

COLLAPSE II

On Vicarious Causation

Graham Harman

This article gives the outlines of a realist metaphysics, despite the continuing unpopularity of both realism and metaphysics in the continental tradition. Instead of the dull realism of mindless atoms and billiard balls that is usually invoked to spoil all the fun in philosophy, I will defend a weird realism. This model features a world packed full of ghostly real objects signaling to each other from inscrutable depths, unable to touch one another fully. There is an obvious link here with the tradition known as occasionalism, the first to suggest that direct interaction between entities is impossible. There is another clear link with the related sceptical tradition, which also envisions objects as lying side-by-side without direct connection, though here the objects in question are human perceptions rather than independent real things. Yet this article abandons the solution of a lone magical super-entity responsible for all relations (whether God for Malebranche and his Iraqi forerunners, or the human mind for sceptics, empiricists, and idealists), in favor of a vicarious causation deployed locally in every portion of the cosmos. While its strangeness may lead to puzzlement more than resistance, vicarious causation is not some autistic moonbeam entering the window of an asylum. Instead, it is both the launching pad for a rigorous post-Heideggerian philosophy, and a fitting revival of the venerable problem of communication between substances.

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The phrase ‘vicarious causation’ consists of two parts, both of them cutting against the grain of present-day philosophy.¹ Causality has rarely been a genuine topic of inquiry since the seventeenth century. The supposed great debate over causation between sceptics and transcendental philosophers is at best a yes-or-no dispute as to whether causal necessity exists, and in practice is just an argument over whether it can be known. What has been lacking is active discussion of the very nature of causality. This is now taken to be obvious: one object exerts force over another and makes it change physical position or some of its features. No one sees any way to speak about the interaction of fire and cotton, since philosophy remains preoccupied with the sole relational gap between humans and the world – even if only to deny such a gap. Inanimate relations have been abandoned to laboratory research, where their metaphysical character is openly dismissed. To revive causation in philosophy means to reject the dominance of Kant’s Copernican Revolution and its single lonely rift between people and everything else. Although I will claim that real objects do exist beyond human sensual access to them, this should not be confused with Kant’s distinction between phenomena and noumena. Whereas Kant’s distinction is something endured by humans alone, I hold that one billiard ball hides from another no less than the ball-in-itself hides from humans. When a hailstorm smashes vineyards or sends waves through a pond, these relations are just as worthy of philosophy as the unceasing dispute over the chasm or non-chasm between being and thought. Neither Kant, nor Hegel, nor their more

1. The term was first introduced in my book *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

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up-to-date cousins have anything to say about the collision of balls-in-themselves. In the past century, the doctrine of Parmenides that being and thought are the same has been implied by Husserl, stated explicitly by Heidegger, and restated quite emphatically by Badiou. But this equation of being and thought must be rejected, since it leaves us stranded in a human–world coupling that merely reenacts the breakthroughs of yesteryear. Reviving the problem of causation means to break free of the epistemological deadlock and reawaken the metaphysical question of what relation means. Along with causation there is also the ‘vicarious’ part of the phrase, which indicates that relations never directly encounter the autonomous reality of their components. After thousands of years, ‘substance’ is still the best name for such reality. The widespread resistance to substance is nothing more than revulsion at certain inadequate models of substance, and such models can be replaced. Along with substance, the term ‘objects’ will be used to refer to autonomous realities of any kind, with the added advantage that this term also makes room for the temporary and artificial objects too often excluded from the ranks of substance.

Since this article rejects any privilege of human access to the world, and puts the affairs of human consciousness on exactly the same footing as the duel between canaries, microbes, earthquakes, atoms, and tar, it may sound like a defense of scientific naturalism that reduces everything to physical events. But the term ‘vicarious’ is designed to oppose all forms of naturalism, by indicating that we still have no idea how physical relations (or any other kind) are possible in the first place. For as I will contend, objects hide

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from one another endlessly, and inflict their mutual blows only through some vicar or intermediary. For several centuries, philosophy has been on the defensive against the natural sciences, and now occupies a point of lower social prestige and, surprisingly, narrower subject matter. A brief glance at history shows that this was not always the case. To resume the offensive, we need only reverse the long-standing trends of renouncing all speculation on objects and volunteering for curfew in an ever-tinier ghetto of solely human realities: language, texts, political power. Vicarious causation frees us from such imprisonment by returning us to the heart of the inanimate world, whether natural or artificial. The uniqueness of philosophy is secured, not by walling off a zone of precious human reality that science cannot touch, but by dealing with the same world as the various sciences but in a different manner. In classical terms, we must speculate once more on causation while forbidding its reduction to efficient causation. Vicarious causation, of which science so far knows nothing, is closer to what is called formal cause. To say that formal cause operates vicariously means that forms do not touch one another directly, but somehow melt, fuse, and decompress in a shared common space from which all are partly absent. My claim is that two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact. In this sense, the theory of vicarious causation is a theory of the molten inner core of objects – a sort of plate tectonics of ontology.



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1. TWO KINDS OF OBJECTS

While the phenomenological movement of Husserl and Heidegger did too little to overcome the idealism of the previous cluster of great philosophers, they and their descendants often show a novel concern with specific, concrete entities. Mailboxes, hammers, cigarettes, and silk garments are at home in phenomenology in a way that was never true for the earlier classic figures of German thought. Even if Husserl and Heidegger remain too attached to human being as the centerpiece of philosophy, both silently raise objects to the starring role, each in a different manner. While Husserl bases his system on intentional or ideal objects (which I will rechristen sensual objects), Heidegger restores real objects to philosophy through his famous tool-analysis. It is seldom realized that these two types of objects are both different and complementary. The interplay between real and sensual objects, if taken seriously, provides ontology with a radical new theme.

In the tool-analysis of Heidegger, which fascinates his opponents no less than his allies, we find perhaps the most enduring insight of twentieth century philosophy. Our primary relationship with objects lies not in perceiving or theorizing about them, but simply in relying on them for some ulterior purpose. This first step is useful enough, but misses the essence of Heidegger's breakthrough, which even he never quite grasps. If we remain at this stage, it might seem that Heidegger merely claims that all theory is grounded in practice, that we need to have an everyday relationship with leopards or acids before staring at them or developing a science of them. But notice that even our practical relation to these objects fails to grasp them fully.

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The tribesman who dwells with the godlike leopard, or the prisoner who writes secret messages in lemon juice, are no closer to the dark reality of these objects than the scientist who gazes at them. If perception and theory both objectify entities, reducing them to one-sided caricatures of their thundering depths, the same is true of practical manipulation. We distort when we see, and distort when we use. Nor is the sin of caricature a merely human vice. Dogs do not make contact with the full reality of bones, and neither do locusts with cornstalks, viruses with cells, rocks with windows, nor planets with moons. It is not human consciousness that distorts the reality of things, but relationality *per se*. Heidegger's tool-analysis unwittingly gives us the deepest possible account of the classical rift between substance and relation. When something is 'present-at-hand,' this simply means it is registered through some sort of relation: whether perceptual, theoretical, practical, or purely causal. To be 'ready-to-hand' does not mean to be useful in the narrow sense, but to withdraw into subterranean depths that other objects rely on despite never fully probing or sounding them.² When objects fail us, we experience a negation of their accessible contours and become aware that the object exceeds all that we grasp of it. This predicament gives rise to the theme of vicarious causation. For if objects withdraw from relations, we may wonder how they make contact at all. Heidegger's tool-analysis opens the gates on a strange new realism in which entities flicker vaguely from the ocean floor: unable to make contact, yet somehow managing to do so anyway.

2. For a detailed interpretation of Heidegger's tool-analysis, see my first book *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. (Chicago: Open Court, 2002.)

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A different sort of object is the basis for Husserl's philosophy. Despite complicated efforts to save Husserl from charges of idealism, he does confine philosophy to a space of purest ideality. Phenomenology cannot speak of how one object breaks or burns another, since this would deliver the world to the power of scientific explanation, which employs nothing but naturalistic theories. For Husserl, the only rigorous method is to describe how the world is given to consciousness prior to all such theories. Philosophy becomes the study of phenomena, not real objects. But phenomena are objects nonetheless: in a new, ideal sense. For what we experience in perception is not disembodied qualities, as the empiricists hold; instead, we encounter a world broken up into chunks. Trees, mailboxes, airplanes, and skeletons lie spread before us, each of them inducing specific moods and sparkling with various subordinate qualities. Since we are speaking solely of the phenomenal realm, it does not matter if these things are hallucinations; even delusions perform the genuine labor of organizing our perception into discrete zones. Note already that sensual objects have a different fate from real ones. Whereas real zebras and lighthouses withdraw from direct access, their sensual counterparts do not withdraw in the least. For here is a zebra before me. Admittedly, I can view it from an infinite variety of angles and distances, in sadness and exultation, at sunset or amidst driving rain, and none of these moments exhaust all possible perceptions of it. Nonetheless, the zebra is already there for me as a whole in all its partial profiles; I see right through them and look to it as a unified object. Although some specific visual or conceptual profile of the zebra is

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needed for us to experience it, the unified sensual zebra lies at a deeper level of perception than these transient, mutable images. Each sensual profile is encrusted onto the unified zebra-object like a patina of brine. Whereas real objects withdraw, sensual objects lie directly before us, frosted over with a swirling, superfluous outer shell. But this difference seems to give sensual objects the opposite causal status of real ones. Given that real objects never touch directly, their causal relations can only be vicarious. But sensual objects, far from being withdrawn, exist side by side in the same perceptual space from the outset, since we encounter numerous phenomena simultaneously. This presents the contrary problem to vicarious causation: namely, why do all the phenomena not instantly fuse together into a single lump? There must be some unknown principle of blockage between them. If real objects require vicarious causation, sensual objects endure a buffered causation in which their interactions are partly dammed or stunted.

The situation is perplexing, but the general path of this article is already clear. Real objects withdraw into obscure cavernous underworlds, deprived of causal links. Sensual objects, by contrast, are so inclined to interact with their neighbors that we wonder why they fail to do so at every instant. In other words, the only place in the cosmos where interactions occur is the sensual, phenomenal realm. Against philosophies that regard the surface as formal or sterile and grant causal power only to shadowy depths, we must defend the opposite view: discrete, autonomous form lies only in the depths, while dramatic power and interaction float along the surface. All relationships are



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superficial. For this reason, we must discover how real objects poke through into the phenomenal realm, the only place where one relates to another. The various eruptions of real objects into sensuality lie side by side, buffered from immediate interaction. Something must happen on the sensual plane to allow them to make contact, just as corrosive chemicals lie side by side in a bomb – separated by a thin film eaten away over time, or ruptured by distant signals.

2. A JIGSAW PUZZLE

It is well known that Husserl emphasizes the intentionality of consciousness. We are always conscious of something, always focused on a particular house, pine tree, beach ball, or star, and indeed on many such objects at once. It is not widely known that Husserl also stumbles across the fateful paradox that intentionality is both one and two. For in a first sense, my encounter with a pine tree is a unified relation; we can speak of the encounter as a whole, and this whole resists exhaustive description. But in another sense, I clearly do not fuse with the tree in a single massive lump; it remains distinct from me in the perception. This gives the strange result that in my intention of the tree, we both inhabit the interior of the total intentional relation. This seemingly dry observation by Husserl has not sparked much interest in his readers. Even so, if combined with Heidegger's insight into the withdrawal of real objects behind all relations, it provides all the pieces of a new philosophy.

To repeat, the pine tree and I are separate objects residing on the interior of a third: the intention as a whole.

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But there is a fascinating asymmetry between the members of this trio. We cannot fail to notice that of the two objects living in the core of the third, I am a real object but the pine tree merely a sensual one. The I sincerely absorbed in the things it perceives is not the I as seen by others, but rather the real I, since my life actually consists at this moment in being occupied by these phenomena, not in being a sensual object for the gaze of others or even for myself. By contrast, the real pine tree does not inhabit the intention, since the real tree (assuming there is such a thing) lies outside any relation to it, withdrawing into depths never entered by outsiders. Finally, the intention as a whole must be classed as a real object rather than a sensual one: for even if my intention of the tree is the most depraved hallucination, the intention itself is in fact underway, quite apart from whether it relates to anything outside. To summarize, we have a real intention whose core is inhabited by a real me and a sensual pine tree. In addition, there is also a withdrawn real tree (or something that we mistake for one) lying outside the intention, but able to affect it along avenues still unknown. Finally, the sensual tree never appears in the form of a naked essence, but is always encrusted with various sorts of noise. Elsewhere I have called it 'black noise', to emphasize that it is highly structured, not the sort of formless chaos suggested by the 'white noise' of television and radio.³ Black noise initially seems to come in three varieties. First, the sensual tree has pivotal or essential qualities that must always belong to it under penalty of the intentional agent no longer considering it the same thing. Second, the tree has

3. *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 183 ff.

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accidental features shimmering along its surface from moment to moment, not affecting our identification of it as one and the same. Finally, the pine tree stands in relation to countless peripheral objects that inhabit the same intention (neighboring trees, mountains, deer, rabbits, clouds of mist).

We should also note five distinct sorts of relations between all these objects:

1. **CONTAINMENT.** The intention as a whole contains both the real me and the sensual tree.
2. **CONTIGUITY.** The various sensual objects in an intention lie side by side, not affecting one another. Only sometimes do they fuse or mix. Within certain limits, any sensual object's neighbors can be shuffled and varied without damaging the identity of that object, as when drifting mists do not interfere with my focus on the tree.
3. **SINCERITY.** At this very moment I am absorbed or fascinated by the sensual tree, even if my attitude toward it is utterly cynical and manipulative. I do not contain the sensual tree, because this is the role of the unified intention that provides the theater of my sincerity without being identical to it. And I am not merely contiguous with the tree, because it does in fact touch me in such a way as to fill up my life. I expend my energy in taking the tree seriously, whereas the sensual tree cannot return the favor, since it is nothing real.
4. **CONNECTION.** The intention as a whole must arise from a real connection of real objects, albeit an indirect connection. After all, the other possible combinations yield entirely different results. Two sensual objects merely

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sit side by side. And my sincere absorption with trees or windmills is merely the interior of the intention, not the unified intention itself. Hence, a real object itself is born from the connection of other real objects, through unknown vicarious means.

5. NO RELATION AT ALL. This is the usual state of things, as denied only by fanatical holists, those extremists who pass out mirrors like candy to every object that stumbles down the street. Real objects are incapable of direct contact, and indeed many have no effect on one another at all. Even the law of universal gravitation only applies among a narrow class of physical objects, and even then concerns a limited portion of their reality. And in a different case, the sensual tree has no relation to me at all, even though I am sincerely absorbed by it. The oxygen I breathe comes from the real tree, not from my perception of it. The sensual tree is a phantasm surviving only at the core of some intention, and takes up no independent relations even with its contiguous phantoms. They are only related vicariously, through me, insofar as I am sincerely absorbed with both.

The objects populating the world always stand to each other in one of these five relations. In *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, I suggested that causation is always vicarious, asymmetrical, and buffered. 'Vicarious' means that objects confront one another only by proxy, through sensual profiles found only on the interior of some other entity. 'Asymmetrical' means that the initial confrontation always unfolds between a real object and a sensual one. And 'buffered' means that I do not fuse into the tree, nor the tree into its sensual neighbors, since all are held at bay

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through unknown firewalls sustaining the privacy of each. From the asymmetrical and buffered inner life of an object, vicarious connections arise occasionally (in both senses of the term), giving birth to new objects with their own interior spaces. There is a constant meeting of asymmetrical partners on the interior of some unified object: a real one meeting the sensual vicar or deputy of another. Causation itself occurs when these obstacles are somehow broken or suspended. In seventeenth-century terms, the side-by-side proximity of real and sensual objects is merely the occasion for a connection between a real object inside the intention and another real object lying outside it. In this way, shafts or freight tunnels are constructed between objects that otherwise remain quarantined in private vacuums.

We now have five kinds of objects (real intention, real I, real tree, sensual tree, sensual noise) and five different types of relations (containment, contiguity, sincerity, connection, and none). Furthermore, we also have three adjectives for what unfolds inside an object (vicarious, asymmetrical, buffered) and three different kinds of noise surrounding a sensual object (qualities, accidents, relations). While this may not be an exhaustive census of reality, and may eventually need polishing or expansion, it offers a good initial model whose very strictness will help smoke out those elements it might have overlooked. What remains to be seen is how these elements interact, how one type of relation transforms into another, how new real objects paradoxically arise from the interaction between real objects and sensual ones, and even how sensual objects manage to couple and uncouple like spectral rail cars.

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These sorts of problems are the subject matter of object-oriented philosophy: the inevitable mutant offspring of Husserl's intentional objects and Heidegger's real ones. In turn, these are only the present-day heirs of Hume's contiguous impressions and ideas (Husserl) and the disconnected objects of Malebranche and his Ash'arite predecessors (Heidegger).

The problem of philosophy now resembles a jigsaw puzzle. We have detected the pieces as carefully as possible, and none seem to be blatantly missing. We also have a picture of what the ultimate solution should look like: the world as we know it, with its various objects and interactions. Unlike jigsaw puzzles, this one unfolds in at least three dimensions, ceaselessly changing from moment to moment. But like such puzzles, instead of mimicking the original image, it is riddled with fissures and strategic overlaps that place everything in a new light. Like five-year-olds faced with a massive thousand-piece puzzle, our greatest danger lies in becoming discouraged. But whereas frustrated children angrily throw their pieces to the floor and change activities, we remain trapped in our puzzle from the start, since it is the very enigma of our world. Philosophers can escape it only through insanity, or with the aid of rope or a revolver.

3. ONTOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS

Beginners in philosophy often ask the exact difference between ontology and metaphysics. In fact there is no consistent distinction, since each philosopher redefines these terms to suit individual purposes. For Heidegger,



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ontology is the account of how being is revealed to humans, while metaphysics remains a term of insult for philosophies that explain all beings in terms of some privileged entity. For Levinas, ontology belongs to the global war between beings, while metaphysics speaks of the infinite otherness that lies beyond such conflict. For my own part, I have generally used these terms interchangeably for a realist position opposed to all human-centered philosophies; at times such flexibility remains useful, as in the opening section of this article. Yet I would also like to propose a more exact difference between them, one not unrelated to their classical distinction. Henceforth, let 'ontology' refer to a description of the basic structural features shared by all objects, and let 'metaphysics' signify the discussion of the fundamental traits of specific types of entities. In this sense, the aforementioned puzzle-pieces belong solely to ontology, since no object is exempt from their rule. These include the basic opposition between real and sensual objects, the five types of relation between them, and the bondage of sensual objects to their various qualities, accidents, and relations. Time and space also belong to ontology, since even eternal and non-spatial objects elude only the narrowly physical spatio-temporal realm, and by no means escape time and space in a broader sense. The question of universals also seems to be a global theme belonging to ontology as a whole, and there may be others. As for metaphysics, which walls off and analyzes the internal organs of any specific kind of entity, the most obvious possible topics include human being, language, artworks, and even God. Any type of object distinct from others, however hazy the boundaries may be, can become

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the subject of a metaphysics. There could be a metaphysics of artworks, the psyche, and language, and even of restaurants, mammals, planets, teahouses, and sports leagues. Insofar as philosophy clearly differs from activities such as singing and gambling, there could also be a metaphysics of philosophy itself, unlocking the crucial features of this discipline, whatever its numerous variations and degenerate sophistical forms.

The distinction between ontology and metaphysics is proposed here for a specific reason. Along with real objects, we have also described sensual objects, which exist only on the interior of some intentional whole. Yet intentionality is regarded by almost everyone as a narrowly human feature. If this depiction were correct, sensual objects would be confined to a metaphysics of human perception, with no place in an ontology designed to address plastic and sand dunes no less than humans. This confinement of sensuality to the human kingdom must be refused. Intentionality is not a special human property at all, but an ontological feature of objects in general. For our purposes, intentionality means sincerity. My life is absorbed at any moment with a limited range of thoughts and perceptions. While it is tempting to confuse such absorption with 'conscious awareness,' we need to focus on the most rudimentary meaning of sincerity: contact between a real object and a sensual one. For instance, I may be sincerely absorbed in contemplating glass marbles arranged on the surface of a table. This is my sincerity at the moment, since I forego other possibilities of greater and lesser import to witness this austere, Zen-like spectacle. But note that the glass marbles themselves are sincerely absorbed in sitting on the

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table, rather than melting in a furnace or hurtling through a mineshaft. (Though they may not be ‘marbles’ for anyone but humans or playful kittens, we need a nickname for the united object that we draw into our games.) The question for us is not the panpsychist query of whether these marbles have some sort of rudimentary thinking and feeling capacities, but whether they as real objects encounter the table-surface as a sensual one.

The answer is yes. We must ignore the usual connotations of sensuality and fix our gaze on a more primitive layer of the cosmos. It is clear that the marbles must stand somewhere in reality, in contact with certain other entities that stabilize them briefly in one state or another. The entities they confront cannot be real objects, since these withdraw from contact. Nor can the marbles run up against free-floating sensual qualities, for in the sensual realm qualities are always attached to objects. Only one alternative remains: the marbles are sincerely absorbed with sensual objects. This indirect argument becomes more persuasive if we examine the landscape inhabited by the marbles, which turns out to share the basic structural features of human intentionality. First, notice that these marbles are perfectly capable of distinguishing between the table and the contiguous relational environment, even if not in the panpsychist sense of a primitive judging ability. At present the marbles sit on the table, but are otherwise surrounded by air; hence, this air is contiguous with the tabletop in the life of each marble. But if we now carefully frame the marbles with bookends or melted wax, the table itself remains the same intentional object, unaffected by our eccentric manipulations. Second, the marble confronts the

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tabletop quite apart from its accidental coldness and slickness, though it probably registers these features in some way as well. If we heat the tabletop, or render its surface sticky or granulated by pouring different materials nearby, the table as an intentional object still remains the same. The final question is whether the marbles can make a distinction between the table and its more essential qualities, such as its hardness, levelness, solidity, and lack of perforation. Even humans can only make this distinction between objects and their qualities in very special cases; since I will soon describe these cases under the heading of ‘allure’, we should wait to ask whether glass marbles are able to follow suit. What is already evident is that all real objects inhabit a landscape of sensual ones, a playground whose fluctuations enable new real connections to arise. Some of these fluctuations are a mere domestic drama, while others provoke new relations with the outside. But whatever is special about human cognition belongs at a more complicated level of philosophy than these sensual objects, though it must be expressible in terms of them.

Elsewhere I have used the phrase ‘every relation is itself an object’, and still regard this statement as true. But since this article has redefined relations to include containment, sincerity, and contiguity, the slogan must be reworded as follows: ‘every connection is itself an object.’ The intentional act’s containment of me does not make the two of us into a new object, and neither (for the most part) do two or three nearby perceptions of cars make a unified object. But two vicariously linked real objects do form a new object, since they generate a new internal space.

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When two objects give rise to a new one through vicarious connection, they create a new unified whole that is not only inexhaustible from the outside, but also filled on the inside with a real object sincerely absorbed with sensual ones. And just as every connection is an object, every object is the result of a connection. The history of this connection remains inscribed in its heart, where its components are locked in a sort of kaleidoscopic duel. But connections occur only between two real objects, not any other combination. This entails that my relation to the sensual pine tree is not itself an object, but simply a face-off between two objects of utterly different kinds. Hence, although intentionality seems to be a relation between me and the sensual pine tree, this is merely its interior. The intention itself results only from the unexplained vicarious fusion of me with the real pine tree, or with whatever engenders my deluded belief that I perceive one.

To repeat, my relation with the sensual pine tree is not a full-blown connection, but only a sincerity. This sincerity can indeed be converted into an object, as happens in the analysis of our own intentions or someone else's. When I analyze my relation to the sensual tree, I have converted that relation into an object for the first time. It has become a real object insofar as its exact nature recedes from view, inexhaustible no matter how many analyses I perform. We now face a merely sensual apparition of the original sincere relation, which withdraws from analysis just as hammers withdraw from handling. A second, more tedious observer might now decide to perform an analysis of my analysis, thereby converting it into an object whose nature can never be grasped, and so on to infinity. But note that this is not



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an infinite regress: all of these objects are not contained infinitely in the situation from the outset, but are sequentially produced *ad nauseum* by an increasingly twisted and pedantic series of analysts. Back in stage one, even my relation to the sensual pine tree is not a real object, but simply a sincere relation of two distinct elements inside a larger one. Unified objects can be molded at will from that clay-like interior. This already shows a way for sincere relations to be converted into real connections. Whether it is the only such way, and whether this method belongs to humans alone, is still unclear.

Another point is in order before passing to the final section. To say that every object is located on the sensual molten core of another object undermines some of the key assumptions of Heidegger. For him, human being partially transcends other beings, rising to glimpse them against a background of nothingness. But the interior of an object leaves no room for transcendence or even distance: a horse seen in a valley several miles away still touches me directly insofar as I witness it. Distance lies not in the sphere of perception, where everything brushes me directly with greater or lesser intensity, but only between the mutually exclusive real objects that lie beyond perception. We do not step beyond anything, but are more like moles tunneling through wind, water, and ideas no less than through speech-acts, texts, anxiety, wonder, and dirt. We do not transcend the world, but only descend or burrow towards its numberless underground cavities – each a sort of kaleidoscope where sensual objects spread their colours and their wings. There is neither finitude nor negativity in the heart of objects. And each case of human mortality is just

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one tragic event among trillions of others, including the deaths of house pets, insects, stars, civilizations, and poorly managed shops or universities. The Heidegger-Blanchot death cult must be expelled from ontology, and perhaps even from metaphysics.

4. ALLURE AND CAUSATION

Some may find it disturbing to think of the world as made up of vacuum-sealed objects, each with a sparkling phenomenal interior invaded only now and then by neighboring objects. A more likely problem, however, is indifference. There seems to be no need for such a weird vision of reality, since it is easy enough to think of the world as made of brute pieces of inescapable solid matter: ‘primary qualities’ supporting a series of more dashing, volatile human projections. In my view, however, Heidegger has rendered this picture of the world obsolete. Though his tool-analysis aims to describe only the withdrawal of objects behind explicit human awareness, practical activity is equally unable to exhaust the depth of objects, and even causal relations fail to let them encounter one another in full.⁴ Finally, even sheer physical presence in space is a concept shaken to the core by the tool-analysis: after all, to occupy a spatial position is to take up relations, and however objects might occupy space, their reality is something deeper. The world is neither a grey matrix of objective elements, nor raw material for a sexy human drama projected onto gravel and sludge. Instead, it

4. The idea that physical relations also have an intentional structure is a minority view, but by no means my own invention. See for instance George Molnar’s fascinating *Powers: A Study in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 60 ff.

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is filled with points of reality woven together only loosely: an archipelago of oracles or bombs that explode from concealment only to generate new sequestered temples. The language here is metaphorical because it must be. While analytic philosophy takes pride in never suggesting more than it explicitly states, this procedure does no justice to a world where objects are always more than they literally state. Those who care only to generate arguments almost never generate objects. New objects, however, are the sole and sacred fruit of writers, thinkers, politicians, travellers, lovers, and inventors.

Along with the distinction between real and sensual objects, there were five possible kinds of relations between them: containment, contiguity, sincerity, connection, and none. Our goal is to shed some light on the origin of connection, the one relation of the five that seems most troubling for a theory of ghostly, receding objects. A connection simply exists or fails to exist; it is a purely binary question. Furthermore, connection must be vicarious, since one purely naked object always recedes from another. An object simply exists, and this existence can never fully be mirrored in the heart of another. What we seek is some fertile soil of relation from which connections surge up into existence: a type of relation able to serve as the engine of change in the cosmos. 'Connection' itself cannot provide the solution, since this is precisely what we are trying to explain; if two objects are connected, then the labour we wish to observe is already complete. The option 'no relation at all' also fails to help, since if things are unrelated then they will remain so, as long as the intermediary we seek is lacking. 'Containment'

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is of no assistance either. Here too we have a merely binary question: either the sensual pine tree and I are together inside a given intention, or we are not. Finally, 'contiguity' does not give us what we need: at best, the shifting play of sensual objects redistributes the boundaries between them, but cannot lead to real changes outside their molten internal homeland. The only remaining option is 'sincerity.' This must be the site of change in the world. A real object resides in the core of an intention, pressed up against numerous sensual ones. Somehow, it pierces their colored mists and connects with a real object already in the vicinity but buffered from direct contact. If light can be shed on this mechanism, the nature of the other four types of relation may be clarified as well.

It all comes down to the dynamics of sincerity, whether of a human or any other real object. Sincerity contends with sensual objects that are defined by their qualities and shrouded with peripheral accidents and relations. What we seek is the manner in which sincere relation with a sensual object is transformed into direct connection with a real one. The coupling and uncoupling of real and sensual objects is now our central theme. We know that a sensual object is detachable from its accidents and relations. The interesting question is whether it can also be detached from its qualities, which seem to belong to it more intimately. By qualities I mean the essential qualities, without which we would regard an object as no longer the same thing. Remember, there is no hand-wringing crisis of objectivity here, since we are speaking of qualities that belong not to the essence of a real object, but only to the sensual things that command our attention – a realm where we ourselves

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are the highest judge in the land. Now, it might be imagined that we could liberate the qualities of the marbles by overtly discovering and listing all the crucial features that the marbles cannot do without. This was the great hope of Husserl's method of eidetic variation. But the effect of this procedure is superficial, and does not grasp the sensual marbles in their essence. Notice that even as our analysis of these objects proceeds, we continue to take them seriously as units, even if we brilliantly slice them into thousands of separate features. Even in the case of a sensual object, the essential qualities cannot be stated or analyzed without becoming something like accidents: free-floating traits artificially detached from the sensual object as a whole. Our sincerity is not really concerned with such a list of detached features, as Husserl realizes when he grants privilege to unified sensual objects over their myriad facets. The unity of such objects even indicates that there is just one quality at issue: this marble-essence, this pine-essence. The unified quality of the thing is not noise at all, but is the sensual object itself. Concerning Aristotle's question as to whether a thing is identical with its essence, the answer for sensual objects is yes. Although qualities were described as a form of noise earlier in this article, this is true only insofar as they veer off toward the status of accidents, when broken free and itemized separately. But the existence of a unified quality of things means that the sensual realm is already home to a certain 'I know not what' that makes the marble a steady focus of my attention. Unlike the followers of Locke, we do not say *je ne sais quoi* in a spirit of gentle mockery, but as a true statement about sensual objects. The sensual thing itself

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has a unified and basically ineffable effect on us, one that cannot be reduced to any list of traits. But if such listing of traits does not sever a thing from its quality, there may be another way for this to happen. We have also seen that vicarious causation – the enchanted unicorn we seek – requires contact with the essential qualities of a thing without contact with the thing as a whole. In this way, discovery of how the sensual object splits from its quality may be a stepping-stone toward discovering an analogous event among real objects.

The separation between a sensual object and its quality can be termed 'allure.'⁵ This term pinpoints the bewitching emotional effect that often accompanies this event for humans, and also suggests the related term 'allusion,' since allure merely alludes to the object without making its inner life directly present. In the sensual realm, we encounter objects encrusted with noisy accidents and relations. We may also be explicitly aware of some of their essential qualities, though any such list merely transforms the qualities into something accident-like, and fails to give us the unified bond that makes the sensual thing a single thing. Instead, we need an experience in which the sensual object is severed from its joint unified quality, since this will point for the first time to a real object lying beneath the single quality on the surface. For humans, metaphor is one such experience. When the poet writes 'my heart is a furnace,' the sensual object known as a heart captures vaguely defined furnace-qualities and draws them haltingly into its orbit. The inability of the heart to fuse easily with furnace-traits (in

5. See also *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 142-4.

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contrast with literal statements such as ‘my heart is the strongest muscle in my body’) achieves allusion to a ghostly heart-object lying beneath the overly familiar sensual heart of everyday acquaintance. Notice that the inverse metaphor is entirely asymmetrical to the first: ‘the furnace is a heart’ draws cardiac traits into the orbit of a sensual furnace, which is freed from bondage to its usual features and evoked as a sort of hidden furnace-soul, one whose *animus* now powers rhythmic beating and circulation. Humour does something similar: we can follow Bergson’s *On Laughter* and note the tension between a comic dupe and the traits he no longer freely adapts to changing circumstances. These qualities are now exposed as a discrete visible shell beneath which the agent haplessly fails to control them. There are countless examples of allure. In instances of beauty, an object is not the sum total of beautiful colors and proportions on its surface, but a kind of soul animating the features from within, leading to vertigo or even hypnosis in the witness. When Heidegger’s hammer fails, a concealed hammer-object seems to loom from the darkness, at a distance from its previously familiar traits. In language, names call out to objects deeper than any of their features; in love, the beloved entity has a certain magic hovering beneath the contours and flaws of its accessible surface. The list of possibilities is so vast that they deserve to be categorized in some encyclopedic work of aesthetics. Until now, aesthetics has generally served as the impoverished dancing-girl of philosophy – admired for her charms, but no gentleman would marry her. Yet given the apparently overwhelming scope of allure, aesthetics may deserve a rather vast role in ontology.

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Different sensual objects within the same intention are described as contiguous; they do not melt together, but are treated by the intentional agent as distinct, and this agent is the final court of appeal in the sensual realm. This pertains to what has been termed the relations of sensual objects. But accidents are a different case. The surface of a sensual object does not merely lie side-by-side with it. Even though we look straight through these accidents to stay fixed on the underlying sensual thing, the accidents are not viewed as separate from that thing, but are encrusted onto it. This frosting-over with peripheral qualities comes about in an interesting way. Recall that the sensual tree as a whole is made up of just one quality (the one from which it is severed in allure). But notice that this unified tree-apparition still has parts. If we start taking away branches and leaves, there will come a point at which we no longer regard it as the same tree; the tree is dependent on its parts. Yet these parts are only unified in the tree along one specific path. It never devours them completely, but employs only a limited portion of their reality. What we know as the accidents of the sensual tree are simply the remainder of its parts, the remnant not deployed in the new object. Each of these parts is complicated because it is made up of further parts, and so on to infinity. But however far we advance toward this infinity, we continue to find objects, not raw sense data. It would be wrong to think that we confront a field of colour-pixels and then mold them into objective zones. For in the first place, it is arbitrary to think that points of green are more qualitatively basic than a unified tree-quality or branch-quality; all are capable of filling up my sincerity, and all

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have a specific personal style. And in the second place, even a supposed pixel of green at least takes the spatial form of a dot, and hence is a complicated object in its own right. There are always largest objects in the sensual realm: namely, those that are recognized by sincerity at any moment. But one cannot find a smallest, since there will always be a leftover remainder of parts, and parts of parts, like the endless overtones of notes struck on a piano. These accidents are the only possible source of change, since they alone are the potential bridge between one sensual object and another. For there can be no changes in the sensual object itself, which is always a recognized *fait accompli*; at most, it can be eliminated and replaced by a new one. Accidents alone have the dual status of belonging and not belonging to an object, like streamers on a maypole, or jewels on a houka. Accidents are tempting hooks protruding from the sensual object, allowing it the chance to connect with others and thereby fuse two into one.

But the relation of part and whole does not occur only in the sensual realm. A real object, too, is formed of parts whose disappearance threatens its very existence.

The difference is that the parts of a sensual object are encrusted onto its surface: or rather, certain aspects of those parts are fused to create it, while the remainder of those parts emanates from its surface as noise. By contrast, the parts of a real object are contained on the interior of that object, not plastered onto its outer crust. In both cases, however, there is a vicarious cause enabling the parts to link together. This can be clarified through the historical difference between scepticism and occasionalism, which are complementary in the same manner as encrustation and

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connection. Hume and Malebranche face opposite versions of the same problem. Although Hume supposedly doubts the possibility of connection, note that for him a connection has actually already occurred: he is never surprised that two billiard balls lie simultaneously in his mind, but doubts only that they have independent force capable of inflicting blows on each other. In this sense, Hume actually begins with connection inside experience and merely doubts any separation outside it. Conversely, Malebranche begins by assuming the existence of separate substances, but doubts that they can occupy a shared space in such a way as to exchange their forces – leading him to posit God’s power as the ultimate joint space of all entities. Like Hume, we can regard the intentional agent as the vicarious cause of otherwise separate phenomena. The tree and its mountainous backdrop are indeed distinct, yet they are unified insofar as I am sincerely absorbed with both. But more than this: when the parts of the tree fuse to yield the tree with its single fixed tree-quality, I too am the vicarious cause for the connection of these sensual objects. Even if I merely sit passively, without unduly straining eyes or mind, it is still for me that these parts have combined. Here, a real object (I myself) serves as the vicarious cause for two or more sensual ones. In the inverted case of Malebranche, we cannot accept the pistol shot of the deity as our vicarious cause, since no explanation is given of how God as a real object could touch other real objects; fear of blasphemy is the sole protection for this incomplete doctrine. Instead, just as two sensual objects are vicariously linked by a real one, two real objects must be vicariously linked by a sensual one. I make contact with another

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object, not through impossible contact with its interior life, but only by brushing its surface in such a manner as to bring its inner life into play. Just as only the opposite poles of magnets make contact, and just as the opposite sexes alone are fertile, it is also the case that two objects of the same type do not directly touch one another. Contiguity between sensual objects is impossible without a real intentional agent, and connection between real ones does not occur except by means of a sensual intermediary.

This entails that all contact must be asymmetrical. However deeply I burrow into the world, I never encounter anything but sensual objects, and neither do real objects ever encounter anything but my own sensual facade. The key to vicarious causation is that two objects must somehow touch without touching. In the case of the sensual realm, this happens when I the intentional agent serve as vicarious cause for the fusion of multiple sensual objects: a fusion that remains only partial, encrusted with residual accidents. But in the case of real objects, the only way to touch a real one without touching it is through allure. Only here do we escape the deadlock of merely rolling about in the perfumes of sensual things, and encounter qualities belonging to a distant signalling thing rather than a carnally present one. The only way to bring real objects into the sensual sphere is to reconfigure sensual objects in such a way that they no longer merely fuse into a new one, as parts into a whole, but rather become animated by allusion to a deeper power lying beyond: a real object. The gravitational field of a real object must somehow invade the existing sensual field. Just as I am the vicarious link between two sensual objects, the

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alluring tree is the vicarious link between me and the real tree. The exact dynamics of this process deserve a lengthier treatment, but something unusual has already become evident. The separation of a thing from its quality is no longer a local phenomenon of human experience, but instead is the root of all relations between real objects, including causal relations. In other words, allure belongs to ontology as a whole, not to the special metaphysics of animal perception. Relations between all real objects, including mindless chunks of dirt, occur only by means of some form of allusion. But insofar as we have identified allure with an aesthetic effect, this means that aesthetics becomes first philosophy.