

Graham Harman

The Third Table

In recent years I have been linked with a philosophical movement called speculative realism. But my own variant of speculative realism, known as object-oriented philosophy, actually dates to the late 1990s. The principles of object-oriented philosophy can be summarized in a few sentences. First, philosophy must deal with every type of object rather than reducing all objects to one privileged type: zebras, leprechauns, and armies are just as worthy of philosophical discussion as atoms and brains. Second, objects are deeper than their appearance to the human mind but also deeper than their relations to one another, so that all contact between objects must be indirect or vicarious. Third, objects are polarized in two ways: there is a distinction between objects and their qualities, and a distinction between real objects withdrawn from all access and sensual objects that exist only for some observer, whether human or inhuman. Finally, the basic problems of ontology must be reformulated in terms of the fourfold structure that results from these two polarizations in the core of objects. In a brief

article like this one, there is no way to deal adequately with all of these problems. Instead, I will focus on clarifying the nature of what I have called real objects by way of a critical treatment of the famous theme of Eddington's two tables.

Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington was a British astrophysicist best known for his observations of a solar eclipse in 1919, which confirmed Einstein's general theory of relativity. Raised as a Quaker, he also had a brief dissident career as a conscientious objector to British participation in World War I. Eddington's primary gift to philosophy, however, is his well-known parable of the two tables. In the introduction to his 1927 Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh, he describes the situation as follows: "I have settled down to the task of writing these lectures and have drawn up my chairs to my two tables. Two tables! Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me—two tables, two chairs, two pens."¹ As the reader may guess, the two tables in question are the familiar table of everyday life and the same table as described by physics. We have long been accustomed to C. P. Snow's concept of the "two cultures,"² distinguishing so-called literary intellectuals from natural scientists. Eddington's sympathies are squarely with his own group—the second. But he admits that the first cannot be effaced:

I need not tell you that modern physics has by delicate test and remorseless logic assured me

1 | A. S. Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York: MacMillan, 1929 [orig. 1928]), p. ix.

2 | C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [orig. 1959]).

that my second scientific table is the only one which is really there—wherever “there” may be. On the other hand I need not tell you that modern physics will never succeed in exorcising that first table—strange compound of external nature, mental imagery and inherited prejudice—which lies visible to my eyes and tangible to my grasp. We must bid good-bye to it for the present for we are about to turn from the familiar world to the scientific world revealed by physics. This is, or is intended to be, a wholly external world.³

3 | Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (see note 1), p. xii.

Against this attitude, the humanities might be tempted to reverse Eddington's conclusions and claim that the table of everyday life is just as real, or even more real, than the scientific table. The first table and first culture would thereby be opposed to the second, and the result would be the usual trench war between science and the humanities. My contrary view is that both groups are equally wrong about the table, and for precisely the same reason. When weighing the respective merits of the everyday and scientific tables, we shall find that both are *equally unreal*, since both amount simply to opposite forms of reductionism. The scientist reduces the table downward to tiny particles invisible to the eye; the humanist reduces it upward to a series of effects on people and other things. To put it bluntly, both of Eddington's tables are utter shams that confuse the table with its internal and external environments, respectively. The real table is in fact a third table lying between

these two others. And if Eddington's two tables provided the moral support for Snow's two cultures of scientists and humanists, our third table will probably require a third culture completely different from these two. This is not to say that the third culture is a completely new one: perhaps it is the culture of the *arts*, which do not seem to reduce tables either to quarks and electrons or to table-effects on humans.

4 | *Ibid.*, p. x.

What we call the third table cannot be reduced downward to the scientific one. As Eddington describes it, "[the] scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in the emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself."⁴ In this way, the familiar household table is dissolved into rushing electric charges and other tiny elements. But while the natural sciences must be admired for having discovered all these minuscule entities, it does not follow that the everyday table can be eliminated outright and replaced by these particles. First, note that the table as a whole has features that its various component particles do not have in isolation. These are often called emergent properties, and there need not be anything mystical about them. The point is not that the passage from quarks and electrons to tables is miraculous (quantum theory can explain such transitions fairly well), but simply that the table has an autonomous *reality*

over and above its causal components, just as individual humans cannot be dissolved back into their parents. Notice that we can replace or outright remove a certain number of the table's components without destroying the table. I am inclined to agree that all entities are composite, made of smaller things rather than being simple and indivisible, but in no way does this prove that only the *smallest* things are real, though this prejudice goes back to the days of pre-Socratic philosophy. Even if every physical thing is made of atoms, every basketball game is also made of individual plays—yet objects are not just sets of atoms any more than a game is just a set of plays or a nation just a set of individuals. The death of an Egyptian in combat on Mohamed Mahmoud Street is tragic, yet it does not mean the death of Egypt; indeed, quite the contrary.

Having defended the existence of tables against their scientific dissolution, it might be assumed that we are defending the rights of Eddington's first table, the one of everyday use. As he describes this everyday table, "[it] has been familiar to me from my earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment that I call the world. . . . It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is coloured; it is above all *substantial*."⁵ We ignore for now the word "substantial," which Eddington uses in a confusing and philosophically imprecise way. What is important for the moment is that

table number one is identified with the table of everyday use: the one we see, the one at which we sit, the one we pound or lovingly stroke. Yet this first table is still not the one that we are seeking. Surprisingly enough, the person who tells us why is Martin Heidegger, even though he is often viewed as a champion of everyday utensils against a science that “does not think.”⁶ The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl asks us to avoid all scientific theories about reality not directly seen; we are requested to shun Eddington’s favored second table and simply describe what appears to consciousness. Heidegger counters that most of our dealings with things are not a matter of conscious experience at all. Blood circulates freely, and vehicles and floors function smoothly, until these malfunction and thus gain our notice.⁷ Restated in terms of Eddington’s example, the table I see is derivative of the table that is invisibly used as I go about my daily business. But even this formulation does not go deep enough. After all, even the table encountered in *practical use* does not exhaust the table’s reality. In one moment it reliably supports paperweights and our midday meal; in the next it collapses to the ground, shattering everything. This shows that just as the table could not be identified with the one we *saw*, it was also not the same as the one we *used*. The real table is a genuine reality deeper than any theoretical or practical

6 | Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper, 1976 [orig. 1951/52]), p. 8.

7 | Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 2008 [orig. 1927]).

encounter with it. And beyond this, if rocks or other weights slam into the table, they fail to exhaust its inner depths as well. The table is something deeper than any relations in which it might become involved, whether with humans or inanimate entities. In short, Eddington's everyday table number one is no better than his scientific table number two. Just as we cannot reduce the table downward to electric charges rushing through empty space, we also cannot reduce it upward to its theoretical, practical, or causal effects on humans or on anything else.

We have now isolated the location of the third table—the only *real* one. Eddington's first table ruins tables by turning them into nothing but their everyday effects on us or on someone else. Eddington's second table ruins tables by disintegrating them into nothing but tiny electric charges or faint material flickerings. Yet the third table lies directly between these other two, neither of which is really a table. Our third table *emerges* as something distinct from its own components and also *withdraws* behind all its external effects. Our table is an intermediate being found neither in subatomic physics nor in human psychology, but in a permanent autonomous zone where objects are simply themselves. And in my view, *this* is the genuine meaning of the word “substance,” which Eddington uses too loosely to refer to table number one as found in human experience. In the Aristotelian

tradition, the term “substance” (*hypokeimenon*) refers to the autonomous reality of individual things. Unlike in Plato, for whom there is one table-form in which countless tables “participate,” for Aristotle each table is its own form: a *substantial* form, rather than a form existing only through its relation to a perceiver or some other thing. It might seem strange to wave the flag of Aristotle, since he is widely viewed as a boring, middle-aged reactionary whose medieval enforcers were overthrown in liberating revolution by Descartes and other moderns. But what is most fascinating about Aristotle’s concept of substance is how much it has in common with our third table, provided Aristotle is given a properly weird interpretation. For on the one hand, Aristotle does not reduce individual things downward to tiny component pieces. And on the other hand, contrary to popular belief, he does not reduce substances upward to what humans can grasp of them using reason. After all, things are always individuals, but knowledge is only of universals (green, heavy, square), and universals belong to many things.⁸ This means that even for Aristotle, the reality of things lies outside the grasp of human knowledge.

By locating the third table (and to repeat, this is the only *real* table) in a space between the “table” as particles and the “table” in its effects on humans, we have apparently found a table that can be verified in no way at all, whether

8 | Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, N. Mex.: Green Lion Press, 1999), p. 145.

by science or by tangible effects in the human sphere. Yes—and that is precisely the point. Any philosophy is unworthy of the name if it attempts to convert objects into the conditions by which they can be known or verified. The term *philosophia*, possibly coined by Pythagoras, famously means not “wisdom” but “love of wisdom.” The real is something that cannot be known, only loved. This does not mean that access to the table is impossible, only that it must be *indirect*. Just as erotic speech works when composed of hint, allusion, and innuendo rather than of declarative statements and clearly articulated propositions, and just as jokes or magic tricks are easily ruined when each of their steps is explained, ~~thinking~~ is not ~~thinking~~ unless it realizes that ~~its~~ approach to objects can only be oblique. We cannot be downward scientific reducers, nor can we be upward humanistic reducers. We can only be *hunters of objects*, and must even be non-lethal hunters, since objects can never be caught. The world is filled primarily not with electrons or human praxis, but with ghostly objects withdrawing from all human and inhuman access, accessible only by allusion and seducing us by means of *allure*. Whatever we capture, whatever table we sit at or destroy, is not the real table.

But if the first and second tables are both unreal, then there is a sense in which the two cultures of C. P. Snow are both failures. Whatever

the practical successes in their own domains of scientific realism and social constructionism, they are both failures as philosophy. This was vividly noted two decades ago by Bruno Latour, in his famous polemic against the modern divide between nature and culture.⁹ However, there is a sense in which Latour retains Eddington's first table (the everyday one), merely expanding its scope so that all electrons, cartoon characters, and real and fictional tables are placed on the same footing. The reason for this is that an object (or "actor") for Latour is to be defined only by how it transforms, modifies, perturbs, or creates some other actor. In this philosophy, nothing is hidden in the depths, since everything is fully deployed in duels and negotiations with other things. By contrast, the Philosophy of the Third Table that I advocate is committed to tables that do exist at a deeper level than all possible transformations, modifications, perturbations, or creations.

I have also suggested in passing that a third culture corresponding to the third table might not need to be created from scratch. Nor is it sufficient (though it may be interesting) to award the third-culture title to natural scientists who happen to brush up against philosophical problems, thereby mixing the worlds of Eddington's two tables. John Brockman reflects this prejudice when he says, in his otherwise fascinating anthology, that "the third culture

9 | Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993 [orig. 1991]).

consists of those scientists and other thinkers in the empirical world who, through their work and expository writing, are taking the place of the traditional intellectual in rendering visible the deeper meanings of our lives, redefining who and what we are.”¹⁰ Far from calling for a true third culture, Brockman is merely calling for a total victory of the second, scientific one, though in somewhat sexier and less nihilistic form. At best, the authors in his collection are trying to make Eddington’s two tables communicate, not hunting the elusive table number three, emerging from its components while withdrawing from all direct access. But as stated earlier, it may be artists (in all genres) who best meet this description. For on the one hand art does not function by dissolving white whales, mansions, rafts, apples, guitars, and windmills into their subatomic underpinnings. Quite obviously, artists do not provide a theory of physical reality, and Eddington’s second table is the last thing they seek. But on the other hand they also do not seek the first table, as if the arts merely replicated the objects of everyday life or sought to create effects on us. Instead, there is the attempt to establish objects deeper than the features through which they are announced, or allude to objects that cannot quite be made present. For centuries, philosophy has aspired to the conditions of a rigorous science, allying itself at various times with math-

10 | See John Brockman, ed., *The Third Culture: Beyond the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). This entire passage is located in the book’s table of contents, in the spirit of a chapter summary.

ematics or descriptive psychology. Yet what if the counter-project of the next four centuries were to turn philosophy into an art? We would have “Philosophy as Vigorous Art” rather than Husserl’s “Philosophy as Rigorous Science.” In being transformed from a science into an art, philosophy regains its original character as Eros. In some ways this erotic model is the basic aspiration of object-oriented philosophy: the only way, in the present philosophical climate, to do justice to the *love* of wisdom that makes no claim to be an actual wisdom.

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