

# WHO'S AFRAID OF ONTOLOGY?

## Tables, Humans and the arrival of Object-Oriented Social Theory (O.O.S.T)

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### Introduction

*"[...] the sentences continue to move in the indeterminate, in the grey, in a kind of no man's land of experience" (CALVINO, 1990, p. 15)*

Ontology is a thorny and complex concept loaded with singular traits, regardless of whether one navigates in analytic or continental waters. Some speak of the uselessness of this concept (Carnap), others of its tendency to be forgotten (Heidegger); some define its outlines (Lukács), others deny this process of definition (Deleuze); some observe its contingency (Meillassoux), while others emphasize its necessity (Hegel); some understand it as a flow of differences (Nietzsche), others as identity (Adorno); some speak of its absence (Kant), while others speak of its excessive presence (Žižek); some use a representational model (Dawkins), while others speak of something mystical beyond representation (Wittgenstein). In the philosophical field the term *ontology* implies different traits, involving various lines of thought,

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as well as authors of the most varied schools. In Contemporary Social Theory on the other hand, this diversity is reduced to a phenomenological debate<sup>2</sup>. This does not necessarily mean that the authors involved are phenomenologists, or that they even understand what phenomenology represents, but only that this approach remains on the horizon, almost as a Foucauldian *episteme*, that is, as the conditions of possibility for questions, concepts, debates and other products of the academic universe.

In fact, anthropologists [and sociologists] who embrace phenomenological aims do not always explicitly apply the phenomenological method (the reduction or *epoche*), engage the work of phenomenological thinkers (Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty), or elaborate themes and concepts typically associated with phenomenology as a descriptive enterprise (intersubjectivity, thematization, embodiment). For the most part, any anthropologist [and sociologist] concerned in the least with the category of 'experience' is likely to claim to be doing, or be identified by others as doing, phenomenology (KATZ; CSORDAS, 2003, p. 277)

The ontological horizon, at least within the humanities and social sciences, basically boils down to the terrain of *experience*, generally using the Heideggerian distinction (and hierarchy) between *present-at-hand* (and its epistemological and representational products) and *ready-to-hand* (and its practical and pre-reflexive sphere). This type of approach can be found in several authors of the social sciences, but mainly in the *ontological turn*, *phenomenological sociology* and *anthropology*, *existential sociology*, as well as in classical approaches involving symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. Adopting a Heideggerian model (at least our interpretation of Heidegger) to speak of practice, especially that which is more spontaneous and involves the body and the dynamics of affect, presents itself as a guarantee of ontological contact with things, the assurance that we finally access reality and not representational distortions of it. Concepts like *experience*, for this reason, not only populate the vocabulary of thousands of papers, books and lectures, but are also offered as a means to access ontological foundations. According to Karl Jaspers, "people wanted 'life', wanted 'really to live'. They demanded 'realism'. Instead of wanting merely to know, they wanted to experience for themselves. Everywhere, they sought 'authenticity', searched for 'origins' [...]" (JASPERS, 1971,

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<sup>2</sup> There are pragmatic approaches as well, although at the end of the day they share the same characteristics as the more phenomenological ones, especially when they offer practice as a synonym for ontology.

p. 4). In other words, "[...] we should live and not interpret our lives [...]" (SHELLEY, 2010, p. 105).

Practice presents itself as a guarantee of contact with the world, a type of bridge to what exists out there, unlike epistemic approaches that transform everything into abstract entities and disembodied propositions. The Husserlian *Epoché*, by putting reality between parentheses, presents itself as a head-dive not only into the “*phenomenological attitude*” (SOKOLOWSKI, 2000, p. 47), but also into the world as such. Subject (normally humans) and reality are mixed together in a clear and unavoidable *transcendental reduction*. This means that “[...] we cannot get out of ourselves” (SOKOLOWSKI, 2000, p. 43), since this “we” is a substance dissolved in the very fabric of reality, a necessary condition of access and meaning. In one of his most important texts, called “What is phenomenology?”, Merleau-Ponty summarizes very well the phenomenological enterprise and its transcendental reduction when he says that “the world is what we perceive” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1969, p. 37). World and Perception, Reality and Experience, are completely confused, overlapping with each other and constituting an undifferentiated and correlationalist field.

Undoubtedly, this notion of ontology as a complete process of undifferentiation implies many interesting outcomes, mainly within anthropological research that resignifies the practice of the Other<sup>3</sup>, going beyond culturalist and epistemological explanations. In other words, it is common to believe that in Social Theory “phenomenology is the way to ontology; or, rather, ontology is only possible as phenomenology” (SPARROW, 2014, p. 38). This is what Meillassoux called *correlationism*, and Harman labelled *philosophies of access*, that is, the idea that to speak of the world is necessarily to speak of a subject implicated in that world. Subject and reality present themselves as an undifferentiated whole, both in a spontaneous dance, without any kind of dualism or separation. That is, “[...] the perceived world is before or beyond antinomy” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2003, p. 32). As a consequence, a correlationalist and phenomenologically grounded sociology promotes an understanding of reality as a practical and spontaneous creation, a collective and daily undertaking. Ontology, therefore, becomes synonymous with experience and “non-themed” interactions, involving what Giddens called *practical consciousness* (GIDDENS, 2003, p. 56). “For the phenomenologist the limits of ontology, of what is real, are aligned with the limits of [...] experience” (SPARROW, 2014, p.

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<sup>3</sup> “Culture as lived is never exactly the same as represented culture” (KATZ; CSORDAS, 2003, p. 285).

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The critique of representationalism in Social Theory<sup>4</sup>, and the bet on *experience* as a foundation for meaning, would supposedly be a return to an ontological terrain. Similarly, betting on the concept of "body"<sup>5</sup>, or even on its pragmatic unfolding, could also be our passport to enter the world, avoiding distorted and abstract forms of contact. Phrases like "daily practice needs no theorist to reveal its 'underlying structure. '[...] Practice lacks nothing" (LATOURE, 1984, p. 179), reveal this phenomenological approach and present practice as a point of entry to the world<sup>6</sup>. This essay's argument, however, suggests the opposite, starting from Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) as an alternative to understand the ontological debate in the social sciences from another perspective. Would practice be as much of a distortion of the ontological sphere as theory? If Harman's argument makes sense, what would our new passport to enter the world be? If the body and experience distort everything they touch, if they simplify and abstract like any concept or criterion, which path should we follow? Is there a choice that avoids all forms of reductionism?

In any case, it should be clear that the central point of this essay is not a critique of the concept of experience, but of its "Kantianization" present in phenomenological and even pragmatist approaches. This means that it is possible, within Object-Oriented Social Theory (HARMAN, 2017, p. 126), to speak of an experience without a subject, as we can see in Meillassoux's critique of "subjectalism" (SHAVIRO, 2014), or Whitehead's (1978) concept of "prehension" or the "Sensual Object" proposed by Harman (2010). In other words, the problem with the concept of experience is its transcendentalism<sup>7</sup>, besides, of course, the anthropocentric traits it carries within itself. This means that instead of thinking of *experience* as a necessary and suffocating horizon of meaning, as a structure dissolved in everything that is made and

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<sup>4</sup> This criticism of representationalism was influenced by the existentialist phenomenology of the first Heidegger and his deconstruction of the *metaphysics of presence*. Reality, from this critique, no longer presents itself as a Cartesian and self-transparent showcase (epistemological realism), being now an indefinite, complex and distant field of conceptual maneuvers.

<sup>5</sup> I am referring to the phenomenological concept, a type of body that I call transcendental, as will become clear shortly. So, my criticism does not apply to vitalist versions of body, as we can see in Spinoza and even Deleuze with his decentered alternative, the body without organs.

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that Latour welcomes a complete phenomenological ontology. It also suggests the idea that even objects tend to simplify other objects when they interact with each other, which he called *interpretation*. This approach that understands practice as an exercise that simplifies, besides abstracting what exists, has greatly influenced Graham Harman himself, as will become clear at the end of this essay.

<sup>7</sup> Following Catherine Malabou (2014), "transcendentalism" and "correlationism" will be used here as synonyms.

articulated, following the path of an *Epoché*, it can also be seen as just an ingredient within a reality that goes beyond any kind of phenomenological or pragmatic pact. The *experience* cannot be synonymous with ontology, despite its importance and its decisive character within philosophical and sociological analyses. Experience, with an emphasis on human experience, therefore, cannot be presented as a transcendental, or as a necessary condition for access to the world, but in an imploded, less Kantian way<sup>8</sup>.

### **Ontology and transcendentalism**

Phenomenological experience is a horizon of meaning, even if it is not representational (epistemic), i.e, composed of ideas, concepts and categories, but of *pre-reflexive* practices (*non-thematic*). In other words, spontaneous experience does not present itself as an arbitrary bundle of impressions, as in Hume's empiricism, so criticized by William James and Graham Harman, but as a systematic whole. That is, "[...] perception and movement form a system [...]" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1991, p. 160), an integrated and meaningful dimension. Despite the possibilities mobilized by each of these approaches, the two instances (epistemic and practical) limit our means of analysis, not least because they remain trapped in what in philosophy is called *transcendentalism*. Roughly speaking, this transcendentalist matrix, whether practical or theoretical, "[...] organizes our experience into a meaningful totality" (ŽIŽEK, 1992, p. 15). According to Levi-Bryant, "the transcendental [...] refers to that which is a *condition* for some other practice, form of cognition, or activity" (BRYANT, 2011, p. 42). As a form, it can assume, various configurations, such as *subject, ego, God, human, class, body, nature*, etc. Imagine this matrix as a tower, a type of support that helps to organize the dispersed elements around you: in this case, the semiotic elements in a text, or even data extracted from experience itself as phenomenological content, being a product of a more spontaneous involvement in the world. There are, therefore, *theoretical* and *practical* transcendental structures, that is, transcendentals that can be found in dissertations and theses, but also in Carlos' bakery or in Katy's pet shop. Even while varying in size, color and shape, this tower always plays the same role in structuring reasoning, practice and life itself. This kind of practical transcendentalism, this spontaneous and pre-reflexive consistency, has gained several names in

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<sup>8</sup> This process of "deskantianization" can also be understood as a "deflationary way" (SHAVIRO, 2014, p. 53) of understanding those concepts, that is, a more modest, open and non-transcendental procedure, especially when the human comes out of the equation.

social theory, such as *ontological security*<sup>9</sup> (GIDDENS, 2003, p. 75), *comforting objectivity* (GASSET, 1964, p. 82), *fullness of meaning* (BECKER, 1973, p. 214), *non-epistemic truth* (HABERMAS, 1999), *practical sense* (BOURDIEU, 2014, p. 174), *organ without body* (ŽIŽEK, 2004)<sup>10</sup>, *principle of identity* (ADORNO, 1970, p. 15), in addition to many other terms, although all share the same Kantian matrix in the background, as will become clear in the next section.

According to Harman, and other OOO authors, it is not possible to talk about ontology while we remain within this Kantian and phenomenological horizon. In other words, "[...] transcendental subjectivity simply corresponds to the task of phenomenological research [...]" (GADAMER, 1997, p. 37). Instead of guaranteeing our access to the world, and overcoming representational investments, phenomenological "experience" can be seen as an obstacle to effective ontological debates. An example offered by Harman can be found in his rereading of the famous "hammer case" in Heidegger. By denying the Heideggerian distinction between theory (*present-at-hand*) and practice (*ready-to-hand*), Harman states that either the spontaneous use of the hammer, or the act of reflecting on it at the moment of its breaking, would be two equally reductionist processes. Practice is no more problem-free than theory, as phenomenologists in the Social Sciences imagine, as if the former accessed the world in a direct, spontaneous and realistic way. This space of interactions, this practical arrangement between *Dasein* and its surroundings, a phenomenological and pragmatic dimension in *Being and Time*, ends up being seen by Harman as another obstacle.

Several existential sociologists, many influenced by pragmatism, and mainly by phenomenology, dedicate their studies to this transcendental sphere, involving the conditions for maintaining the world, be it in a more localized and micro way, as in Goffman and Garfinkel, or even in synthesis models as in Bourdieu and his *genetic sociology*, or Giddens and his *Structuration Theory*. In many moments this parallel between phenomenology, Kant and social sciences is presented clearly and directly: the "OT [Ontological Turn] in anthropology is a

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<sup>9</sup> According to this British sociologist, "ontological security is a form, but a very important form, of feeling secure in the broad sense in which I used the term earlier. The phrase refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (GIDDENS, 1990, p. 92). Other concepts in Giddens' sociology, such as routinization and regionalization, end up also being examples of this search for a spontaneous and pre-reflexive consistency (GIDDENS, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> If the "body without organ" (DELEUZE, 1987, p. 4) is a pure chaotic and decentralized flow, the "organ without body", proposed by Žižek, on the contrary, is precisely the refusal of all contingency, almost a synonym of "ontological security".

planned attempt to use the transcendental method first instituted in Kant's critique and later refined by Husserl and his *Epoché* in relation to the specific problem of ethnographic materials" (PEDERSEN, 2020, p. 26). The commitment, in this very phenomenological sense, is to explain the consistency of phenomena, the fact that they are what they are, what Adorno (1970) called identity. For these authors, it is precisely the identity of phenomena that defines its ontological background, besides the diverse strategies applied to guarantee its firmness. Of course, this consistency is not epistemic, involving the conditions of possibility of knowledge, but rather what Merleau-Ponty called the *conditions of existence*, as can be seen in Garfinkel's ethnomethodology (next section). There is, therefore, an *empirical* (practical) *transcendentalism*, involving the very construction of the world and the guarantee of its solidity and consistency. "Throughout the twentieth century phenomenology promised to get us 'back to the things themselves', that is, back in touch with the world of lived experience *as it is lived*. But what phenomenology actually delivers is a subtler version of the Kantian world" (SPARROW, 2014, p. 30).

According to Harman, and other authors of Object-Oriented Ontology, and psychoanalytical approaches, the ontological dimension cannot be found in the streets or corridors of everyday life, but rather in moments when their self-evidence fails, becomes silent or overflows. The hypothesis of these authors, unlike phenomenological approaches, is that the ontological sphere "[...] is not something that can anywhere be found in *experience*" (BRYANT, 2011, p. 85). Transcendentalism and ontology are incompatible, although there are little bridges that we can notice, as will become clear below. Ontological reality, as in Žižek, will be understood here as a kind of fissure, a rare instant, and not an obvious starting point as defended by phenomenologists (*correlationism*). To speak of ontology, therefore, is to speak of a dimension that cannot be accessed either by arguments or practices but rather by something oblique and more peripheral, as we shall see.

### **Garfinkel and transcendentalism**

In Garfinkel, unlike his master Talcott Parsons and systemic versions of social theory, individuals do not act according to internalized categories or introjected representations, but rather based on performative (though non-epistemic) attitudes. In other words, daily and practical transcendentalism, which maintains the undifferentiation between subject and world, and a sense of consistency throughout the scenes of each gesture and speech act, ends up being

an aesthetic<sup>11</sup> and continuous process. We are dealing with "materialized forms of creative continuity" (GIDDENS, 2003, p. 237), rather than rigid matrices that mechanically determine actions. Social actors present this curious characteristic, an attitude that guarantees the very identity of phenomena. In general, by using a kind of *stock of knowledge* (SCHÜTZ, 1979, p. 74), they try to evade dissonance, chaos, and contradiction, almost always through the rearrangement of their experiences and memories within an ordered, though pre-reflexive, whole. After all, "when I realize it, I cannot imagine the world: it organizes itself before me" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1983, p. 107). In other words, this horizon of meaning is found "behind the backs of the participants in interaction, [being] the unquestioned context of the process of understanding" (HABERMAS, 1999, p. 436), what Heidegger called a *remissive context*. This transcendental attitude, as an identity, does not necessarily present itself in an epistemic form, as a *discursive consciousness* (GIDDENS, 2003, p. 84), involving arguments, concepts and criteria, but rather as a spontaneous experience, almost an undifferentiated flow of exchanges, interactions and conversations. In this predictable (and perhaps convenient) process both body and language present themselves as an unfolding of this *transcendentalism*, thus ensuring the coherence of experience, what was called *transcendental body and language*. There is a kind of *adaptive mechanism* at play, a process of adjustment and resignification of the subject in the face of the "contingencies of reality" (BERGER, 1985, p. 48; FROMM, 1990, p. 23; GEERTZ, 1973, p. 57). That is the reason why "we need any idea that helps us to deal, practically and intellectually, with reality or its belongings, that does not disturb our progress with frustrations, that actually adjusts and adapts our life [...]" (JAMES, 1997, p. 96).

Fontaine's adaptation of the fable of the fox and the grapes is instructive here. The fox, disappointed that she did not get the grapes she wanted so much, and frustrated by the effort and time lost, decides to abandon her quest, claiming that the grapes were green. Similar to this simple and profound allegory, everyday life unfolds via a creative chain of encounters, generating a kind of "practical harmony" in the face of various phenomena, including the most unpredictable and unpleasant circumstances, those that overwhelm and exceed our own capacity for comprehension, mocking our unity and the certainty of *natural attitudes* and the *horizons* at play. This conforming and centralizing profile of the subject in its daily life can be understood in a Kantian way, as a *transcendental*, although always in a performative and

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<sup>11</sup> "Aesthetics" not only in the ordinary sense of art, but also as "body," "sensibility", as suggested by authors such as Baumgarten, Kant, and Nietzsche. In other words, aesthetics as a theory of affects.



aesthetic manner, involving not only art as productive of meaning, but also the body and its pragmatic and phenomenological implications. In other words, this transcendental matrix exists as "practical purposes" (GARFINKEL, 1967, p. 7).

To understand the role of this transcendental and correlationalist matrix in the pragmatic and phenomenological context more clearly<sup>12</sup>, we can appeal to some particular experimental research. The purpose is precisely to observe the nuances of this process, every detail of its manifestation, as well as the creativity involved behind the scenes. Instead of understanding its existence as an *a priori*, as it is usually thought, that is, only epistemically, correlationism can also be seen as a continuous process, involved in concrete pragmatic contexts. In the same way as the *Big Other*, an illusorily solid, external and coercive figure, this Kantian matrix "[...] is fragile, unsubstantial, properly virtual [...]. [It] only exists to the extent that subjects act as if [it] existed" (ŽIŽEK, 2006, p. 18); it is "something that is sustained by their continuous activity" (ŽIŽEK, 2006, p. 19). As has already been said, there are two distinct ways in Social Theory of understanding this transcendentalism: 1) the epistemic version (theoretical and representationalist), involving arguments, concepts and interpretative arrangements, and b) the phenomenological version, in its most spontaneous profile of a *practical consciousness*.

Garfinkel, in the following experiment, aims to analyze the way social actors manage what he called the *documentary method*, a curious strategy that guarantees the consistency of experience, as well as a basic sense of identity, thus preserving its effectiveness and solidity, especially when facing strange, dangerous or absurd circumstances, what Jonathan Haidt (2012) called *dissonance*. For this reason, "each subject sews his correlations like the threads of a spider, relative to certain properties of things, and weaves them into a solid web that supports his existence" (UEXKÜLL, 1982, p. 42). The example brought by Garfinkel involves language and justification, which although it sounds like an epistemic rather than phenomenological sphere, is the opposite, mainly because "the word brings its meaning in the same way that the body is constituted in the embodiment of a behavior" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1993, p. 110). Language and body are parallel transcendentals, the result of a practical and spontaneous commitment to the world.

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<sup>12</sup> As should be evident by now, I start from the idea that "[...] Garfinkel is following the known movements of Husserl and other phenomenologists" (ANDERSON; HUGHES; SHARROCK, p. 1985, p. 224).

In his research presented in the book *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Garfinkel (1967) offers a curious investigation, so curious that perhaps, for ethical reasons, it could not be reproduced today. Without immediately revealing the premise of his research, he invites some students who may be interested in an appointment with a psychologist. This participation requires certain prerequisites: *First, the questions asked by the students will be answered by the psychologist in the form of "yes" or "no" answers. Second, after the answer "yes" or "no" offered by the psychologist, the student must explain the reason for that answer, justifying their possible motivations.* That is a direct and apparently simple procedure. A detail, however, was purposely omitted from the instructions offered to the students, one that is a key assumption of all Garfinkel's research, and also for this essay. The summary of the controversial experiment is this:

**Subject:** Ok, this is the situation that I am presented with. I happen to be of the Jewish faith and I have been dating a Gentile girl now for about two months. My dad is not directly opposed to this situation, but I feel at the same time that he is not exactly pleased with it [...] My question is, do you feel under the circumstances [...] Do you feel that I should continue dating this girl?

**Experimenter:** My answer is no

**Subject:** No. Well, that is kind of interesting. I kinda feel that there is really no great animosity between dad and I but, well, perhaps he feels that greater dislike will grow out of this. I suppose or maybe it is easier for an outsider to see certain things that I am blind to at this moment. I would like to ask my second question now.

**Experimenter:** Okay

**Subject:** Do you feel that I should have a further discussion with dad about this situation or not? Should I have a further discussion with dad over this subject about dating the gentile girl?

**Experimenter:** My answer is yes

**Subject:** Well, I feel that is reasonable but I really don't know what to say to him. I mean he seems to be not really too understanding. In other words, he seems to be afraid really to discuss the situation [...] he really does not want me to date her, but he is only doing it because he wants to be a good dad, should under these conditions, should I still date the girl?

**Experimenter:** My answer is yes

**Subject:** Well, I am actually surprised at the answer. I expected a no answer on that. Perhaps this is because you are not quite aware of my dad and his reactions and he seems to be the type of person that is sensitive and therefore he is very careful in the way that he will handle things[...] If after having this discussion with dad and getting a positive answer from him but at the same time felt that this was not his honest opinion do you think that it would be proper for me to have my mother have a serious talk with him and therefore try and get a truer reaction to dad's opinion on the situation?

**Experimenter:** My answer is yes

**Subject:** Well, this seems fair to me. I feel perhaps that he would be more honest with mother about the situation [...]” (GARFINKEL, 1967, p. 80-81).

The conversation between the psychologist and the student in the experiment continues beyond what has been presented here, although without much variation as to the main meaning that runs through the dialogue as a whole. The story revolves around a Jewish boy who finds it difficult to talk to his father about his new relationship with a non-Jewish girl, while being distressed by the uncertainty of his feelings for her. In the course of the conversation, especially during moments of incoherence, the student tries to justify his doubts, gaps and

silences, all based on the psychologist's "yes" or "no", in the hope of a possible escape from his love dilemma. This experiment would not present anything extraordinary, mainly being a creative way of conceiving an analysis, if not for one simple detail: *all the answers given by the psychologist were arbitrary, based on a list defined before beginning the appointment*. What is curious is the extreme coherence with which the participant's discourse was associated with the psychologist's random answers, giving them a sense that, strictly speaking, was non-existent. "Throughout there was a concern and search for pattern" (GARFINKEL, 1967, p. 91). The active profile of the subject is taken here in all its intensity, revealing an interesting aesthetic dimension. Through his life experiences and the assumptions he had about the actions of others, in this case expectations regarding the role of the psychologist and his consequent legitimacy, he guaranteed a transcendental foundation behind the scenes of his own action. Even using language, his movement was pre-reflexive, spontaneous, and not a projected (epistemic) exercise, as happens in papers and lectures. His language, in a Merleau-Pontyean sense, is an extension of a background body. This experiential arrangement, accompanied by a whole vocabulary, guarantees "[...] an aspect of coherence, clarity and consistency sufficient for everyone to have a reasonable chance of understanding and being understood" (SCHÜTZ, 1979, p. 81).

Even when the psychologist's responses were contradictory, and the fabric of reality was completely torn, the spontaneous inclination towards coherence remained explicit in the student's discourse. In other words, a transcendentalism was assured thanks to the way experiences were intertwined, thus preserving what was most significant behind the scenes. Without doubt, "[...] he tried to find any justification in chance" (BALZAC, 2012, p. 410), and he succeeded; he managed to preserve mainly his religious convictions, avoiding any unnecessary threat or inconvenient excess, as well as ensuring the consistency of our most important transcendental: the *I*, the *Ego*. There was therefore a "presupposed underlying pattern" (GARFINKEL, 1967, p. 78), a significant totality to be preserved, that is, a practical transcendental matrix. Perhaps this matrix could be found in his own EGO, or even in its underlying religious reference, although the details do not matter. The most significant thing in the encounter between the student and the psychologist is the former's fear of having his completeness compromised, their fear of undermining the solidity of everything around them. "What exasperated him most was to find himself at the mercy of chance, randomness, probability, to confront, in human attitudes, sloppiness, imprecision, yours or others" (CALVINO, 1990, p. 25). Experience (always in a transcendentalist way) guarantees an

integrated sense for the subject, an *ontological security* (GIDDENS, 2003, p. 133), or a certainty that things exist within a solid whole, as well as the guarantee that his body and its signifiers are well supported by a consistent Kantian structure. In one of his best-known passages, Proust describes this level of certainty, this practical transcendentalism, when speaking of Mr. Vinteuil's daughter: "[...] an alluvium of misfortune or sickness, succeeding uninterruptedly in a family, will not make her doubt the generosity of her God [...]" (PROUST, 1913, p. 76). Nothing shakes the boundaries of transcendental experience, not even contradictions, failures, silences, or any other kind of inconvenience. Everything remains within the coherence of expectations, whatever they may be.

At the end of the experiment, anxious about what had just happened, the participant reports his impressions a little:

The answers I received I must say that the majority of them were answered perhaps in the same way that I would answer them to myself knowing the differences in types of people [...]. *I honestly believe the answers that he gave me, that he was completely aware of the situation at hand* (GARFINKEL, 1967, p. 84).

The participant was not suspicious of how arbitrary Mr. McHugh's words (the psychologist) were, nor of the contradictions lurking in the shadows of his own life, or the aesthetics involved in his speech and practice. In other words, transcendentalism, that is, the conditions of possibility (*present-at-hand*) and of existence (*ready-to-hand*) of experience, is not perceived in the flow of action, which leads the subject to believe in a direct link with things and people. This means that the *natural attitude* presupposes a correlationalist assumption, as if subject and world enter into a spontaneous and obvious dance, when in fact contact is always made by indirect means, a result not only of a certain transcendentalism behind the scenes, but also the result of a world that escapes and overflows, as will become clear in the next section.

At the end of the experiment, when all the questions had been asked, and arbitrarily answered with a laconic "yes" or "no", a certain coherent whole remained, and all doubt, rupture and suspicion was dispelled by the same transcendental beam. In the famous examples of the "clauses de *et cetera*" (GIDDENS, 2003, p. 77), proposed by Garfinkel himself, this mending effort or search for a certain significant fabric becomes quite evident, especially when words or phrases are omitted (ellipsis). Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, when trying to justify a diffuse sensation of hatred and resentment, demonstrates the same transcendental attitude as

Garfinkel's example:

A thousand works and good initiatives could be done with the money this old woman leaves to the monastery. Hundreds, perhaps thousands might be set on the right path; dozens of families saved from misery, from dissolution, from ruin, from corruption, from venereal hospitals [...] And all this with her money. Killing her, taking that money away from her, in order to consecrate it to the service of all humanity and to the general good (DOSTOIÉVSKI, 2004, p. 69).

Leaving the frozen lands of Russia, and arriving in New York, Melville, in one of the most beautiful and tragic passages in universal literature, also manages to condense the practical and spontaneous inclination of what we here called *transcendentalism*, as he describes Captain Ahab's interpretive maneuvering and his hallucinatory search for an underlying meaning:

All that most maddens and torments; all that upsets the stillness of things; all truth with a certain malice; all that destroys vigor and hardens the brain; all that is subtly demonic in life and thought; in short, all evil, for Ahab, became visible, personified, and confrontable in Moby Dick. He heaped upon the whale's white hump all the anger and rage felt by his whole race since the fall of Adam; and then, as if his breast were a mortar, there he blew the grenade of his burning heart (MELVILLE, 2013, p. 179).

Because it is not a simple *a priori*, or even a universal, transcendentalism (or correlationism) is more plastic than it may seem. This Kantian matrix, as an aesthetic work, is "self-imposed" and not a mechanical result of external elements, such as *devices, modes of production, field conflicts*, and other instances as vertical as these, just as "stigma"<sup>13</sup> for Goffman is not a vertically imposed label, but a continuous work produced by the hands of a performing subject. That is the reason why "[...] the aesthetic is not an intruder into experience, either through a vain luxury or an ideality [...], but that it is the clarified and intensified development of features that belong to every normally complete experience" (DEWEY, 1980, p. 97). To understand this basic dynamic, therefore, is also to understand the process of construction and

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<sup>13</sup> The result of this transcendentalism can be seen in several of the statements brought by Goffman. For example: "The stigmatized person may also see the privations he has suffered as a secret blessing, especially because of the belief that growth can teach a person about life and about other people" (GOFFMAN, 1963, p. 20).

reproduction of that transcendentalism, to understand its existence less as a structure of thought and more as a practical tool, a significant object within a certain performative and aesthetic game. In the various moments that go through our daily life, and its transcendental maneuvers, "we cannot find absolute rest, we must fight all the time to reduce our differences, to explain our misunderstood words, to manifest our hidden aspects [...]" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1983, p. 51).

While everything seems very creative and interesting within this transcendentalist sphere, it will be difficult to talk about an ontology while we are inside this space. By doing this creative work, the subject simplifies the surrounding world, limiting the possibilities of things, people, animals and circumstances within a convenient and meaningful whole. Harman has called this pragmatic and simplistic attitude *overmining*. According to OOO, the prerequisite for entering ontological reality is the breaking with of any Kantian trace or transcendentalist remnant. In other words, we should not only break with epistemic and representational arrangements coming from philosophers and social theorists; we also need to break with the pragmatic and phenomenological pact of everyday life, since it ends up being another obstacle in the ontology debate, as will become clear in the following.

### **Harman and the two forms of reductionism**

For Harman, there are two ways in which transcendentalism can express itself, not only through the eyes of philosophers and social theorists, but also according to any concrete person in the world. This section will clarify the whole trajectory of transcendentalism as an obstacle in social (and human) sciences and also suggest a possible escape from it, especially by proposing an Object-Oriented Social Theory (O.O.S.T).

"There are only two basic kinds of knowledge about things: we can explain what they are made of, or explain what they do" (HARMAN, 2017, p. 7). In other words, if someone asks you what an object is, there are two possible responses: The first describes how the object is *made*, its basic and elementary components, and the second involves what it *does*, that is, its interactions and effects. The first is *undermining*, an approach that reduces an object to its most basic components, identified here with the Pre-Socratics and their tireless search for the elements that structure reality as a whole. Perhaps it is *water* (Thales), *fire* (Heraclitus), *air* (Anaximenes), or the *Apeiron* (Anaximander). But what about Social Theory? Undermining can be observed in early Durkheim and in structuralist and functionalist authors, where there is

always a fundamental substratum that can explain not only the action of agents, but of reality as a whole. The objective, therefore, is to find this substrate, going beyond the superficial layers of agency, and digging into its depths in search of a lost kingdom. The method of *undermining* can be seen in Durkheim's positivism, especially when he uses sociology as a tool to reveal this basic and constituent substrate of reality, thereby removing the most superficial layers of action, such as those of a more psychological origin. In Harman's terms, objects in this approach present themselves in a shallow form, being second order elements awaiting the discovery of a deeper and more relevant layer.

In his book *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim compares sociology with any other type of hard science, suggesting that they share a similar (though not equivalent) scientific method. According to him, society should be understood as a *thing*, as a reality not only external to us and coercive, but also as something material and constitutive. For him, society is not a projection of ideas or representations, a pragmatic pact of loose individuals, nor an imitative network of intersubjectivities (TARDE, 2007), but rather a creature that has a life of its own, defining everything around us, especially the way objects are made and handled. In other words, society defines the very materiality of each singular thing. Just as the physicist represents water via its chemical formula H<sub>2</sub>O, decomposing it into its most basic elements, sociology based on positivist premises follows a similar path, as it does with structuralist approaches, such as Althusser's structural Marxism or Talcott Parsons' functionalism. *Structure* or *system*, at least in *undermining*, are not epistemological terms arbitrarily chosen by the sociologist to understand reality, but are seen as part of reality itself, its foundation. Behind so many layers of action, behind the chairs, tables, books, and humans, there is always a foundation that orders and justifies everything. Because of that, the sociologist's objective is to cross these layers and be able to extract the core of reality. As such, the *undermined object* becomes just a pretext, nothing more than a persistent obstacle.

Similarly, Marx and even Hegel with his *objective idealism*, can be understood as authors of *undermining*, that is, as theoreticians in search of a basic explanatory framework that underpins phenomena. In fact, materialistic currents in Social Theory run a serious risk of falling into *undermining*, especially those that possess an *ontotheology*, in the Heideggerian sense, or a *metaphysics of presence*, as Derrida would say. In this model, the world is always too shallow, too superficial, which launches us into a paranoid search for something deeper, almost as if trying to replicate the steps of the Pre-Socratics, but in a more sociological way. Social theory based on *undermining* basically reproduces the Heideggerian distinction between *Thing*



and *Object*, but with a different language, even while reproducing the same reasoning, that is, that objects do not warrant consideration, being only a byproduct of a deeper and more significant element, which can be the *system, structure, etc.*

The second type of transcendentalist knowledge and "the greatest danger for the humanities and social sciences is the opposite, overmining" (HARMAN, 2017, p. 9). The first type of overminer is the one we could call *ontological*. According to them, the world outside exists, of course, but it is seen only as a set of connections that it establishes in a circuit of exchanges, flows, and experiences, with nothing solid or singular hiding in the curtain. There is nothing behind or below, but always a "between," a constant practical and horizontal movement. Unlike underminers, the first type of overminer relies on the idea that objects are very deep, with nothing underneath or hidden in their accidental, contingent manifestations. Here, there is nothing but transitory exchanges, whether pragmatic, phenomenological, or vitalist, which basically means encounters that can cease to be with impressive ease, almost like a wind passing by and knocking down the aging branches of some tree. The second type of overminer are the *social constructivists*, also known as the idealistic part of the movement, or the "epistemic" portion. According to them, reality disappears completely, and may be a product of the mind, language and its justifications, ideologies, power, and so on. This is the reason that led Foucault to state that "the objects to be known [...] are the effects of the fundamental implications of the knowledge of power and its historical transformations" (FOUCAULT, 1995, p. 27). In this post-structural scenario, at least when one thinks of the more archaeological Foucault, we do not have any kind of ontology, not even something reminiscent of the escapist scent of Heideggerian Being, for the world itself is only a distant and impossible dream, a simple discursive mirage suffused at various epistemic levels.

In any case, both types of overminers mentioned so far believe that the identity of an object, and its internal consistency, are only optical illusions. To understand an action, the goal is not to decompose its layers in search of a consistent and fundamental space (undermining), but to observe the connections it establishes and the effects it produces in the world. There is nothing here but relations, whether linguistic, phenomenological or pragmatic. According to Harman, by contrast, "rather than replacing objects with a description of what they do (as in ANT) or what they are made of (as in traditional materialism), OOO uses the term 'object' to refer to any entity that cannot be paraphrased in terms of its components or its effects" (HARMAN, 2017, p. 3). In other words, "the object is deeper than any possible relation to it" (HARMAN, 2011, p. 37). The curious part is that even the link between objects

(interobjectivity) does not exhaust their particular qualities either, for it always points to a characteristic that overflows. Nor does the relationship between objects exhaust their characteristics, which reveals a reality that goes beyond even this interobjective bond (LATOURE, 1996), as can be seen in "Harman's favorite example" (BRYANT, 2011, p. 39):

For the fire to burn cotton, which is the favorite Islamic example discussed in all those ancient texts, fire does not need to react to most of the properties of the cotton: its smell and its color are irrelevant to the fire. The fire is going to burn the cotton based on flammable properties, whatever those are [...] (LATOURE; HARMAN, 2011, p. 37).

According to Harman, not only does human interference reduce objects to a certain transcendentalist horizon offered by language, power, experience, or the like, but even objects tend to create their own transcendental horizons, especially when they interact with other elements or with themselves. Access is always "by indirect, allusive, or vicarious means" (HARMAN, 2010, p. 17), even when two objects interact with each other. Therefore, contact is imperfect, simplified, since something always overflows. There is a kind of *surplus* that escapes every form of interaction, as if there were a *gap*, an ontological *gap*. Each *object* is not only removed from human interventions and from other objects, but also from itself. According to Harman,

[w]hen the things withdraw from presence into their dark subterranean reality, they distance themselves not only from human beings, but *from each other* as well. If the human perception of a house or tree is forever haunted by some hidden surplus in the things that never become present, the same is true of the sheer causal interaction between rocks or raindrops (BRYANT, 2011, p. 280).

Something lies beyond the contours of interobjectivity, that is, the Latourian network finds its limit here. And if we look carefully, this overflowing dimension not only goes beyond the limits of the network, but can, under certain circumstances, compromise its own functioning, like an excess, a "surplus-value of life" (MASSUMI, 2014, p. 13). That is, the object at its core, in its *substance* (in Harman's terms), is not simply a reflection of exchanges, interactions, and other practical forms of contact, but a *surplus* that overcomes even this kind of pragmatic and phenomenological limitation. Ontology, therefore, *withdraws* from practical and

theoretical contact, almost like two magnets with opposite polarities. In this sense, "[...] we ourselves are strange strangers not only to other entities, but above all to ourselves insofar as withdrawal is not merely a relation of one entity to another, but also a relation of entities to themselves" (BRYANT, 2011, p. 267).

Harman's goal is not just to criticize the epistemological horizon, offering in exchange (practical) ethics and its privileged access to the world, since both would be trapped in what he calls *undermining* and *overmining*, as two equivalent forms of transcendentalism. The goal, on the contrary, is to suggest aesthetics as a possibility, as an indirect, though possible, way of getting in touch with the ontological terrain, understood here as a multiple, complex, and even contradictory field of meaning. Our entry passport would not be with the theoretician and his representations, nor with the world of life, and its experiences, bodies and practices, since both run the risk of overstepping the mark (ontological monopoly), but it would be precisely with the artist and his evasive Language. This is why "synthesis theories" (ALEXANDER, 1987), despite all the creativity involved in sewing up their arguments, end up not working very well, as they combine two already transcendental and simplified forms of approach (epistemology and ethics, theory and practice, structure and experience). The assumption that "reconstituting macrosociology on radically empirical micro-foundations is the crucial step toward a more successful sociological science" (GIDDENS, 2003, p. 165) seems to be questioned by Harman and his Object-Oriented Social Theory. In other words, "we do not have to work from interaction or structure or between the two" (LATOUR, 1996b, p. 234). Based on that, we can raise the following question: since the classical alternatives are no longer useful, if epistemology and practice are both questionable, what is our new passport to the ontological kingdom?

### **Aesthetics as an alternative**

Harman has always been keen to draw attention to the etymological origin and meaning of the Greek word *φιλοσοφία* (*philosophia*), which refers to a *love* of wisdom, not knowledge of it. This indicates a certain relationship with something that cannot be properly represented or accessed in any other way. Socrates never defined his concepts, unlike the Sophists Gorgias and Protagoras with whom he talked. This approach reinforces the idea that philosophy was not born as a form of knowledge (epistemology), nor as a form of practice (ethics), but rather as something beyond.

Instead of betting on epistemology and its representations, or on ethics and its spontaneous and well-targeted practices, Harman proposes *aesthetics* as a kind of ontological solution, although always in an indirect manner. The example he offers comes from Lovecraft, a celebrated writer of weird and uncanny novellas and short stories, such as "Call of Cthulhu". In this and other tales the writing is elliptical, inconclusive and adept at conveying horror through simple suggestion rather than outright description, as well as not dissolving itself into pragmatic or phenomenological expectations. In other words, the meaning of the work is not found in the representations made in it and through it, much less through the contact of the reader and his phenomenological arrangements, but through the work's capacity to escape from any kind of bond, be it representational or practical, almost as if it overflowed. "It is something too powerful, or too unfair, but sometimes also too beautiful, and therefore exceeds our sensorimotor capacities" (DELEUZE, 1987, p. 29). This characteristic that art has of escaping from any transcendental structure, can and must be extended to the universe as a whole. *Ontology*, therefore, does not involve the theoretical and practical capacity of connections, but precisely the moments during which these are frustrated, letting the distant aroma of something deeper, of an ontology, escape. This ontological horizon that is accessed indirectly, either through art or in moments of rupture, is what Harman called *Allure*.

The ontological sphere, in this sense, instead of being a starting point, as in phenomenology, is presented much more as a point of arrival, as an *a posteriori*. It is slippery ground, often seen as an invasion, that is, as rare moments that spring from the transcendental contours of experience. This idea of ontology as something invasive, like that which overflows, can also be found in the Lacanian concept of "Real" or even in the Deleuzian concept of the "body without organs". In fact, the whole vitalist tradition, from Spinoza, through to Nietzsche, Deleuze, Whitehead and others, shares this abyss between *Ontology* and *Experience*. These two spheres are not only distinct from each other, but have always placed themselves in an obvious opposition.

For existential philosophers and sociologists, because of the fusion of the concepts of *existence* and *ontology*, the ontological sphere is also presented as equivalent to practical and experiential dimensions, as well as to "knowledge of something, [...] ways of speaking [...] conventions and role-playing- from all kinds of foreground phenomena" (JASPERS, 1971, p. 3). According to Harman, on the contrary, the ontological horizon cannot be synonymous with existence, as if they were two overlapping realities, but precisely the instant in which this existence is compromised, what Levi-Bryant (2011, p. 265) called *immanent ontology* or

*Onticology*. The Self is not defined by its existential aspect, but by that which overflows, escapes, silences, as it is possible to observe in psychoanalysis itself. I am not what I do or what I say, but the fissures and gaps in this doing and this saying. According to Miller (2010, p. 53), "the subject cannot elaborate a truth from its experience", especially when we understand "experience" in the transcendentalist, phenomenological sense. Truth (ontology), at least here, exceeds, overflows. This approach can even be found in contemporary anthropology, at least the one close to the theoreticians of speculative realism and OOO. According to American anthropologist David Graeber, "all of us are indeed faced with the stubborn reality - that is, immediate unpredictability, ultimate unknowability [...]" (GRAEBER, 2015, p. 28). As in psychoanalysis, there is only one thing that connects all cultures, peoples and traditions, and that element is precisely the *Real*, that is, the limit of meaning, of what escapes, overflows and compromises every transcendentalist (correlationist) arrangement behind the scenes.

To put it bluntly, while OT [Ontological Turn] would encourage me to privilege the fact that I will never fully understand Malagasy conceptions as to act as *if* those conceptions were simply determinant of reality, I decided to privilege the fact that my Malagasy interlocutors insisted they did not understand reality either; that nobody ever will be able to understand the world completely, and that this gives us something to talk about. It also gives us the opportunity to unsettle one another's ideas in a way that might prove genuinely dialogic (GRAEBER, 2015, p. 28).

Because of what has been said so far, the Giddens' concept of *ontological security* may need to be reformulated, since the everyday life is a space not of ontologies, but of transcendentals. Perhaps what exists in practice is a *transcendental security*, while ontology presents itself as a distant, rare horizon, only accessed through accidents, shocks, failures, or even through art and its privileged access to the world. Perhaps if ontology is understood in this sense given by Graeber and Harman with his Object-Oriented Social Theory, we will have no difficulty in concluding that there is the same ontological horizon not only for all human peoples, but for everything that exists, which brings us once again to Spinoza's monism, even if many disagree with this vitalist approach. In describing the possibilities of access to reality and its phenomena, Graeber summarizes very well this entire essay: "As virtually any of these interlocutors would be happy to suggest, the real point is that the informants don't understand these questions either, nobody does, the ethnographer doesn't either, and that means that ultimately we are all in the same boat" (GRAEBER, 2015, p. 30-31). It is in the fissure of

practical and theoretical transcendentalism, in the gaps of experience and interpretations as well as structures and systems, that the OTHER appears on the horizon, whether that OTHER is a person, an object, or an animal. What possibilities does this kind of ontology offer to the field of Social Theories? This essay was only the beginning of a long journey.

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