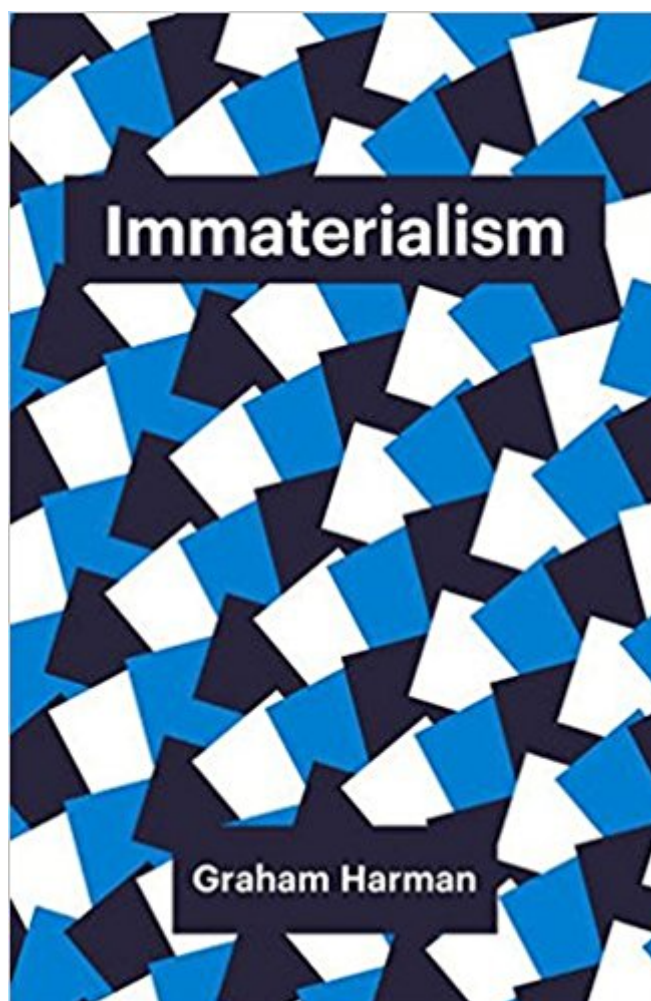


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Immaterialism: Objects And Social Theory (Theory Redux)



Synopsis

What objects exist in the social world and how should we understand them? Is a specific Pizza Hut restaurant as real as the employees, tables, napkins and pizzas of which it is composed, and as real as the Pizza Hut corporation with its headquarters in Wichita, the United States, the planet Earth and the social and economic impact of the restaurant on the lives of its employees and customers? In this book the founder of object-oriented philosophy develops his approach in order to shed light on the nature and status of objects in social life. While it is often assumed that an interest in objects amounts to a form of materialism, Harman rejects this view and develops instead an "immaterialist" method. By examining the work of leading contemporary thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Levi Bryant, he develops a forceful critique of "actor-network theory". In an extended discussion of Leibniz's famous example of the Dutch East India Company, Harman argues that this company qualifies for objecthood neither through "what it is" or "what it does", but through its irreducibility to either of these forms. The phases of its life, argues Harman, are not demarcated primarily by dramatic incidents but by moments of symbiosis, a term he draws from the biologist Lynn Margulis. This book provides a key counterpoint to the now ubiquitous social theories of constant change, holistic networks, performative identities, and the construction of things by human practice. It will appeal to anyone interested in cutting-edge debates in philosophy and social and cultural theory.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"It is rare to find academic and philosophical writing that is this clear. Harman's explanations of not just his own position but also the other views to which he responds are thorough, concise and in a style and vocabulary that are accessible to non-experts." The British Society for Literature and Science

Graham Harman is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (on leave from the American University in Cairo).

"Immaterialism" is an excellent introduction to Graham Harman's OOO (Object-Oriented Ontology). The book is divided into two parts: the first on Immaterialism, and the second on the VOC (Dutch East India Company) as Harman's "Object" of study. After concluding his presentation of the VOC, Harman ends "Immaterialism" with fifteen provisional rules for the OOO method. In the first part, Harman distinguishes ANT (Actor-Network Theory) and New Materialism from OOO, by critically presenting Undermining (ex: The Pre-Socratics), Overmining (ex: David Hume, Bruno Latour, The Megarians, etc.), and Duomining philosophies. He then proposes a set of theses on Immaterialism as an antonym to Materialism, which he claims substitute the "Thing-In-Itself" with a loose paraphrase of it. Based on a critique of Correlationism, a term coined by the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, Harman insists on returning to "The-Thing-In-Itself" while maintaining the preservation of Finitude. Although Harman does not insist on developing a social or political theory based on OOO, scholars from various fields will find Harman's approach (an attempt to evolve ANT) attractive. Using the OOO method, Harman identifies important "symbioses" that transformed the reality of the VOC, leading to turning points throughout its life-span. Identifying the different moments in an Object's life-span as Birth, Ripeness, Decadence, and Death, Harman presents what makes each of these stages so different in structure. Harman, a key theorist of the Speculative Realist movement, must be read. His diverse set of influences (Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Bruno Latour, Gottfried Leibniz, H.P. Lovecraft, Marshall McLuhan, Alfred N. Whitehead, Xavier Zubiri, and more), writing style, and theoretical surprises and twists make his work exciting.

The brevity and clarity of Harman's work are to be admired. Where other philosophers take pride in their tomes of dense prose, Harman seems to go against the grain, while never falling into prosaic language. This book in particular cuts to the quick without sacrificing substance. In it, Harman engages with his favorite living philosopher, Bruno Latour, and his version of Actor-Network Theory, as well as his later shift to "Modes of Existence". He also touches on the work of John Law and

Annemarie Mol. Harman's account of the VOC and Jan Pieterszoon Coen are quite fascinating and provide some very rich examples of Harman's concept of symbiosis, and of social objects generally. I could see this book being a nice introduction to Harman's oeuvre for sociologists, anthropologists, and students of religious studies. I give it five stars; highly recommended!

Immaterialism is a better read than Harman's "Toward Speculative Realism" which I also reviewed. My own interest in Harman is the result of his inclusion in the "New Realist" school, though all three of its core members (Harman, Ferraris, and Meillassoux) hold very different positions. This book is a clearer though yet only skeletal summary of Harman's "Object Oriented Ontology". Harman claims not to be a materialist but an immaterialist. If this suggests a view peculiar to Harman, it is. The book begins with a summary of Object Oriented Ontology in comparison to the earlier "Assemblage Network Theory" of Latour from which Harman evolved it. The book's second-to-last chapter also comes back to the relation between ANT and OOO. In his last chapter, Harman lists 15 characteristics or principles of OOO. I would like to know if and where he has supported the development of OOO in some more formal way, but as yet I find only statements of its conclusions. The core of this little book, a somewhat strange choice here though there is method in Harman's madness, is the history of a corporate entity, the Dutch East India Trading Company shortened, in the book, to its Dutch initials VOC. In OOO everything is an object. Rocks, stars, and individual animals are objects as are chairs and statues, ideas, and also the atoms of which all of these are composed. Parenthetically, like a few other philosophers I've read recently, Harman is strangely sloppy with scientific allusions stating repeatedly that "hydrogen is produced in stellar fusion" for example. But back to objects, we also have such things as societies, economies, clubs, along with more fleeting entities like the meeting of a particular board of directors on a certain day. Everything that can be conceived as having any sort of unifying principle (recognized by mind as a "joint in the world" -- my interpretation, Harman does not use this phrase though it seems to fit), however enduring or fleeting in time, is an object and all objects are equally real, though not all equally important. The unequal importance idea is one place Harman's OOO gets into trouble. Since everything is equally real there isn't any objective purchase for a hierarchy of importance other than the human/world divide Harman aims to flatten out! OOO wants to reintroduce being to philosophical respectability. We cannot "know being" directly, or for that matter even indirectly, and Harman admits that it is a posit for the sake of understanding, that is making more coherent, what we can know, qualities and properties through which we (also objects) experience. Objects (even inanimate objects), similarly experience us. This is not taken to mean "psychically" in the case of

inanimate objects, and the significance of the encounter is not (though it can be) symmetrical. If, skiing, I run into a big tree, the impact has little effect on the tree but could dramatically change the course of my life, possibly even ending it. But being that cannot in principle be known cannot be connected up to its qualities (the connection is always mysterious) and so might or might not exist (be real) at all. In Immaterialism, Harman is at pains to show how OOO works in the social realm and thus the object of his attention is a corporation, the VOC, technically in business for 193 years from its founding in 1602 to its nationalization in 1795. An amazing history. Such objects obviously have an impact on history, broadly conceived, in every year of their existence, but only some of these impacts rise to awareness in the present day. The same is true of events, and other objects (in the case of the VOC these turn out to be a turning-point document in 1619, the character of certain individuals, and the evolving technology of naval weapons) that impact or redirect this history of the entity. The big events he terms "sympiotic" because while perhaps fleeting objects in themselves (a naval engagement) they end up having a disproportionate effect on the subsequent history of the object under investigation. Harman traces all of this out through the history of the VOC making the case that the changes which history records presuppose an entity with a being (the VOC) "to which" these things occur and which responds by transforming (over time) in particular ways. What the introduction of being supposedly gives us is the contingency of those transformations. Things happened the way they did, but they need not have happened that way. That there was the potential for something else to have happened seems to be what the "unknowability of the object's being" gives us. As I've said, Harman doesn't argue for any of this here but only states it and illustrates how it applies to a social construct. The kindest interpretation I can give to Harman here is that the history of a particular social structure gives evidence that there are always latent potentials in a thing that never get realized. Further, beyond potentials, hidden being is not merely hidden because no history ever exposes all its potentials, but because by nature those potentials are infinitely fine, inexhaustible! My question is does it matter to anything that happens to anything in the universe if OOO is true or false? In OOO, even events are objects and have a being in which their unitarity (as an event) inheres. But exactly the same things happen (qualities interact) and the same infinite latent potentials in objects across time exist whether being itself is real or the object is nothing more than the sum of these. Even if Harman manages, somewhere, to argue properly for OOO, I wonder if it is not something of a Pyrrhic victory. I do not see what accepting it accomplishes; how it enhances our insight into the world of our experience.

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