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THE FUTURE OF CONTINENTAL REALISM

Heidegger's Fourfold

GRAHAM HARMAN

It seems to me that Lee Braver is correct when he argues, in *A Thing of This World*, that Continental philosophy has been primarily an *anti-realist* school from the start. We differ only in that Braver heaps praise on this anti-realism, while I view it as an intellectual catastrophe. In any case, an alternative Continental philosophy has begun to emerge, in the shape of at least three major realist approaches in Continental thought in the twenty-first century:

1. The New Realism led by the Italian ex-relativist Maurizio Ferraris¹ and the prolific German *Wunderkind* Markus Gabriel.² Given that Ferraris's own realist turn dates as far back as the early 1990s, he may deserve the title of the first blatantly realist philosopher of the Continental tradition. He also paid a heavy price for this, since it put a heavy and permanent strain on his relationship with one-time mentor Gianni Vattimo.
2. The realism of Manuel DeLanda,³ drawn somewhat counter-intuitively from Deleuze and Guattari, but developed with vigor and passion, and unremittingly realist in spirit.
3. The realism of the Speculative Realists gathered at the 2007

1 Maurizio Ferraris, *Introduction to New Realism*, trans. S. de Sanctis. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015.)

2 Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.)

3 Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002).

workshop at Goldsmiths, University of London.⁴ This was a loose confederation of separate realist approaches, and the four original members quickly went their separate ways.

Through the influence of these three approaches—and not those of New Materialism, which is a mostly rabid anti-realist movement⁵—realism has finally achieved something like a critical mass in Continental philosophy. Far from fading away quietly, it is the subject of more books, articles, and conferences each year.

Thus, it may be a good time to consider possible future developments in Continental realism. Given the limited space available for the present article, the best I can hope to do is discuss the possible future of my own preferred Continental realism: object-oriented philosophy, or object-oriented ontology (abbreviated OOO, or “Triple O”). Since I cannot assume the reader’s prior familiarity with the object-oriented approach, I will begin by explaining its origins in Husserl and Heidegger, before moving on to consider the future prospects of OOO itself.

1 – The Tool-Analysis

We begin with Martin Heidegger, the original inspiration for OOO. Heidegger’s entire philosophy is contained in the celebrated tool-analysis, first published in his 1927 masterwork *Being and Time*,⁶ but found as early as his first university lecture course in 1919.⁷ In my view it is the pivotal moment of philosophy in the twentieth century, and it is crucial that we draw the right lessons from it if we ever wish to escape that century (Harman 2002). The tool-analysis is best viewed as a response to Husserl, who served Heidegger in the usual double capacity of mentor and rival. Husserl’s phenomenology famously “brackets” the natural world, suspending all theories about atoms, chemicals, and sound waves, with the aim of focusing on the world as it shows

4 R. Brassier, I. H. Grant, G. Harman & Q. Meillassoux, “Speculative Realism.” in *Collapse III*. (2007), 306-449.

5 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.)

6 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson (New York: Harper, 2008).

7 Martin Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, trans. T. Sadler (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

itself to us. When a door slams, I simply hear the door slamming, and this experience contains countless subtle stratifications that patient analysis can eventually uncover. If a scientist counters by saying that the slamming door creates percussive effects in the air, which causes vibrations in the eardrum, which sends signals through the nervous system into my brain, this is just a theory—a derivative mode of understanding, while for Husserl the phenomenal experience of hearing the door slam is primary.

Heidegger’s way of deepening this model is both simple and profound. For the most part, things *do not* appear to us as phenomena in consciousness. Most of the things in our environment are hidden from view, silently taken for granted until something happens that makes us notice them. The floor beneath my feet, the oxygen in the air, the neurons in my brain, the English grammar I easily use, generally function with unspoken efficiency unless something goes wrong. This happens often enough: tools do break. When they do, entities reverse from tacit reliability into explicit presence. As a name for such presence, Heidegger chooses the term *Vorhandenheit*, usually rendered in English as “presence-at-hand.” As a contrary name for the silent labor of unnoticed things, Heidegger chooses the term *Zuhandenheit*, or “readiness-to-hand.” It is important to note that these are not names for two different *kinds* of objects, as if shoes and hammers were always ready-to-hand and colors or numbers always present-at-hand. For in fact, reversals between the two modes constantly occur. The functioning hammer easily breaks, reversing from silent readiness-to-hand into explicit presence-at-hand. But even when this happens, the broken hammer lying before me is not available in sheer, unalloyed presence. Many aspects of the hammer are still taken for granted even when I stare at it explicitly. Conversely, a broken hammer might easily be repaired, returning to its previous unnoticed use: but even then it flashes in the sunlight from time to time, and never fades completely from view.

It is safe to say that presence-at-hand is the sole great enemy of Heidegger’s philosophy. His version of the history of philosophy is even somewhat monotonous in accusing all past thinkers of reducing being to presence. Heidegger lists several different ways in which things can be present-at-hand: normal everyday perception, explicit theoretical awareness, and the mournful case of broken tools. What all these experiences have in common is that none of them gives us the *being* of the things. Whether I perceive a hammer, create theories about it, or grieve over its recent malfunction, in all such cases

I merely confront the hammer “as” hammer. This explicit awareness of the hammer “as” having such-and-such characteristics articulates some of its features while inevitably leaving others in shadow. Presence never does justice to a thing’s full reality, which withdraws into a depth no awareness can ever exhaust. The hammer “as” hammer always means the hammer *for* someone who considers it. But this is not the same as the hammer in its own right, which no observer can drain to the dregs.

An additional form of presence-at-hand that Heidegger considers is independent physical substance. Science views entities as pieces of objective matter occupying space and time (or shaping them, as in general relativity). Thus, it views entities as a set of objective properties that can be summarized in a theory. This latter form of presence-at-hand, independent physical substance, is the pied piper that so often leads mainstream Heidegger commentators astray. For these interpreters hold that “present-at-hand” for Heidegger means “independent of Dasein.” And since reality independent of Dasein obviously spells realism, they conclude that Heidegger’s relentless critique of presence-at-hand is also a critique of realism. This leads to the assumption that Dasein’s *access* to the world is philosophically paramount, just as it was for Kant and most of his successors. The mistake is understandable, but a mistake nonetheless. To show this, we need only note that when entities are defined as physical matter occupying space-time coordinates, this is just as much a caricature of entities as Husserl’s phenomena were. After all, physics is an attempt to see physical things “as” what they are via certain mathematizable properties, even though there always remains a deeper layer in the things that is taken for granted. Whether the as-structure results from phenomenological description, or from physical theorization, in both cases it is derivative of a more primal being of the things. The as-structure is a sort of objectification or distortion: or better yet, a *translation* of entities, rendering them in a present-at-hand language that is never entirely apt. In short, the physical things known to the sciences (and to common sense) are not independent of Dasein at all, but only *seem* to be independent. They result from a purely mathematical projection of nature by Dasein, and this will never be enough to exhaust the depths of the being of things. But this means that presence-at-hand actually refers to the *dependence* of things on Dasein, not their independence. Without some phenomenologist, perceiver, scientist, or frustrated handyman observing the hammer, it would not be present-at-hand. Presence

always means presence *for* someone or something. By contrast, readiness-to-hand refers to absence. This latter point will be refused by most Heidegger commentators, and we will soon consider why.

My initial claim, then, is that Heidegger's presence-at-hand means dependence on Dasein, and readiness-to-hand means the independence of that which withdraws from access. The counterargument is easy to find, since nearly all commentators make it. For them it is the reverse: presence-at-hand means independence, and readiness-to-hand means dependence on Dasein. By countering mainstream Heideggerians on such a fundamental point, am I dismissing them as an unruly mob of hacks and fools? No. They have good reasons for thinking as they do. The main reason is that for Heidegger, there is no such thing as "an" item of equipment in isolation from others. Equipment always forms a total system, the very system that Heidegger calls "world." Hammers gain meaning from the houses they are used to build, houses gain meaning from the climate they are designed to resist, and so forth. Every tool exists "in order to" do something else. And further, all this equipment ultimately gains meaning only from that "for the sake of which" they are used: namely, for the sake of Dasein's own existence. If Dasein were not physically fragile, or not in need of privacy, houses would not be what they are. If Dasein is living in frozen Iowa rather than sweltering Texas, rooftop heaters become too costly for Dasein to afford (though this did not prevent my high school in Iowa from installing them). Tools belong to a holistic system that is defined, ultimately, by Dasein itself. This would seem to make an airtight case that readiness-to-hand means "Dasein-dependent," thereby placing my thesis in jeopardy. Yet I will soon demonstrate that my thesis is in no danger at all.

The most widely read Heidegger commentator is surely Hubert Dreyfus.⁸ His reading of the tool-analysis is now the standard one. Dreyfus sums up the situation as follows: "Heidegger first notes that we do not usually encounter.... 'mere things,' but rather we use the things at hand to get something done. These things he calls 'equipment,' in a broad enough sense to include whatever is useful: tools, materials, clothes, dwellings, etc."⁹ He continues: "The basic characteristic of equipment is that it is used for something.... An 'item' of equipment is what it is only insofar as it refers to other equipment

8 Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

9 Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 62.

and so fits in a certain way into an ‘equipmental whole.’”¹⁰ And true enough, Heidegger grants us a holistic vision in which all tools fit together in a referential whole, none of them existing in isolation. Dreyfus notes further that “when we are using equipment, it has a tendency to ‘disappear.’ We are not aware of it as having any characteristics at all.”¹¹ And “partly as a joke but also in dead seriousness Heidegger adds that this withdrawal or holding itself in is the way equipment is *in itself*.... This is a provocative claim. Traditional philosophers from Plato to Husserl have been led to claim that the use-properties of things their function as equipment, are interest-relative so precisely *not* in themselves.”¹² In this way, Dreyfus lays the groundwork for the standard anti-realist interpretation of the tool-analysis. Tools withdraw from view. They belong to a relational system of purposes. And to say that withdrawal is how entities are “in themselves” must mean that things themselves are relational, despite the views of “traditional philosophers from Plato to Husserl.” To counter this reading, it needs to be shown that Dreyfus is wrong to identify withdrawal and relationality. Another telling problem is that Dreyfus repeats the frequent but groundless claim that Heidegger’s tool-analysis was anticipated by John Dewey, who “introduced the distinction between knowing-how and knowing that to make just this point...”¹³

To show why it is so wrong to mix Heidegger with Dewey, it simply needs to be shown that the distinction between readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand is not the same as the difference between pragmatic know-how and explicit theoretical awareness. We begin with the latter point. It certainly seems that Heidegger draws a distinction between our implicit use of tools (*Zuhandenheit*) and our explicit awareness of them (*Vorhandenheit*). But notice that unconscious practice distorts or translates the things of the world no less than conscious theory does. If I suddenly stare at the floor and think about it, I reduce it to present-at-hand features such as color, texture, and hardness, thereby losing the *being* of the floor, which is simply taken for granted. This belongs to the ABC’s of Heidegger studies, and is quickly learned by all newcomers to his work. Yet there is also a less obvious lesson that is equally true: my unconscious *use* of the floor does the same. To sit on the floor does not exhaust its being any more than staring at the floor does. In both cases, the

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 64.

12 Ibid., 65.

13 Ibid., 67.

inscrutable withdrawn depth of the floor is reduced to a discrete and limited set of features, even if using the floor can be called “implicit” and staring at it can be called “explicit.” Hence, the difference between presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand is by no means equivalent to that between knowing-how and knowing that. The comparison with Dewey becomes irrelevant—or even hopelessly wrong, given Dewey’s remorseless relational view of the world—since Heidegger’s tools are ultimately what *escape* all relation.

Some readers may object that this is a fanciful projection of bizarre non-Heideggerian ideas onto Heidegger’s own work. I would answer this objection with two points. Point one: tools are not just efficiently handy for Heidegger, but also *break*. Once the tool is broken, it obviously belongs to the sphere of present-at-hand awareness, as an obtrusive sort of obstacle. But what is it *in the tools* that breaks? It obviously cannot be their current smooth relational functioning: by definition, this is a sleek efficiency already fully assigned to other entities. Hence, whatever breaks in the tool must be something that is not fully inscribed in its current use. In short, the invisible use of a tool does not exhaust its reality any more than the visible properties of a tool do. Point two: Heidegger uses the as-structure to refer to *both* realms, theory and practice alike. To see a broken hammer is to consider it explicitly “as” a hammer. But for Heidegger, even to use a hammer unconsciously is to use it “as” a hammer, not as a drill or as some vague indeterminate thing. The first kind of “as” is surely more transparent than the second, but it is clear that Heidegger sees tools as always articulated, whether consciously or not. Yet articulation is always a translation or distortion, and never unlocks the full depths of a thing’s reality. This leads us to a remarkable observation: insofar as an unconsciously useful tool is relationally assigned to other entities, it is *already a broken tool*. To relate is not to be a tool, but to be *broken*, even if human witnesses do not happen to be looking on. The as-structure governs both theory and practice, making them ontologically indistinct. To find the tools themselves, we must retreat not just behind theory, but even behind “tools” in the normal pragmatic sense.

From here we can easily see the problem with Dreyfus’s other, now quite mainstream, suggestion: that withdrawal means the same thing as relationality. *Au contraire*. Insofar as the tool is related to other tools, insofar as it belongs to the system of world, it is merely relational rather than withdrawn. An invisible tool that functions smoothly may be withdrawn from Dasein in

the sense that we are not “conscious” of it. But it is not withdrawn from Dasein at all in the wider sense, since it is fully determined by a system of references that are enslaved to Dasein’s current purposes. To “withdraw” must mean to withdraw from all references, not just from the explicit conscious awareness of humans. Withdrawal is what allows a tool to break eventually, since it holds something in reserve that escapes its current functioning no less than its current presence in consciousness. But this entails that if world is a system of relations, then the world is a system of presence-at-hand. Presence-at-hand means nothing other than relationality: presence for something or someone. The tools themselves are deeper than world, and Heidegger is inconsistent when he identifies tools with world. His famous “ontological difference” between being and beings cannot mean a difference between implicit and explicit, but must be a difference between reality and relation. But this entails that his critique of presence-at-hand gives us realism, not anti-realism.

2 –The Thing

Heidegger’s realist attitude toward the thing becomes even more apparent in that classic work of his post-war career, “Insight Into What Is.”¹⁴ The lecture was written down in Heidegger’s Black Forest hut in October 1949, and delivered to the Bremen Club on the easily remembered date of December 1. The opening theme of this lecture is the elimination of distance by modern technology: “All distances in time and space shrivel away.... Yet the hasty elimination of all distances does not bring nearness; for nearness does not consist in a small amount of distance” (Heidegger 1994, 3).¹⁵ Here, the central theme of the tool-analysis is alive and well. To bring distant jungles and tribes close to us through television merely brings them close as something present-at-hand. It is a false nearness that reduces them to superficial outer contours. Likewise, our vast temporal distance from the ancient Greeks would only be a false distance, since it overlooks our deep reliance on their concepts of being, and other aspects of Greek Dasein.

But if technology does not give us nearness, then neither does physi-

14 In what follows I will translate the German text myself rather than using the 2012 Mitchell translation.

15 Martin Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, GA Band 79 (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), 3.

cal science. “It is said that the knowledge of science is compelling. Certainly so. Yet in what sense is it compelling? For our case [it means] that we must renounce the jug filled with wine and replace it with an empty space in which a fluid is extended. Science turns the jug-thing into a nullity, since it does not permit things to be decisive”.¹⁶ Here nothing has changed from Heidegger’s earlier conception of science, which in his view merely reduces things to a series of objectified properties, thereby shoving the thing itself out of view. Science, like technology, gives us a false nearness to the nature of things by inscribing them in a field of accessible, present-at-hand properties. Thus the thing will not be found in the sciences. And neither will it be found in knowing how a thing was constructed: “The jug is a thing as a container. This container certainly needs to be produced. But its producedness by the potter in no way constitutes what belongs to the jug insofar as it is a jug. The jug is not a container because it was produced, but rather the jug must be produced because it is this container.”¹⁷

What the technological, scientific, and manufacturer’s views on the thing all share is their reduction of the thing to its outward features, its *Vorhandenheit*. Heidegger says that what the jug really is can never be experienced through its outward look: its *idea* or *eidos* in the Platonic sense. In a passage already cited above, he asserts that “Plato, who represents the presence of that which is present from the standpoint of its outward look, thought the essence of the thing just as little as Aristotle and all later thinkers.”¹⁸ If a new way can be found to understand the thing, this will already put us on an entirely new path of philosophy: “The first step to.... wakefulness is the step back from the merely representative (i.e. explanatory) thinking into commemorative thinking.”¹⁹ Such a commemorative thinking would not reduce the jug to its present-at-hand outer contours. For in no way does the thing itself consist in its dependence on humans, despite the Dreyfusian reading of *Being and Time*. Heidegger is quite clear about this: “As a container, the jug is something that stands in itself. The standing-in-itself characterizes the jug as something *independent*. As the independence of something independent, the jug distinguishes itself from an object. Something independent can become an object when we

16 Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, 9.

17 Ibid., 6.

18 Ibid., 7.

19 Ibid., 20.

represent it to ourselves, whether in immediate perception or in recollective presentation.”²⁰ If we avoid the aforementioned technological, scientific, and manufacturer’s versions of the jug and replace it with the Dreyfusian model of the jug as a useful tool assigned to other tools and to human Dasein, we will still have failed to think the jug itself. Dreyfus (and Dewey) have merely replaced the jug with a pragmatic theory and thereby reduced it to a nullity; they have missed the jug *qua* jug. Heidegger says in 1949 that “the jug is not a container because it was produced, but rather the jug must be produced because it is this container.” He might just as well add that “the jug is not a container because it used by Dasein in a referential system, but rather the jug must be used by Dasein in a referential system because it is this container.” The jug is real. Like any other real thing, it cannot be replaced by a set of features belonging to its outward look—or its outward *use*, for that matter. The realism of this 1949 lecture cycle is even harder to deny than that of the earlier tool-analysis.

Now, “realism” can admittedly mean any number of different things. Braver’s book, the definitive account of Continental anti-realism, provides a valuable table including no fewer than *six* possible senses of the term.²¹ Two of the six are perhaps the most frequently used: 1) Belief in a mind-independent reality; 2) Belief in a correspondence theory of truth. Heidegger obviously rejects the latter. For him, truth is a matter of *aletheia*: a gradual unveiling or unconcealment that never disposes of shadow, never brings anything forth in total, naked presence. By rejecting correspondence theories of truth in this manner, Heidegger certainly abandons the most common model of truth found among realists. But in no way does this amount to a rejection of realism *tout court*. It is possible to believe in a mind-independent reality while not believing it possible to attain a perfectly lucid grasp of that reality. Indeed, the best proof that such a position is possible is that Heidegger himself maintains it. Braver and others hold that the replacement of correspondence by *aletheia* entails that truth can only be an internal movement within what is already fully accessible to humans. In other words, being is nothing more than the series of historical shapes in which it manifests itself to people; there is no “in itself” hiding behind being’s manifestations, but only an emergent process that

20 Ibid., 5.

21 Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2007), xix.

leads us to yet another manifestation. This Hegelized version of Heidegger ignores Heidegger's incurable hostility to all attempts to reduce being to presence of any sort. For Heidegger, being is nothing if not *absence*, to such an extent that all comparisons between him and Hegel immediately capsize. It is the same reason that leads Heidegger to attack ontotheology—also known as “the metaphysics of presence,” or simply “metaphysics.” When ontotheology claims that one kind of entity (say, atoms) is the ultimate constituent to which all others are reducible, Heidegger complains that this reduces all beings to a single set of present-at-hand features that characterize their component atoms: mass, position, angular momentum. His position is not that there is no true reality lying behind its manifestations; rather, his position is that this reality can never be adequately described through its present-at-hand features. In short, Heidegger's rejection of ontotheology, of “metaphysics,” is merely a rejection of correspondence theories of truth, not of a mind-independent reality.

Yet there is another possible counterargument here, and a reasonably good one. Throughout his career, Heidegger declares that there is no being without Dasein, no Dasein without being, but always a primal correlation or rapport between the two. He finds it nonsensical to ask whether Newton's laws were true or untrue before they were discovered, or to ask what happened in the world before the existence of Dasein. This is the undeniably anti-realist side of Heidegger. But notice that even a permanent being-Dasein correlate does not entail the lack of a mind-independent reality. The fact that being and Dasein always come as a pair does not require that being is fully exhausted in its manifestations to Dasein. Although jugs only exist as jugs for humans, and perhaps for certain dogs and birds, it does not follow that the jug is reducible to its represented features—as Heidegger's jug-analysis makes clear. In similar fashion, the fact that there is no human society without humans or humans without society does not mean that human society is reducible to what humans currently understand about it. Sociology would be an unnecessary discipline if the features of social reality were legible to its members at a glance.²²

Yet there is a glaring lacuna in Heidegger's thoughts on the jug. As we have seen, he does insist that the jug “as” jug is unattainable by any form of representation; in this respect, he follows Kant's view of the noumena,

22 Manuel, DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society* (London: Continuum, 2006).

which lie outside human categories and their determination of phenomena. This is undeniably a form of mind-independent realism, despite repeated attempts to finesse both Kant and Heidegger out of this position. Yet there is also a harmful way, rarely addressed, in which Kant and Heidegger slam the door on a healthy realism. Namely, for both of these thinkers the function of independent reality is simply to exceed human representation, nothing else. The “in itself” is merely a residue unreachable by humans, and does little more than haunt us with dreams or nightmares of our finitude. Phrased more bluntly: what do the things in themselves do *to each other* when humans are not looking? Are there really no relations between these things apart from us? Heidegger dismisses the question as nonsense. Kant ignores it, at least in the Critical period. The same holds true for most post-Kantian philosophy, with Alfred North Whitehead providing the most prominent counterinstance.²³ Endless debates erupt between those who believe in a reality apart from humans and those who see this attitude as retrograde and naïve. But both sides tacitly agree on the main point, implicitly assuming that philosophy has nothing to say about the relations between things when no humans are there to see it. This problem is thrown to the natural sciences, which invariably treats it in materialist fashion: one billiard ball smashes another; an iron filing aligns itself with a magnetic field. Yet it ought to be clear, however controversially, that *materialism is not realism*.²⁴ After all, materialism idealizes its objects by reducing them to a limited number of mathematizable features endorsed by the accidental state of present-day physics. Yet it is not only for us that the jug and wine withdraw from such explicit features, but *in their own right*. It is not the mere accident of my looking at the jug and wine that transforms them from physical masses into strange, withdrawn residues. In other words, withdrawal occurs not just along a single Kantian fault line where human meets world, but crosses the world itself. The wine does not exhaust the jug any more than we humans do. If Heidegger had admitted this additional point, it would necessarily have led him to develop a metaphysics of objects. The withdrawal of things from all access is not some quirky existential/psychological feature of humans, but infects even the most rudimentary forms of inanimate causation. Veiling and unveiling are ubiquitous: even between billiard balls, even between fire and cotton, and even when humans are not observing, do not yet

23 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Detroit: Free Press. 1979).

24 Graham Harman, “Realism without Materialism,” in *SubStance* 125, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2011, 52-72.

exist, or exist no longer. Those who do not agree to this principle are in fact committed to a form of idealism, since what they really claim is that a certain assemblage of abstract properties can altogether exhaust a thing's reality.

3 – The Fourfold

So far I have avoided mentioning the embarrassing open secret that Heidegger's thing is conceived as a *fourfold* thing. The fourfold, *das Geviert*, was first proclaimed in the same 1949 lecture we have been discussing, aside from a brief initial taste in the habitually overrated *Contributions to Philosophy*.²⁵ No major concept of Heidegger has been so ignored as the fourfold. Only in 2015 did Andrew Mitchell publish the first book in English devoted exclusively to this topic, a welcome development despite the considerable flaws of that book.²⁶ At first taste, the quadruple mirror-play of earth, sky, gods, and mortals seems so precious and obscure that it leaves his admirers either ashamed or confused. But as I see it, the fourfold is Heidegger's crowning discovery. Moreover, the fourfold is not as obscure as it looks, and can even be clarified with such conceptual rigor that it soon appears dryly schematic and sterile. And finally, I hold that earth, sky, gods, and mortals are the necessary horizon of any future Continental realism. Here is the sort of passage at which the scoffers understandably scoff:

In the gift of the pouring [from the jug] carries the onefold of the four. The gift of the pouring is a gift, insofar as it lets earth, sky, gods, and mortals linger. Yet lingering is no longer the mere persistence of something present-at-hand. Lingering appropriates [*ereignet*]. It brings the four into the light of what is their own. From out of its onefold they are confided to one another."²⁷

My goal in the concluding pages of this article is to replace the reader's mockery with genuine interest.

Fourfold structures, quite common in the history of human thought, are almost always generated by the intersection of two separate dualisms. What we seek here are the specific dualisms that jointly act to produce Hei-

25 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy*, trans. R. Rojcewicz & D. Vallega-Neu (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).

26 *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

27 Heidegger, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, 12.

degger’s apparently inscrutable fourfold. The first of these dualisms is so awesomely repetitive throughout his works that at times he seems to have no other ideas at all. I speak of the trademark Heideggerian play of absence and presence, veiling and unveiling, concealing and clearing, withdrawal and as-structure, tool and broken tool, thrownness and projection, past and future, being and beings, and equivalent pairings. The vast majority of Heidegger’s thousands of pages can be mastered simply by noting that these oppositions are all *exactly the same*. Things are withdrawn from presence, yet they come partly to presence “as” such-and-such. The opposed poles of concealing and revealing combine in an ambiguous present, and this is all that Heidegger means by “time”: the simultaneous absence and presence of everything. His fourfold structure will emerge as soon as we supplement this solemnly repetitive dualism with another. And this second duality is not hard to find in Heidegger: all one needs to do is look, but everyone has been too busy laughing at earth, sky, gods, and mortals to take the trouble to look.

The immediate source of Heidegger’s second duality comes from his rather unusual early reading of Husserl. But let’s return briefly to Franz Brentano, that seldom-read grandsire of phenomenology, whose interpretation of Aristotle’s *De Anima* already provides us with a fourfold structure. Here I cannot improve on the account given by Barry Smith: “[For Brentano] we are to imagine two realms, of soul or mind, and of matter.... On both sides we are to distinguish further what we might call *raw* and *developed* forms of the entities populating the realms in question”²⁸ Though it would not be altogether accurate to say that Heidegger’s two basic poles are those of soul and matter, the resemblance is close enough to be interesting: namely, the realm of jugs and hammers themselves is distinct from that of jugs and hammers as they appear explicitly to Dasein. Smith continues:

The raw form of matter is called *materia prima*. This can become everything corporeal.... In an analogous way, the soul can become everything sensible and intelligible, and does not exist except insofar as it receives the form of something sensible and intelligible. *In each case what gets added is of a formal nature*, and it is the fixed stock of forms or species which informs both the realm of thinking and that of extended (material, corporeal) substance.... *it*

28 Barry Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 36.

*is forms which mediate between them.*²⁹

For Brentano, then, the fourfold model of Aristotle's psychology involves dual realms of soul and matter, both of them crossed by a second distinction between shapeless matter that can become anything, and a stock of forms that can be stamped into that matter. In short, it is a fourfold based on the dualities of soul vs. world and matter vs. form; the duality of matter and form exists in the world, and exists again on a second level in the mind. Whatever criticisms might be made of this model, it is certainly not laughable.

Now jump forward to Husserl, whose connection with Brentano was much more direct than Heidegger's own. It is admittedly somewhat harder to find a fourfold structure in Husserl, and for a simple reason. For Husserl, the Aristotle-Brentano-Heidegger "reality itself," as opposed to the realm of presence to the mind, is deliberately suspended from consideration. The world itself is bracketed out of the picture, never to return. For this reason Husserl is dismissed in many realist circles as just another idealist, a Johnny-Come-Lately who repeats familiar anti-realist gestures already accomplished more clearly by Descartes, Kant, or Hegel. Yet this assessment of Husserl is disturbingly shallow. While it is true that Husserl suspends reality-in-itself in the name of an immanent phenomenal sphere, a more interesting topic is the duality that occurs for Husserl *within* the phenomenal realm. Consider the following passage from the *Logical Investigations* VI:

The object is not actually given, it is not given wholly and entirely as that which it itself is. It is only given "from the front," only "perspectively foreshortened and projected", etc.... On this hinges the possibility of indefinitely many percepts of the same object, all differing in content. If percepts were always the actual, genuine self-presentations of objects that they pretend to be, there could be only a single percept for each object, since its peculiar essence would be exhausted in such self-presentation.³⁰

The same point was already made in Husserl's Second Investigation, where he attacked the empiricist doctrine of objects as bundles of qualities. For Husserl, an object *is not* just a bundle of qualities, since that would make each

29 Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano*, 36.

30 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, Two Volumes. Translated by J.N. Findlay. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 712-713.

shifting percept an entirely new object, and this is what Husserl most opposes. Similar insights about intentional objects over and above their manifest qualities simply cannot be found in Descartes, Kant, Hegel, or anyone else for that matter. Indeed, the presence of intentional objects is what explains the strangely realist *atmosphere* found in the books of the non-realist Husserl: blackbirds and mailboxes resist our perceptions, unattainable behind their various profiles, masks, and perspectival foreshortenings. The important point for us is that Husserl adds a new kind of duality within the phenomenal realm. For Brentano's Aristotle it was a distinction between the wax-like soul and the forms it takes on. For Husserl, by contrast, it is the difference between intentional objects and the changing costumes they wear from one moment to the next, even while remaining the same objects that they were. Yet Husserl has no chance to extend this dualism into the subterranean realm of real things and create a fourfold, since he never accepts such an underground layer of reality.

Heidegger, however, is able to pull it off. His tool-analysis was first presented in the 1919 War Emergency Semester. At the end of that fateful semester, Heidegger turns to an unusual interpretation of his teacher's phenomenological method,³¹ and speaks of two types of theory (which he even identifies with Husserl's own "generalization" and "formalization").³² Normally, phenomenological analysis is bound to a step-by-step progression, leading us through increasingly deeper levels of categorial intuition: I see a blurry patch; the blurry patch is brown; brown is a color; color is a kind of perception; perception is a kind of experience; and so forth. Now it might seem that the final step of this passage through many layers would be the category of "something in general." Yet Heidegger oddly mocks this apparently dry and harmless notion.³³ He insists instead that "something in general" can be invoked immediately at any stage of the analysis, unlike all the others. That is to say, categories normally have a layered, onion-like structure. We cannot pass from saying "this is brown" to "this is an experience" without passing through the intervening categorial layers. But for any layer we *can* say "this brown is something in general" or "this experience is something in

31 Martin Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, GA Band 56/57. (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1987), 109-117.

32 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. Translated by W.B. Gibson. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1931), 72-74.

33 Heidegger, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*, 113.

general.” As opposed to the usual “specific bondedness to levels of the steps in the de-living process [the young Heidegger’s term for theory]”³⁴ we have the principle that “everything experienceable at all is a possible something, regardless of its genuine world-character.”³⁵ Stated in less boring terms, everything we experience is both something *specific* and something *at all*. This sounds suspiciously close to the classical rift between essence and existence. But more importantly for us, Heidegger sees this same division as repeated on two levels: that of world, and that of the perception of world. In this way the young Heidegger already gives us his infamous fourfold in germinal form. On the level of world, we have the “pre-worldly something” (something at all) and the “world-laden something” (something specific). On the level of explicit awareness, we have the “formal-logical objective something” (something at all) and the “object-type something” (something specific).³⁶ To phrase it as an example: if I encounter a pencil, it is both something specific and something at all, and then *outside* our relationship and in-itself the pencil is also something specific and something at all.

In this way, the 1919 Heidegger gives us a rather dull-sounding fourfold in contrast with the all-too-flashy *Geviert* of 1949. The 1949 model is also different in one important respect. Although in 1949 the first dualism still lies between the world itself and our encounter with world, the second axis changes for Heidegger. Instead of being a duel between the existence and essence of every object, it is now a distinction between “world as a whole” and “specific beings,” repeated on the veiled level as well as the unveiled one. Earth and gods belong on the level of veiled reality. We know this for “earth” because earth is always a Heideggerian term for that which invisibly withdraws from view. We know it for “gods” because he often tells us that they merely hint without ever coming to presence. “Sky” replaces what was called world in the famous essay on artworks, and this makes it take on the role of visibility against earth’s concealment. “Mortals” also belongs on the level of

34 Ibid., 114. Emphasis removed.

35 Ibid., 115. Emphasis removed.

36 See the table in my book *Tool-Being*, p. 203. Theodore Kisiel is also alert to the fourfold structure in this important early lecture course. Kisiel’s chapter on the course in his *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time*, (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1995) also includes a diagram of these four terms, though without relating them to Heidegger’s later *Geviert*, a puzzling oversight given Kisiel’s peerless scent for the subtleties of Heidegger’s development.

the visible, since he openly associates mortals with the as-structure. As for the second principle of division, earth and mortals are assigned to “world as a whole,” gods and sky to “specific beings.” This decision is somewhat trickier, but I have made a full argument elsewhere and will not repeat it here.³⁷ In short, the tension between earth and gods can be found in the jug itself, while that between mortals and sky can be found in how the jug is present to us.

Now it seems to me that the young Heidegger’s fourfold was better, even if the manner in which it was presented is significantly more boring. But a more intriguing fourfold would be one that Aristotle, Brentano, Husserl, and Heidegger never quite pieced together. Under this model, we would retain Husserl’s phenomenal realm, with intentional objects emitting various profiles that shift constantly without changing the underlying intentional unit: the tree remains the same tree even as its colors and shadows change. But unlike with Husserl, we would have the same drama underway in a non-phenomenal reality that he could never accept: *real* objects would also be distinct from their qualities and not just a bundle, in the same way that his intentional objects are not just a bundle of accidental profiles. On both layers of reality (the real and the intentional) we would have a tension between unified things and their plurality of traits. The question would arise of how the four poles of the thing interact, and this is the very question to which Heidegger’s fourfold has led us. There can no longer be a question of calling *das Geviert* “absurd.” The question, instead, is how to make productive philosophical use of it. And this, I think, is the future of Continental realism.

37 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 190-202