

Matter and Society

Response to Orensanz

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Abstract—This article is a response to Martin Orensanz’s argument that object-oriented ontology ought to accept the existence of matter as both a sensual and a real object. That matter can exist as a sensual object is a point immediately granted, since “sensual object” is such a broad term that nothing could be excluded from this designation. Yet I argue that this is not the case with respect to real objects, which must exist independently of any other entity that might encounter them. This leads to a related debate on whether parthood is transitive, in which Orensanz takes up a recent argument of Daniel Korman while I defend the modified Aristotelian position that only the proximate parts of an object can be said to belong to it in the strict sense.

Résumé—Cet article est une réponse à l’argument de Martin Orensanz selon lequel l’ontologie orientée objet devrait accepter l’existence de la matière en tant qu’objet à la fois sensuel et réel. Que la matière puisse exister en tant qu’objet sensuel est d’emblée admis, puisque « objet sensuel » est un terme si large que rien ne peut être exclu de cette dénomination. Ce n’est pourtant pas le cas, selon moi, des objets réels, qui doivent exister indépendamment de toute autre entité susceptible de les rencontrer. Cela conduit à un débat sur le caractère transitif de la relation partie-à-tout, dans lequel Orensanz reprend un argument récent de Daniel Korman, tandis que je défends une position aristotélicienne amendée selon laquelle seules les parties proximales d’un objet peuvent être considérées comme appartenant à cet objet au sens strict du terme.

Keywords—Materialism; Object-oriented ontology; Speculative realism; Mario Bunge; Daniel Korman.

Speaking as an object-oriented ontologist, it is a pleasure to respond to Martin Orensanz’s article “Object-Oriented Ontology and Materialism” (Orensanz 2024). Among other things, it is

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refreshing that the first lines of his abstract get straight to the point: “According to Object-Oriented Ontology, matter does not exist. Here I will challenge that idea, by advancing some arguments that matter can be conceptualized both as a sensual object as well as a real object.” (Orensanz 2024: 268). Orensanz is correct that for Object-Oriented Ontology [OOO], matter does not exist; he correctly notes that this was true as early as my first book (Harman 2002). He will attempt to counter this view, proclaiming that matter can be treated on OOO’s own terms as *both* a real object and a sensual object. Perhaps I should begin by saying that the sort of “matter” attacked by OOO was initially the formless “prime matter” thought by some to exist prior to any individual objects, but to an increasing degree the target has been the “pre-individual” realm championed by Gilbert Simondon (2020). If something exists, then it is one, and in that case its unity gives it a minimum of one quality. In OOO’s terms, this is enough to make it an object, even if it is given such anti-objectual nicknames as “pre-individual,” “apeiron,” “blob,” “*il y a*,” “whatever,” or “inconsistent multiple.”² Yet the question of whether matter can be an object is less central for Orensanz than the rather different one of whether it can exist as both real and sensual. Thus an explanation of these terms is in order, given that some readers of this article may not have previous familiarity with OOO.

1] Sensual and Real

We begin with the term “sensual,” which does not refer to the senses as opposed to the intellect, but to whatever is directly accessible as opposed to a reality that is not thus accessible (Harman 2011: 20–34). It would not be wholly inaccurate to link OOO’s distinction between real and sensual with Kant’s division between thing-in-itself and appearance (Kant 1965). The chief difference is that for Kant appearance always means appearance to some (invariably human) mind, while for OOO the sensual realm pertains to all relations whatsoever, including those involved in inanimate causation. While this is an especially controversial and interesting aspect of OOO, it is not of particular importance to Orensanz at this

² These are the terms proposed respectively by Gilbert Simondon (2020), Anaximander (cf. Zeller 1886: 39–41), the architect Greg Lynn (1996), Emmanuel Levinas (2001), Jean-Luc Nancy (1993), and Alain Badiou (2005).

juncture, and thus we leave it aside. More pertinent here is the link between OOO's sensual realm and the concerns of phenomenology. Franz Brentano is widely credited with reviving the medieval term "intentionality" to refer to the property of every mental act that it is directed toward an object (Brentano 1995). Brentano also uses the phrase "immanent objectivity" to refer to this situation, though without clarifying what relation—if any—this immanent object might have to a world outside the mind. One of Brentano's most talented disciples, the Polish thinker Kazimierz Twardowski, proposed a dualism of "objects" outside the mind and "qualities" inside the mind (Twardowski 1977). In opposition to this model, the young Edmund Husserl protested that any inside/outside distinction would render knowledge impossible, since there would be no way to establish a link between a real Berlin-object in the world and the Berlin-qualities I have in my mind (Husserl 1994). Rather than trying to explore how such mediation might occur, Husserl insisted that any notion of a real Berlin different in kind from mental Berlin-qualities is "absurd." In this way, both the power and the limits of phenomenology were permanently established. On the one hand, phenomenology's rejection of anything like a Kantian thing-in-itself was etched in stone. On the other, Twardowski's object/content distinction was ingeniously retained by imploding *both* terms into the intentional sphere. This can be seen in Husserl's crucial distinction between intentional objects and the numerous fleeting adumbrations (*Abschattungen*) through which they become accessible to us (Husserl 1970).

Unlike Husserl, OOO regards the Kantian thing-in-itself not as absurd, but as an essential consequence of the fact that no relation (or sum total of relations) can ever exhaust the reality to which it relates. The Berlin that is accessible to me is in fact *not* equivalent to the real Berlin, as easily seen from the fact that whatever Weimar-era cabaret shows and Nazi rallies might occur in someone's mind, these mental experiences do not have the same causal status as the actual shows and rallies in Berlin itself. There is the additional fact that someone might be confused or outright deluded in their thoughts about Berlin, and while thoughts may be utterly confused or deluded at times, a real thing such as Berlin cannot be deluded in its act of existing, but simply is what it is. Although Martin Heidegger often shares his teacher Husserl's intuition that the inner/outer distinction is a "pseudo-problem," in practice Heidegger is

closer to Kant. This is perfectly clear from an explicit but under-recognized passage in his book on his great predecessor, in which he faults German Idealism for its denial of the thing-in-itself (Heidegger 1965: 251–252). More broadly speaking, none of Heidegger’s reflections on the forgetting of Being and its various disclosures through the course of history would make any sense if he agreed with Husserl on the transparent accessibility of any object to an intentional act (Heidegger 1962). In any case, the thing-in-itself that exceeds direct contact—and not just for humans—is what OOO calls the real.

In arguing that matter can exist in the form of a sensual object, Orensanz appears to be contesting an explicit passage in *Tool-Being* that runs as follows: “If [OOO] is ‘materialism,’ *then it is the first materialism in history to deny the existence of matter.*” (Harman 2002: 293). Orensanz reads this denial in a maximalist sense, as though it denied the possibility that matter could exist even sensually, though he concedes in a footnote that I “had not developed the concept of sensual objects in *Tool-Being* that would occur [three years later] in *Guerrilla Metaphysics.*” (Orensanz 2024: 5n10). But in case I did mean to deny even sensual existence to matter, he lays out a diligent pre-emptive proof of how—on my own terms—matter should at least be permitted to exist in the sensual realm. After all, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* already permits the existence of centaurs as sensual objects (Harman 2005: 184). Given this, Orensanz is easily able to show that matter ought to be treated at least as liberally as the mythical horse-humans of ancient Greek lore. In so doing he refers to a similar argument made for the existence of Eli Hirsch’s “incars” (defined as cars positioned entirely inside garages) by Daniel Z. Korman, who proposes to demonstrate that such incars are every bit as real as islands (Hirsch 1982; Korman 2015: 6).

As concerns the permissibility for OOO of matter existing as a *sensual* object, Orensanz is assaulting an open door, though this may be my own fault due to lack of clarity (or foresight) in the aforementioned passage from *Tool-Being* against materialism. On any occasion where I may have said “matter does not exist,” or anything along those lines, it would have been meant solely to deny the existence of matter as something *real*. In OOO’s sensual realm, anything goes. Not only centaurs and incars circulate freely, but so do “outcars,” non-centaurian centaurs, square circles, cartoon characters, and all monsters and demons that one can imagine. The

sensual is a kind of Meinongian nature preserve where nothing can be eliminated. Yet it is also a purely harmless preserve, since it does not entail that any of these objects exist independently of thought (Meinong 1983). We can imagine complaints from the likes of Willard van Orman Quine that this sensual realm is aesthetically sloppy: “[this] slum of possibles is a breeding ground for disorderly elements. Take, for instance, the possible fat man in that doorway; and, again, the possible bald man in that doorway. Are they the same possible man, or two possible men?” (Quine 1980: 4). Yet the objections are irrelevant here, since we are not talking about *possible* sensual objects, but fully actual ones, whose number is heavily restricted by the fact that they exist only while someone or something is thinking of them. The sensual object “centaur” only exists for the one who actually confronts this object right now; once this person changes their focus of mental attention, falls asleep, or dies, the sensual centaur vanishes from the universe. And true enough, Orensanz is right that just as we can think of a centaur, a fat man in the doorway, or a possible bald man in the doorway, we can also think of matter. Thus I have no objection to the sensual existence of matter: not because it is matter, but because it is anything at all. The sensual realm is an ontological “safe space” where pretty much anything is welcome as long as we relate ourselves to it. The question is whether matter is also *real*: that is, whether it exists even when no one is positing its existence. While I freely admit that it *could* exist, I also deny that it does.

But before moving on to Orensanz’s discussion of the real, I would like to address one recurrent misunderstanding of the real and the sensual in OOO. According to this misreading, the sensual realm consists of all manner of different objects, but then only “some” of these objects turn out to be real. For instance, if I am in a room in which my pet dog is present while I am also imagining a battle of centaurs, then the dog is real but the centaurs merely sensual. Even as careful a reader as Quentin Meillassoux makes this mistake—in connection with qualities rather than objects—in his Preface to the French translation of my book *Dante’s Broken Hammer* (Meillassoux 2023: 18)³. Here Meillassoux misconstrues the standpoint of OOO as one that is closer to Wilfrid Sellars’s

³ The French translation of the book is Harman (2023), while the original English is Harman (2016).

distinction between the manifest and scientific images: all of which are images, but only some of which adhere tightly enough to reality (Sellars 2007). For OOO, by contrast, there is a radical incommensurability between any image—which can only be sensual in our terms—and the real it aspires to denote.

Since this point touches on a crucial aspect of my rejection of the existence of matter, it is worth a bit more of our time. Let's use the term "intellectual intuition" to refer to the mechanism by which some philosophers hold that reality can be made directly present to the mind via certain mental acts, something wholly forbidden by Heidegger and Jacques Derrida under the title "metaphysics of presence." (Heidegger 2009; Derrida 2016)⁴. Some philosophies, known collectively as "direct realism," go even further and hold that pretty much any experience gives us at least some degree of access to the real. But for most advocates of direct access, there are privileged sorts of mental acts that do this with especial adequacy. In Husserl's case, we are meant to follow the path of eidetic reduction and categorial intuition to gain insight into the essence of a thing. For Meillassoux it is mathematics that enables us to view the primary qualities of things directly (Meillassoux 2008). In both cases, and in all other such cases of intellectual intuition, an overlap is posited between the thing and the mind that knows it. We need only recall Husserl's denial that there is any ontological difference between Berlin itself and the Berlin I intend, despite the fact that real buildings and schools of poetry can exist in Berlin but not in my mind. Precisely here is where the concept of "matter" is usually invoked: as a guarantor of the identity of the two Berlins. The idea, in short, is that Berlin can be known directly because one and the same form is contained in the Berlin of the world and the Berlin of my knowledge; the difference between them is that the real Berlin exists "in matter" while the Berlin of knowledge does not. But given that formless matter has never been seen or even indirectly detected, its existence can only be justified as a fictional prop for the groundless wish that forms might be moved from the world to the mind without translation or energy loss. I would certainly concede that an imaginary table does not hurt my foot in the night, though

⁴ Derrida pushes the critique further to cover a non-existent additional enemy dubbed "self-presence," leading him to the needless sacrifice of the principle of identity. See Harman (2022).

a real one often hurts me badly: I simply deny that the difference between them consists in the supposed “material existence” of the real table. Instead, there is a difference *in form* between the table that hurts and the one that does not, a difference usually overlooked because we falsely imagine that the presumed visual congruity between the two is enough to establish an identity of form. A similar assumption haunts Kant’s inadequate view of the difference between real and imaginary coins (Kant 1965: 500–507). Namely, he holds that all of the qualities of the two coins are the same except that the real ones have “being,” which he then interprets as “not a real predicate,” so that being has to become a matter of “position” with respect to us. What Kant fails to see is that the real and imaginary coins do not have the same qualities to begin with, and this prevents him further from addressing the ontological proof for the existence of God in the proper way. But that is a topic for another time; we now return to Orensanz’s argument that matter is also a real object.

Orensanz begins by citing a passage from the 2007 Speculative Realism workshop in which I appear to argue for the “reality” of hobbits, after Ray Brassier presses me on the question of whether hobbits are just as real as quarks (Ray Brassier, in Brassier *et al.* 2007: 316–317). My misleading response at the time was that I am a Latourian on this point: that is to say, given that hobbits as literary concepts can have effects on other entities, and given further that despite their fictionality hobbits cannot conceivably fit just anywhere (such as in the novels of Proust), they must be granted a certain reality (Graham Harman, in Brassier *et al.* 2007: 324 ff.). Anyone familiar with my critical appreciation of Latour in *Prince of Networks* and elsewhere will immediately recognize that I do not hold that for something to have effects on the world qualifies it as a real object (Harman 2009). That is Latour’s own position, but definitely not mine. Orensanz himself clarifies this by helpfully citing a later email in which I specify that a hobbit should instead be interpreted as a sensual object with real qualities, which is precisely how I read Husserl’s intentional object.⁵ For OOO, all sensual objects have real qualities, since otherwise they would consist of nothing but swirling accidental features. As a result, (1) intentional objects would be nothing more than a series of adumbrations, and (2)

⁵ Personal communication, June 13, 2022.

all intentional objects would be the same. It should also be noted that sensual objects are sometimes able to turn into real ones, in ways that neither I nor anyone else connected with OOO has written much about, but this is not the place to develop that notion. In any case, Orensanz is right that I have to treat matter as liberally as I treat hobbits: even though I do not accept the existence of something called matter, I must at least concede that matter qua sensual object has real qualities. The concept “matter” does exist, after all, and it does lead people to behave and react in specific ways while discussing it, though from the OOO standpoint it is nothing but a fiction.

Of course, Orensanz notes that at least some scientific materialists are equally happy to call “matter” a fiction: he points in particular to Mario Bunge, and more recently Gustavo Romero (Bunge 1981; Romero 2022). What these authors share in common is the notion that matter is merely a concept, while what really exists are individual material beings; Orensanz seems to be in agreement on this score. OOO would certainly agree with all of them that a concept is not quite a real object in the strict sense, and would further agree that individual beings are all that exist, though OOO sees no reason to call these individuals “material.” This does not mean that I find the remainder of their argument satisfying. After all, if one believes in a plethora of something called “material beings,” it seems clear that one is committed to the existence of something like matter in a way that OOO is not, even if that matter is found nowhere else than in fully-formed individuals.

But the claim that only individual material beings exist leads Orensanz to some additional, mereological claims with which I largely disagree, and which may be of interest to readers. In particular, he borrows from Daniel Korman the idea of a “disguised plural,” which Orensanz will use to describe his own conception of matter no less than Bunge’s and Romero’s (Korman 2015: 139). If we consider an assortment of numerous random things, most of us will not be inclined to treat that assortment as a single individual, even though it is grammatically singular. This is a clear and illuminating case of a disguised plural. Korman also presents a more intriguing case: the Supreme Court. Here again we have an example that is grammatically singular. But is the famed Court really an individual being? Korman (and Orensanz himself) say that it is not. The reason as stated by Orensanz is that “[i]t’s generally considered that

the relation of parthood is transitive.” In layman’s terms, if the Supreme Court is a single entity composed of nine Justices, then the parts of the Justices should also be parts of the Court. But this would lead to apparently ridiculous results, as seen in the following rhetorical question from Korman: “Is the Supreme Court a single fleshy object with nine tongues and eighteen elbows?” (Korman 2015: 145). Always committed to a spirit of fair play, Orensanz cites our aforementioned correspondence of 2022, in which I argued that parthood *is not* transitive. The source to which I appealed was Manuel DeLanda’s discussion of emergence: in particular, his idiosyncratic but effective use of the term “redundant causation.” (DeLanda 2006). In DeLanda’s usage, redundant causation refers to the fact that an object can lose many of its components while still remaining the same object: as when a tire loses a multitude of atoms, or Los Angeles bids farewell each year to the many residents who die or move away. The same insight was anticipated by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* when he said that a thing is only made of its most proximate pieces: we might plausibly refer to semen as a potential human, but to refer to wheat as a potential human would be skipping too far down the line (Aristotle 2016: 149).

Orensanz then plausibly links my view and DeLanda’s with Bunge’s idea of “levels of composition.” For instance, animals have brains as parts, but since it is entire animals rather than brains that engage in social relations, we can easily dismiss the transitive assumption that brains (as parts of animals) would also be directly involved in social relations (Bunge 1979: 5). But here Orensanz worries that such means of avoiding the transitivity of parthood might lead to emergent entities that are somehow disembodied. For instance, in light of the multiple structural layers separating an entire cell from its constituent atoms, we might be led to the dangerous conclusion that cells have no atoms. Here, however, I think Orensanz is equivocating between multiple senses of “have.” Los Angeles without any people would in some sense not be Los Angeles anymore, but merely the ghostly remnants of a city. It does not follow, however, that the need for a city to have people means that individual humans need to have direct causal impact on the city as a whole, without intervening emergent layers. In the case of the Supreme Court, it should be equally clear why the Court is not a fleshy entity consisting of nine tongues and eighteen elbows. If one or more of the Justices of the Court were to lose their tongues or one

or both arms in some grotesque tragic incident, this would inspire much public sympathy, but would surely not raise doubts as to whether the thereby disabled Justices were still members of the Court. To summarize, when we consider a human being qua judge, arms and tongues take on the aspect of mere accidents. The difference between the essential and the accidental takes on further importance when Orensanz plays with another variant of the supposed paradox: “If parthood isn’t transitive, it follows that your fingers are not parts of your body. So, you don’t have fingers.” But this is a *non sequitur* akin to saying that if people are not the proximate elements of Los Angeles, then Los Angeles has no people. Or better, in Aristotle’s terms: if wheat is not a potential human, then humans do not consume wheat.

2] Concluding Remarks

Although Orensanz continues to raise interesting ideas until the final page of the article, our main topic effectively ends on page 14. For it is there that Orensanz outlines five possible ways of dealing with the problems covered so far. The two of interest to us here are my own rejection of the transitivity of parthood (number three on the list), and Orensanz’s preferred solution (number five) of the disguised plural. He admits that he faces an uphill battle in his future systematic defense of this position, though in denying that “society” exists as anything more than an assortment of individuals he can count on the assistance of the late Bruno Latour, who was endlessly horrified by Émile Durkheim’s unified “Society” with a capital S (Latour 2007). But one need not accept Durkheim’s view to support the idea that societies are formed of emergent layers of structure rather than simply of piecemeal individual humans. If I have a worry about Orensanz’s own developing social theory, it is a concern that his final picture of society will contain far more elbows and tongues than necessary, to say nothing of atoms.

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