

Tool-Being: Through Heidegger to Realism

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Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects. Graham Harman. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2002.

With *Tool-Being*, Graham Harman seeks to reinvigorate both Heidegger studies and realist metaphysics. This book, confidently promises to alter the direction of Heidegger interpretation—away from human-centered concerns with *Dasein* and language and toward a concern with objects themselves—and in so doing to open a route for a realist metaphysics that will incorporate the phenomenological critique of naïve realism. Striking claims, but backed up with scholarly thoroughness: Dr. Harman has read every published volume of the *Gesamtausgabe* in the original German, and puts that knowledge to rigorous use with both scholarly thoroughness and originality of thought.

Tool-Being provides, in three well-structured chapters, a thorough unpacking of two central axes present within Heidegger's thought. One is the famous distinction between *presence-at-hand* and *readiness-to-hand*—it is the latter term which Harman re-christens as “tool-being,” while the former can be viewed as the “broken tool.” Despite the claims of his interpreters and his own wishes, almost the whole of Heidegger's conceptual array—*Ereignis*, temporality, Angst, etc.—reduces to a monotonous replay of this basic insight: that each thing is at once present-at-hand and ready-to-hand.

The recognition of this insight flattens virtually all Heidegger interpretation, including Heidegger's self-interpretation: human *Dasein* does *not* possess an authentic possibility that sets it outside of mere presence-at-hand; *Dasein* is the interplay of presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand. But not only *Dasein*: even the infamous lowly hammer is not merely present-at-hand, it is also ready-to-hand. What Heidegger, and Heideggerians, failed to recognize is that the tool analysis does not refer only to specific humanly-produced technologies, but to *all* beings. And not only is this true of *Being and Time*, but this axis permeates the whole of Heidegger's thinking, from his earliest recorded lectures onwards—“*Kehre*” notwithstanding. In short, by elaborating the tool/broken-tool distinction, Heidegger has provided a—quite narrow—opening into a philosophy of objects.

Beside the presence-at-hand/readiness-to-hand axis, there is a less elaborated and far more often overlooked ontological distinction: Heidegger's appeal to the difference between a being as "something at all" and as a "specific something." These two axes, when crossed, present the only specification—an obscure one—of what might lie beyond the repetition of tool and broken tool: the *fourfold*. It is from this opaque yet tantalizing hint that Harman begins, in the final chapter of *Tool-Being*, to tease out the threads of his own philosophy of objects, borrowing insights from recognized philosophical heavyweights and fascinating metaphysical wild-cards.

Chapter One presents a commentary on Heidegger's thought, centered around the tool/broken tool tension, with an indication of the fourfold. Heidegger's mission was to show the inadequacy of philosophy's reduction of being to presence-at-hand. He failed to fully understand the breadth of tool-being as the counterpoise to presence-at-hand, through his tendency to view human being (*Dasein*) as having privileged access to tool-being, and hence thought of non-human objects as "merely" ontic. Instead, inanimate objects are "like undiscovered planets, stony or gaseous worlds which ontology is now obliged to colonize with a full array of probes and seismic instruments—most of them not yet invented." (p. 19)

Heidegger's central metaphysical discovery and obsessive theme is this: "*The world of tools is an invisible realm [the ontological] from which the visible structure of the world [the ontic] emerges.*" Naïve realism assumes that an entity's being will somehow be manifested in natural appearance (presence); actually, the very *being* of an entity consists in its withdrawal from any presence. The being of a bridge consists in its efficacy, not in any particular element of its constitution, or even in a gestalt of those elements: the bridge, as ready-to-hand, is of necessity *invisible*. Along with invisibility, the other distinguishing trait of tool-being is *totality*: entities always dissolve into a totalizing "global tool empire."

Both these distinguishing traits combine into *referentiality*. Entities refer in two senses: to the *totality* into which they disappear, and to the *withdrawal* by which they effect that disappearance. The former process produces presence-at-hand, the latter readiness-to-hand. Again, this description applies to all entities, and it is illegitimate to privilege human consciousness with regard to the drama of entities. A knife could only cut a piece of paper if knife and paper encounter one another *as such*.

Given the totality of tool-beings, how does anything other than readiness-to-hand arise at all? From the “broken tool,” that is, from presence-at-hand. “Broken” here does not mean “malfunctioning,” but a more general “having become obtrusive.” The tool and the broken tool are the central players in the drama of Heidegger’s thought.

Several sections trace out repeated—and failed—attempts by Heidegger to develop a framework that would privilege human access to being. However, Heidegger does point us toward the distinction between the entity as “something in general,” and as “*something* in particular.” From this new axis, crossing the generally recognized *Vorhanden/Zuhanden* axis, the fourfold will develop.

Chapter Two examines Heidegger scholarship, particularly the two principal schools of Heidegger commentary: “Aristotelian” continentals and “pragmatist” analytics. Attention to linguistic signs, historical antecedents, “philosophy of language” and *praxis* do not make up for a common inability to grasp that presence-at-hand does not refer to something which is transcended by human activity, of whatever kind.

In “The Threefold” a surprisingly mild critique of David Farrell Krell—surely one of the most over-rated of the now-fading previous generation of academics—is provided. This section shows that the threefold structure of ecstatic temporality fails to provide anything beyond the basic tool/broken tool dichotomy.

“The Fourfold” has been misunderstood, as shown by the inadequate standard view on the subject in Richardson’s *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. The fourfold, rather than being a sloppy bit of poetic excess, specifies four domains within each being: “earth” is that which is concealed and “something at all,” “gods” that which is concealed and specific, “mortals” a revealed “something at all,” and “sky” a revealed specific something. Strange hints, but they point us beyond both the simple repetitiveness of the tool/broken tool dichotomy and the excessive simplicity of naïve realism—toward a revived version of substance theory.

Chapter Three outlines Harman’s object-oriented philosophy, working out of the Heideggerian inspirations examined in the first two chapters, with important borrowings from Whitehead, Levinas, and Zubiri. A theory of substances is presented, with the following features:

1. Substance is not a particular kind of entity, but belongs to all entities.
2. Tool-beings lies outside the “world” of Dasein, in a not yet determined “metaphysical vacuum.”
3. Hence, there is no direct causality; a “local” version of *occasional cause* must be developed.

By seeing that there is a mutual objectification with which *all* objects confront one another, Whitehead recognized more fully than Heidegger that a “relational” philosophy would apply not only to the human domain, but to existence in general. However, Heidegger is ultimately more important, as he provides a route out of the reduction of the particular object, whereas for Whitehead there are ultimately no specific entities at all.

The last sections of this book are an attempt to begin to address the following question: given the radical gap between the ontic and the ontological, what could be usefully said about tool-being other than that it lies at an infinite distance from us?

A start has been made by Levinas and Zubiri. With his notion of the *il y a*, a version of “mortals” appears in Levinas’ thought—a specific version of the “something at all”/“specific something” dichotomy. Hence, thought is a kind of *sincerity* for Levinas—a remaining-true to being, rather than a distancing from it. However, Levinas still restricts this breakthrough to the specifically human domain by linking the *il y a* to the experience of insomnia. But this structure is to be found in all entities & experiences.

Zubiri is able to discern specific essences for specific entities, even non-human ones, and to see that these entities contain within themselves a plurality of elements, but he affirms the ultimately unworkable traditional prejudice that some entities possess essences, while others are merely relational. If we accept that an entity is a community of “notes” (to use Zubiri’s term), then this distinction won’t hold up.

So, for Harman, entities should be conceived, neither as durable substances nor as mere sets of relations, but as some of each. But not only is every entity a set of relations, every set of relations is also an entity.

The final two sections of the book present a series of four paradoxes which follow from this first attempt at a philosophy of objects:

1. The object is both free of all relations and seems created by relations.
2. “Where *is* presence?” (p. 287) (in a world crammed full of tool-beings?)
3. There must be an “indefinite regress” within being, so as to forestall either a return to traditional substantialism or a slide into simple relationalism.
4. Given that a relation creates a new entity, the being of an entity can only exist in another entity—this leads us toward a non-theistic, “local” conception of occasional cause. In short, another kind of “regress,” now, a descent inside the entity itself.

Given these “regresses,” philosophy now should be “reverse engineering,” rather than “unveiling.” So, we are presented with the first steps in a desperately needed direction: to move philosophy away from talking about talking. Harman’s next book promises to continue these steps.

References

Harman, G. *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2002.