Tool-Being*, §11 and §12).
- 63 For more on why the ontological difference does not consist in a dualism, dialectic, or reversal between terms but is an overturning of such operations, the reader may see my "The Overturning of Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology" (*Journal of Philosophical Research*, Volume 41, 2016).
- 64 CPR, B384. Our translation of this important phrase serves two purposes. First, we retain Kant's intention to distinguish between transcendental and popular meanings of the word "idea." The popular, derisive sense of "it is only an idea" says the same as "it is a mere idea." Second, we go beyond Kant's transcendental distinction and, consistent with the definition of the "absolute" that Kant has just given, we develop the difference between a *mere* idea and an *absolute* idea, which is at the heart of our disagreement with object-oriented philosophy.
- 65 CPR, 307; B385. Thus the tension in the Transcendental Dialectic and in Kant's distinction between speculative and practical reason in general is resolved in the difference between formal and transformative meanings of the absolutely unconditioned, i.e., between differing conceptions of philosophy.
- 66 *Philosophical Writings*, 162, 76; *Werke*, 391, 556, 400.
- 67 Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 102; *Werke*, 407.
- 68 Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre*, 8-11.
- 69 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 10-12.
- 70 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 59.
- 71 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 26, 46.
- 72 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 17-18, 20.
- 73 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 100, 18, 26.
- 74 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 45.
- 75 Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, 167, 164; *Werke*, 309-313.
- 76 *Wissenschaftslehre*, 39.
- 77 CPR, 447; B535 (translation slightly altered).
- 78 Novalis, *Werke*, 401 and 407.