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Published in:
Organization Theory

DOI:
10.1177/26317877231153186

Published: 01/01/2023

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Please cite the original version:
Towards an Object-Oriented Organization Theory: The Role of Entrepreneurial Objects in Organizational Emergence

Lauri Laine and Ewald Kibler

Abstract
Avant-garde entrepreneurship studies have contributed to organization theory through a strong process ontology on the creation of new potentialities for organizing; however, this has also further diminished scholarly attention to organizations as objects. It follows that the core entities of organization theory—real organizations—matter very little for theorizing organizational emergence. Based on Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO), we develop the argument that objects, not unlike processes, can be entrepreneurial. Laying the ground for an object-oriented organization theory (OOOT), we posit that increased attention to viewing entrepreneurship as a quality invites organization theory into the weird reality of organizations as emergent autonomy-seeking objects. This becomes possible by way of a non-literal knowledge sustained by the commitment of another object that is neither reducible to its components (including process itself) nor actions (including all forms of the relational determination of organizations). We close by discussing the uniqueness of OOOT through the example of Sun Ra and the Arkestra.

Keywords
Entrepreneurship, new organizations, realism, emergence, novelty, object-oriented ontology, philosophy, process theories

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Introduction

Beguiled by process-based philosophies, work at the intersection of organization theory and entrepreneurship focuses on organizations as emergent phenomena (Chiles, Bluedorn & Gupta, 2007; Gartner, 1993; Hjorth, Holt & Steyaert, 2015). Ensuing research that draws from a strong process-oriented ontology (Cloutier & Langley, 2020) has explored “organization-creation in an already organized world” (Hjorth & Reay, 2022, p. 171), elaborated upon in an impressive range of historical, cultural, spatial, and institutional contexts (Gehman, Sharma & Beveridge, 2022; Lounsbury, Gehman & Glynn, 2019; Wadhwani, Kirsch, Welte & Jones, 2020; Welte & Baker, 2021). Although empirical studies on how organizations come to exist are now a staple of organizational studies (Cucchi, Lubberink, Dentoni, & Gartner, 2022; Williams & Shepherd, 2021), surprisingly little theoretical discussion has ensued around the metaphysical grounds of process ontology’s rejection of organizations as objects (du Gay, 2020; du Gay & Vikkelso, 2018; Frankel, 2021; King, Felin & Whetten, 2010). Specifically, instead of theorizing on what it is, precisely, that comes into existence when organizations emerge (Gartner, 1993), the focus has largely been on how processes of organizing become creative through entrepreneurship (Hjorth, Strati, Weik & Drakopolou Dodd, 2018). Indeed, it appears that we are moving in a direction that leads away from recognizing organizations’ importance in theorizing organizational emergence. This presents us with the exciting opportunity in this paper for a philosophical exercise (Guillet de Monthoux, 2015; Kornberger & Mantere, 2020) that finds actual organizations appealing not because they might empirically fit our theoretical schema, but rather because something about them escapes their expression by way of theory. Organizations, in the sense that they are not exhausted by what can be known, said, and done about them, are essentially weird.

The theoretical school exhibiting explicit and strong interest in organizational emergence can also be found in processual entrepreneurship studies (PES). Despite inhabiting a range of theoretical traditions (Steyaert, 2007), ground zero in PES is located in the perception that an organization is the net result of entrepreneurship, that is, those creative activities by means of which the virtual becomes actual in the form of an organization (Hjorth et al., 2015). An organization, in this sense, emerges as an outcome of the entrepreneurial process that “makes potentiality leak into the actual” (Hjorth, 2014, p. 55). Importantly, PES’s point of departure is a strong processual, anti-entative ontology (Hjorth et al., 2015; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas & Van de Ven, 2013; Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009), which involves the foundational idea that organizations are not, ontologically speaking, real entities but rather “momentary instantiations of processes” (Cloutier & Langley, 2020, p. 3; see also Linstead & Thanem, 2007; Nayak & Chia, 2011). It follows that, somewhat surprisingly, entrepreneurship is said to create something productive out of this already-organized fluidity (Hjorth, 2009). It is not an exaggeration to claim that emergence has arrived in lockstep with process ontology.

By studying process, attention has been deflected from entrepreneurship’s traditional emphasis on individual human beings, turning instead to the more collective and “already organized” premises of organizational emergence (Hjorth et al., 2015). Yet, despite advances in understandings of how the possibilities for creating new organizations emerge (Hjorth & Reay, 2022), it is fair to ask whether process ontology—the philosophical stance on which scholarly inquiry currently rests (Hjorth, 2014; Steyaert, 2007)—rightfully enjoys a monopoly over emergence as the explanatory modus for organizations. To deliver a competing, if also largely complementary and certainly respectful, view we argue that strong process ontology (Cloutier & Langley, 2020) tends to deal with organizations in a way that relegates
them to an epiphenomenal status. As an epiphenomenon, organizations can have no ontological claim of their own in the view of strong process ontology, we believe, and are instead mere examples of a more fundamental underlying process (Linstead & Thanem, 2007). This tendency is dangerous, however, because it provides sustenance to the hypothetical troll who maliciously suggests that organizations cannot therefore be interesting in their own right and that, subsequently, all that is worthy of theoretical exploration must lie elsewhere (du Gay, 2020). To starve this troll, we put forth the view that by turning to metaphysics, organization theory can embark on artistic explorations of organizations as weird entities, and thereby provide a novel rationale for how organization theory may become attracted to approaching real organizations as aesthetic phenomena (Guillet de Monthoux, 2015). To appreciate fully the weirdness of organizations, we argue that theory must consider them as real objects that consist neither of what they are made nor in what they do (Harman, 2016b).

In this article, we develop the stance that organizations are emergent autonomy-seeking objects. We show that this approach is consistent with the notion that organizations emerge in environments that are already organized (Hjorth et al., 2015; Hjorth & Reay, 2022). In this mode of thinking emergence is an instance of something coming to exist that is not merely the sum of its parts (Morton, 2011, 2018). Our tentative theory is based on object-oriented ontology (henceforth OOO; see Harman, 2018, for a general introduction to OOO; and see Young, 2021, for a treatise on emergence from an OOO perspective), which proposes an innovative shift towards treating everything that exists as an object, including phenomena previously thought to be represented best through a strong process ontology, such as events and activities (Cloutier & Langley, 2020). In the OOO view, no change occurs unless something is capable of changing, or of being an agent for change. However, this does not imply that an object-filled cosmos must rigidify thinking, cripple the imagination, or oppressively predetermine everything that exists. What process ontology takes as objects’ weakness, OOO considers to be their most interesting aspect: objects are slippery, riddled with mystery, and strangely never present in full (Giovannoni & Napier, 2022; Law & Singleton, 2005). For this reason OOO is often associated with the label weird realism (Harman, 2009a, 2010); and should our writings succeed, organizations turn weird—as does (some of) organization theory, too.

We propose here that objects may not only become PES’s raison d’être by adopting the perspective of OOO, but that entrepreneurship itself becomes a property of organizations once these are considered as objects. As suggested by kindred theoretical streams such as assemblage theory (Gehman et al., 2022), actor-network theory (Korsgaard, 2011), and the communicative constitution of organizations (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009), objects hold vast explanatory potential, for we live in an irreducible world of honey bees, paper mills, Mars landings, blue roses, and Thor—all of which are objects, just like everything else (Morton, 2011). Objects are not merely empty containers, pockets of something rubbery that become balloon-like when inflated by a subject with airy matter (although, strangely, all empty containers must, by definition, also be objects themselves), but also independent actants imbued with agency (Bento da Silva, Quattrone, & Llewellyn, 2022; Cooren, 2020; Latour, 1996b). In this line of thinking, not only do people who inflate balloons come across an object that is a balloon-to-be, but also balloons-to-be come across us and cause us to fill our lungs repeatedly with air in order to satisfy the object that is becoming a balloon. Fittingly, OOO’s stance is decidedly non-anthropocentric: the human subject is but one particular type of object capable of connecting with other objects, so as to form a new compound object or assemblage (Gehman et al., 2022), which is the Deleuzean “parallel term” for OOO’s objects (Harman, 2016b, p. 41). By resorting to OOO, this paper seeks to grasp organizations as actual sources of novelty in the world (Harman, 2016b); and we aim to show that this understanding radically differs
both from approaches that view organizations as consisting only of their doings, as well as from approaches that argue that organizations emerge from a deeper ontological caste of perpetual flow.

We proceed here as follows: we begin by laying out OOO’s analysis of the ontological rejection of objects and subsequently apply this to strong process ontology. This is followed by a brief review, where we acknowledge and draw on the work of theoretical allies for whom objects also matter, making our case for the comparative uniqueness of OOO’s position. We then introduce OOO in more detail, focusing on identifying and navigating the tensions between objects and their qualities, and proceed to posit “the entrepreneurial” as a real quality of emergent organizations. We continue by illustrating the comparative uniqueness of OOO’s position through the biographical example of Sun Ra and the Arkestra. We conclude with an impassioned plea for aesthetics-driven theories that imaginatively explore the gap between the entrepreneurial and organizations in order to generate conceptual innovations in organization theory. The overall contribution we wish to make is to encourage a speculative plunge into the weirdness of actual organizations that may serve as a remedy to “getting stuck” in self-affective cycles of radical doubt (Morton, 2011) over OT’s core objects.

**Process and Organizations in Exile**

*The ontological rejection of objects*

Process ontology puts “movement, change, and flow first” (Hjorth et al., 2015, p. 599). For process theorists, objects are too entative, static, and reactionary—and hence fishy—possessions of the enemy (Steyaert, 2007). Cloutier and Langley (2020) have identified at least two shades to such animosity, labeled “weak” and “strong” process ontologies. Briefly, in weak process ontology change happens to things, while in strong process ontology things are epistemic *results of* an underlying cosmic sweep of change (Langley et al., 2013). These two versions of distrust are what enables access to the real movements behind the need to create organization. With such a metaphysical conviction, it might appear fruitless to consider objects of real importance and with genuine theoretical enthusiasm. Echoing this, Morton notes that “in an age where flows and processes are PC [politically correct] and ‘object’ conjures up something dull and static, it’s difficult to convey the breakthrough quality of OOO” (Morton, 2011, p. 165). Morton’s (2011, 2018, 2022) OOO is the same as Graham Harman’s *object-oriented ontology* (Harman, 2010, 2016a, 2018), in that only objects can be said really to exist. While this principal position of OOO stands in clear contrast to strong process ontology, we seek to show that it is precisely the dialogue between OOO and strong process ontology that best propels organization theory forward, in terms of theorizing organizations as emergent phenomena.

Strong process theorists hold the view that an ontology of objects automatically reproduces a deterministic view of the socially qualified universe, and that therefore objects must be metaphysically eliminated in order to theorize “becoming” (Cloutier & Langley, 2020; Nayak & Chia, 2011). Hence, when dealing with new organizations, process theory replaces objects with flow, accentuated through a division between the potential and the actual (Hjorth & Reay, 2022; Linstead & Thanem, 2007). As a result of this, not only the more obvious examples of objects, from computer screens and kittens to wookies and ray guns, but also real organizations may seem unlikely candidates for organization theorists’ interest (Frankel, 2021). In the following, we discuss why this division is not required from an OOO viewpoint, especially in terms of explaining emergence and novelty. Furthermore, as process identifies little theoretical use for objects, often purging them from their ontological system, it also becomes incapable and/or unwilling to theorize organizations as objects. However, it remains unclear how exactly objects can be eliminated from theory in a philosophically sound way; OOO, as we now show, provides precisely such an analysis.
How organizations are banished from organization theory (and why this is a bad idea)

Our argument rests on the observation that the current problems in theorizing organizations as real objects (du Gay, 2020; Frankel, 2021; King et al., 2010; Latour, 2013) are grounded in ontological ideas over reality. Organizations are commonly banished from organization theory because there is no place for them in a process-oriented ontology (Hjorth, 2014; Langley et al., 2013; Steyaert, 2007; Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009), which argues that the only thing said to exist properly is, indeed, process—all else is understood to belong in the domain of epistemology (Nayak & Chia, 2011). To understand how objects are thus banished from theory on ontological grounds, OOO analyzes the reductionist technique of duo-mining, splitting this into the two more specific arguments of “undermining” and “overmining” (Harman, 2013). By way of duo-mining, it can be argued that things are made of a further, more fundamentally real selection of components, while being constructed in situ by subjects (Harman, 2013). Undermining refers to the dissolution of objects on the grounds that they are nothing but the net result of their constituent factors (Harman, 2013). Overmining, in turn, refers to objects amounting to nothing but the influence they exert elsewhere (Harman, 2013). We will now examine in more detail how process ontology uses undermining and overmining techniques to banish objects from theory; and we argue why these techniques lack the ability to make a theoretical case for the emergence of novel organizations.

Undermining

Undermining reduces organizations to their components. The motto for undermining can be thought of as “things do not matter, for they are made of something else.” In undermining, objects are stripped of their independence on the basis of being nothing but modifications of a more profound, deeper version of reality (Harman, 2013). In theoretical work that relies on process ontology, undermining commonly occurs most explicitly in statements that remind us that we should not expect organizations to be anything beyond the processes that yield them. For example, Nayak and Chia (2011, p. 281) adopt a processual view of things by stating that organizations arise from a primordial “sea of constant flux and change”; Cloutier & Langley (2020, p. 3) assert that “things are seen as momentary instantiations of processes”; and Hjorth et al. (2015, p. 599) ponder how “when examined carefully, what might seem fixed becomes loose.” Process theory is joined in such acts of undermining by materialism, or at least the traditional, pared-down type of idealistic materialism that considers things real only if they can be understood as examples of materiality (Harman, 2016b; Latour, 2007). Neither process ontology nor materialism is required for undermining, however: all that is needed are the conceptual tools and rhetorical latitude to reduce objects to an underlying, circumstantial base condition for existence (Harman, 2013, 2018). In PES, undermining could mean specifying the mechanisms that underpin the organization-creation process; for example, the journey of an entrepreneurial venture can be said to consist of several stages or events that, all taken together, constitute the newly created organization (Davidsson & Gruenhagen, 2021; McMullen & Dimov, 2013). The undermining of objects can equally be employed to reason that a new organization exists because all the vacant components necessary for its emergence have been fulfilled (Ramoglou, 2013), or that an organization comes into existence as the instantiation of a greater organizing movement towards the future (Gehman et al., 2022).

Undermining makes no theoretical case for emergence. Undermining very much remains a useful and necessary technique for developing organization theory, and theory has found new ways to explore emergent organizational phenomena through process ontology’s approach of undermining (Steyaert, 2007; Weiskopf & Steyaert, 2009). Yet, when faced with the task of investigating the actors who carry out the
concrete work of “organization-creation in an already organized world” (Hjorth & Reay, 2022, p. 161), process ontology achieves their disappearance by subordinating them to the “hidden overlord” of process (Harman, 2009b). By undermining the agency of real organizations, their emergence becomes conditional on perpetual movement’s potency to appear in organized form. However, this only pertains if theory inscribes organizational form into some virtuality-inspired notion of being in the future—which subsequently becomes actual in organizational emergence (Hjorth, 2014). For organization theory, replacing the real with potentiality means that emergent organizations are reduced to something which they are not in every single, actual instant, assuming that they are instead something else which is capable of withholding potentiality while lying dormant in actuality—from which they subsequently actualize, given favorable external conditions (Latour, 2013). In other words, here process already contains the seed for all of that which is to come about.

The question arises as to how anything can truly change if a virtuality exists that precedes the actual, for new combinations cannot differ fundamentally from the combining factors that fulfill the virtually-set prophecy in the actual world. In fact, in undermining no new combinations exist in the sense of concretely emergent objects ranging from—to borrow some of Schumpeter’s favorite examples—the mighty combustion engine to the humble Deerfoot sausage (Schumpeter, 1947). Emergence that does not take place entirely in actuality but rather manifests as a result of virtuality’s actualization is problematic for theory, because it leaves no agency for new organizations themselves in determining either what they are or what they may yet become. We shall return to how an OOO view can approach solutions to these issues by arguing that the emergence of organizations is only possible in a world that is already full of other objects and organizations, even if this entails arriving at a number of extraordinarily weird conclusions.

**Overmining**

Overmining reduces organizations to their external effects. The motto for overmining can be thought of as “things do not matter because they are not even things.” In overmining, things are determined by how they relate to and affect other things; there is no independent locus of determination for objects because they are “too deep to be real” (Harman, 2013, p. 45; see also Baranovas, 2020). Most commonly, overmining is derived from a correlationist position, which assumes that all ontological statements must include an account of how subjects are capable of accessing exterior reality (Brassier, Grant, Harman & Meillassoux, 2007; Young, 2020). In process-oriented theoretical work, overmining often takes the form of critiquing commonly held conceptions of organizational discourses and practice—especially those of market-based business firms—as ideologically controlled (Ogbor, 2000) in that they are performatively constructed, symbolically enacted, and/or doctrinally determined processes in lieu of the real. Examples of such statements are Thompson, Verduijn and Gartner’s (2020, p. 249) plea to view “all entrepreneurial phenomena as taking place within, and are aspects or components of, the nexus of practices”; Jones and Spicer’s (2009, p. 236) uncanny vision of entrepreneurship as “a paradoxical, incomplete and worm-ridden symbolic structure that posits an impossible and indeed incomprehensible object at its centre”; and Steyaert’s (2007, p. 463) influential suggestion that “new organizations are constructed through countless stories that perpetually repeat, contradict and extend each other.”

Like undermining, overmining comes in many guises; and its purpose is to banish objects from theory by elevating language as the ongoing site of constructing “the world as we know it.” It comes as no surprise, then, that Harman considers overmining the greater of the two dangers in social theory (Harman, 2016b). In PES, overmining can mean arguing that entrepreneurship is best seen as determined by power rituals (Goss, Jones, Betta & Latham, 2011), or
exposing how the enthusiasm generated by unbridled pro-business ideologies obscures the actual effort it takes to organize so as to pursue new value genuinely (Dey & Lehner, 2017). With overmining, for instance, new organizations can be said to emerge during the process of creating practical relations between members and non-members (Johannisson, 2011), or to manipulate culturally accessed meanings purposefully in the creation of new value (Lounsbury et al., 2019).

**Overmining makes no theoretical case for novelty.** Similarly to undermining, overmining has greatly enriched our understanding of entrepreneurship and the emergence of organizations. Our concern with it arises from the observation that while it avoids being determined by a priori images of what an organization ought to be, it turns to reductive thinking in assuming that the most relevant and intriguing theoretical conversations are to take place around, rather than with, real organizations (du Gay, 2020). While in undermining everything is made of primordial elements, the “hidden overlord” of overmining is relationality that determines objects through the effects they have on other objects (Harman, 2009b, 2013). Hence, by succumbing to the tyranny of relations, overmining means that organizational emergence is determined by changes in the relational configurations among all the actors that appear in the process. However, this only succeeds if novelty is transplanted from objects to relations, meaning that new organizations are merely different ways to do something other than being emergent organizations in the actual and concrete sense of the word (Frankel, 2021; King et al., 2010).

In OOO’s contrasting view, change is only possible if things change, by combining with other objects in novel ways so as to generate a new actual object that is neither reducible downwards to the combined objects, nor upwards to what it does elsewhere (Harman, 2012, 2018). While organization theory has yet to embrace actual organizations, entrepreneurship studies long ago pointed out the lack of a more specific theory on organizations as emergent objects (Chiles, Meyer, & Hench, 2004; Gartner, 1993). However, by turning to prosesual and relational ontologies (Steyaert, 2007), both entrepreneurship and organization theory have ignored how new organizations are capable of relating with other organizations, institutions, and things. Overmining’s approach is to claim that an organization is what it does; or, in other words, an organization is nothing less than the influence it exerts on others, which is an event that determines its agency (Gehman et al., 2022). Yet, how then can it be possible for organizations to change that which they do? How would they be able to begin doing anything at all; and how can anything hold the property of novelty if organizations are devoid of identity beyond their relational influences elsewhere? By situating novelty outside organizations themselves, process theory struggles to account for the truly new organizations of the actual world. This is problematic because, just as in the case of undermining, such an understanding leads to the notion that organizations are incapable of being real sources of novelty.

**The ontological rehabilitation of objects**

Our review and problematization of the ontological neglect of objects in organization theory is based on the two combinable techniques of undermining and overmining, both of which are limited in their ability to explain emergent novelty (Garud, Simpson, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2015). Undermining fails in this by positing that the key to emergence lies with potentiality rather than real organizations, while overmining cannot explain novelty because it replaces real organizations with what actors do to each other at a given time or place. In contrast to both of these techniques, OOO argues that only independent objects allow for both emergence and novelty:

the point is not that Harman protests against the reduction of things we encounter every day to some hidden forces to preserve the world we
experience, but that undermining and overmining reduce objects to nonobjects, that is to say, only the expressions of true sources of determination. (Baranovas, 2020, p. 240)

Specifically, OOO considers emergence as a phenomenon where new objects appear once objects come together (Harman, 2018, pp. 30–32). To propose a principal theory of how organizations come to be in actuality, we posit organizations as objects (du Gay, 2020; Frankel, 2021; King et al., 2010) that are capable of combining with other objects—including with other organizations—so as to emerge as novel objects.

To take things further, OOO agrees with process ontology in that objects begin to come apart when examined closely (Hjorth et al., 2015). More concretely, objects in OOO can never be fully exposed to anything else (Harman, 2007a, 2009a): they are always alien to each other; and they are self-determinating, independent, and withdrawn. Withdrawness is a particularly important concept in OOO, referring to the impossibility of determining the thing-in-itself by extrinsic means (Harman, 2018; Morton, 2022). In other words, objects are never exhausted by that which can be known about them. Strictly speaking, real objects are “out there,” somewhere, and their crucial parts are entirely shut off from access by anything else (Harman, 2013). For Harman, all notions of literal access are ultimately self-negating because they hinge on an ontologically unsustainable distinction between human subjects and the world, which in philosophical discourse is often called correlationism (Brassier et al., 2007; Young, 2020). Instead, OOO posits that objects are self-determinating in the sense that they always keep something about themselves to themselves. Since there is no way to bypass this withdrawn quality, the more deeply we examine objects the more they withdraw (Harman, 2010; Morton, 2011). To operate with withdrawal, OOO suggests rescinding the long-standing, yet obsolete, contract between theory and correlationism, and allowing ourselves to be mesmerized aesthetically by the inaccessibility of the things that we study.

By engulfing us, the organizations of organization studies invite us to take note of how incomprehensible, complex, and astonishing they actually are (Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019; Tsoukas, 2017). Indeed, OOO is disconcerting in that theory ought not only to offer comfort but weirdness: “Harman wants you to see things you can’t see” (Morton, 2011, p. 170). For object-oriented organization theory—should such a theory emerge—organizations are self-determining phenomena to such a degree that ought not to be duo-mined away by theory. As maintained by process theory, new organizations must emerge from already organized premises (Hjorth & Reay, 2022). However, theory that takes this to mean that organizations are only externally determined deprives us of the rather more intriguing aspect of organizations entering into relations with alien objects, including with other organizations. “Organizations are real, as objects,” is OOO’s dictum here. Fortunately, as we outline in the following, there are theoretical streams that seek to reconcile process and objects.

For whom objects matter. We have argued that the ontological rejection of objects leads to the “banishment” of organizations from organization theory. Based on Harman’s (2013, 2018) work, we have also presented two theoretical techniques for doing so—undermining and overmining—as well as their combination in form of duo-mining. Our purpose here has not been to use ideal-typical exaggerations so as to show the deficiency of the theoretical traditions analyzed above, but rather to illuminate a vacancy for real organizations within organization theory. OOO is helpful in this because it argues for a reality replete with objects capable of interacting and combining in strange new ways, with new emergent objects, and with objects that wither, decay, and pass away (Harman, 2018; Morton, 2018). However, objects are clearly not OOO’s invention and go back to the very beginnings of philosophy; and there do exist theoretical streams
that are close to, and also within, organization theory and entrepreneurship where objects wield crucial influence. The review that follows is not exhaustive, but intended to serve as an indicator of potential allies or fellow travelers on the path towards an object-oriented theory of organizational emergence. Table 1 summarizes this section.

First, opportunity-based theories are a disparate group largely focused on the concept of opportunity as a boundary condition to entrepreneurship. Intriguingly, the liveliest discussions

Table 1. For whom objects matter (and why they do not address the emergence of organizations as autonomy-seeking objects).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core concept</th>
<th>Opportunity-based theories</th>
<th>Formal theories of organization</th>
<th>CCO</th>
<th>ANT</th>
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that are close to, and also within, organization theory and entrepreneurship where objects wield crucial influence. The review that follows is not exhaustive, but intended to serve as an indicator of potential allies or fellow travelers on the path towards an object-oriented theory of
in opportunity-based theorizing concern over-mining positions and the question of whether opportunities are constructed processes or empirical entities (Alvarez, Barney, McBride & Wuebker, 2017; Ramoglu & Tsang, 2016, 2018). Although Ramoglu’s (2013) critical realist approach differs in some ways from OOO’s weird realism (Harman, 2009a), these are clearly the two positions that lie closest together in our review, as both think of “the real” in terms of objects that extend beyond the knowable (Ramoglu, 2021). Opportunities, in this sense, are anything that exists independently of subjective thought that can be “actualized” into profit (Ramoglu & Tsang, 2016). The downside to this is that the focus lies on theorizing the entrepreneur–market interface rather than organizations as emergent objects.

Second, formal theories of organization focus on formal organization as the (only) legitimate object of organization theory. du Gay (2020) in particular argues that organization theory ought to be purged of the “salad” of metaphysics and instead inquire into the “bread and butter” of formally existing organizations. Frankel echoes du Gay’s sentiments in lamenting organization studies’ search for organization in places where it cannot be located by empirical means, calling for scholars to be more self-critical in remembering that not everything is an instance of organization (Frankel, 2021). OOO agrees with these points to the extent that organizations are real entities with insides and outsides, and beginnings and ends, while not being determined by any of them, either separately or together (Nooteboom, 2020). For both formal theorizing and OOO, organization theory needs to make organizations meaningful (du Gay & Vikkelso, 2018). However, because formal theories focus on organizations that are already empirically certified as such (du Gay, 2020; Frankel, 2021), organization theory says little about the real phenomenon of the emergence of new organizations.

The following two approaches—CCO and ANT—differ from opportunity-based and formal theories in that they are, at least in part, designed to explain emergent novelty. We will therefore explain them in more detail, before we turn to OOO itself.

The communicative constitution of organization (CCO) approach sees organizations as being created through processes of reciprocal interaction (Brummans, Cooren, Rochibaud & Taylor, 2014; Cooren & Martine, 2016; Schoeneborn, Kuhn & Kärreman, 2019). Based on the foundational idea that organizations are indebted to a socio-material reality (Orlikowski, 2007), CCO argues that new organizations materialize through communications in a given time and place (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, 2020). Importantly, this approach holds a processual metaphysics in which all things are in constant movement from one degree of materialization to another (Cooren, 2020), that is, a process of the constant transformation of things from one material stage to another and/or from the ideational to the material (Brummans, Hwang & Cheong, 2020). In the following, we explore why CCO, despite its indisputable merits in explaining the role played by communication in the creation of organizations, nevertheless fails to grasp objects fully, at least from an OOO point of view. This notwithstanding, CCO does succeed in its assertion that theory should be inclusive of all kinds of actors capable of generating change, and that these actors are not restricted to human subjectivity (Cooren, 2020). Through a shared non-anthropocentric stance, both OOO and CCO argue for less theoretical emphasis on how human subjects construct (or distort) exterior things, thus rejecting the human mind as a boundary condition to (social) reality (Latour, 1996a, 1996b).

CCO and OOO converge on a number of important fronts, yet also diverge in ways that emphasize the respective uniqueness of their approaches to objects. In terms of convergence between CCO and OOO, first, CCO’s explicit rejection of the human mind as a primary organizing principle seems to be able to “fix” a number of the concerns voiced by speculative realists over correlationism (Brassier et al., 2007; Young, 2020). Principally, CCO holds that any object, be it a brain, a business plan, or Starship Enterprise, can be a medium through
which other objects emerge (Cooren, 2020). Therefore, at least in principle, CCO includes the possibility of organizations without humans (Latour, 1996b). OOO would agree, and extend this agreement to allowing all kinds of objects to influence, and even generate, new theory about organizations. These objects are not restricted to human subjectivity. However, while CCO is chiefly interested in the production of social reality through the communicative acts of objects (Ashcraft et al., 2009), OOO points at the objects themselves (Harman, 2007a; Heidegger, 1967). If things really exist irrespective of what people think or believe about them, as both CCO and OOO insist, creativity can only take place in a fundamentally inaccessible, unknowable, scary, and mysterious universe of things that precede the actions that these things take (Harman, 2010). OOO’s impetus is not to disclose the role played by objects in relational processes—which is what CCO does so well (Brummans et al., 2020; Schoeneborn et al., 2019)—but instead to disclose how it is possible that objects can influence each other in ways that yield new objects in the first place (Harman, 2007b).

Second, CCO tackles undermining claims by considering organizations as emergent outcomes of communicative practices that result in an organizational form that exceeds the objects that do the communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren & Martine, 2016). Emphatically, CCO excels in explaining how all kinds of (human and non-human) things work as transmissive channels through which other things, such as organizations, institutions, and societies, come into being (Brummans et al., 2014; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). The focus, however, lies on material objects—or, more specifically, on how objects materialize through their communicative acts, clearly including objects such as organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, 2020). CCO thus restricts itself to analyzing the material dimension of organizations, and how this dimension yields organizations by way of communication. Privileging the material dimension over the other dimensions of things might, however, obscure vital aspects of real organizations that are not material but rather fictive, as well as how the creation of organization is influenced by things that begin and remain in the imagination and, hence, are never determined by their materialization (Chiles, Crawford, & Elias, 2021; Thompson, 2018). In contrast to this, OOO provides equal weight to both materialized and immaterial objects, based on Harman’s argument that materiality is but one property of reality among others, even if it is often presented as ultimately prevailing over other properties (Harman, 2016a).

Third, it remains unclear how CCO helps organization theory to avoid overmining impulses and thus lend its support in embracing real objects. The charges of overmining appear to apply to CCO: the reduction of things to that which they do to other things (Harman, 2013). This is not a crucial concern as long as CCO is employed to explain how objects function as channels for other objects’ self-expression (Cooren, 2020). However, given CCO’s recent tendency towards stating ontologically that organizations not only engage in but are determined by communicative processes (Brummans et al., 2014; Schoeneborn et al., 2019), overmining is a grave concern. In cases where CCO goes beyond explaining communication channels in organizing to theorizing communication as the relational substrate without which organizations cannot exist (Brummans et al., 2014), this approach in fact resorts to overmining by reducing organizations to the after-effects of things influencing each other in a given time and place. Is it unthinkable for organization theory that different relational effects at a different time and in a different place still yield the same organization? Is it not possible for an organization to “not do” anything at all? Affirmative answers to these questions necessitate abandoning the ontological assumption that organizations are capable of holding at least some level of continuity over time (Pettigrew, 1979). If organizations are nothing less than the relational acts that constitute them, then neither can they possess the property of novelty, because there is no longer anything that holds them together besides those fleeting,
if sometimes successive, actions and events. Equating organizations with doings and practices is precisely the kind of overmining thinking for which OOO seeks an alternative.

Actor-network theory (ANT) posits two basic building blocks of reality: actors and networks (Latour, 1996a). Ontologically, ANT is a material relationist and performative approach (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2005; Korsgaard, 2011; Latour, 2007) with potential to trace how novel actors are created through processes of assembling various other actors into a holistic entity (Gehman et al., 2022; Steyaert, 2007). ANT’s actors are closely related to OOO’s objects in the non-anthropocentric sense that they can just as well be “human, inhuman, nonhuman, [and] inhuman” (Latour, 1996a, p. 373). Similarly to OOO, ANT reasons that actors possess a degree of independence from any definitive set of relations, although we will see below that OOO goes farther than this by arguing that actors are independent from any relations whatsoever (Harman, 2009a). Although Steyaert (2007) sees ANT as an “anti-essentialist” and “anti-entitative” processual ontology (p. 468) focused more on how entities are “translated” from one context to another (Korsgaard, 2011), Latour’s (1996a) principal version of ANT suggests that, to account for “the very essence of societies and natures” (p. 369), one must be involved with entities rather than with “vague all-encompassing sociological terms” (p. 369). Hence, while ANT has been drawn closer to process philosophy (Garud, Gehman & Giuliani, 2018; Steyaert, 2007), it can also be interpreted as a flat ontology of independently existing actors (Harman, 2009b, 2016b). ANT and OOO both strive to rescue objects from theoretical oblivion by emphasizing the idea that it is objects that (should) determine our theories rather than vice versa. We will return to the manner in which OOO, as both ANT’s pupil and critic, goes about this task.

Similarly to CCO, ANT can operate beyond correlationism because it considers all actors capable of joining and assembling a network, and because it does not require actors to be human (Latour, 1996b). OOO emphatically agrees with ANT here in that, as Latour (2013) has forcefully argued, there is no way of telling neatly in advance which actors must be present in order for an organization to emerge. To investigate how things emerge, ANT explores the reciprocal relationships between actors and networks, that is, how actors assemble to create networks and gain identities as they are shaped or “translated” by other actors in the network (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2005; Korsgaard, 2011). While partially agreeing, Harman argues that its emphasis on reciprocal relational action guides ANT to focus on actors rather than objects (Campbell, Dunne & Ennis, 2019; Harman, 2016b). While ANT can be used to argue that without objects there can be no organizations, it can also, paradoxically, contribute to reducing those same objects to their relational nature, for example on the basis that they are performatively “co-constituted in the sayings and doings of heterogeneous actors” (Garud et al., 2018, p. 62). Although the purpose of OOO is not to remove the basis for such interpretations—which, after all, can provide fresh understandings of how new organizations rely not only on entrepreneurs but a plethora of other actors (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2005)—OOO’s focus lies on how real objects or actors are able to come together in ways that do not exhaust their independence, and how their ability to “touch without touching” (Harman, 2018, p. 150) forms the core of emergent novelty.

ANT’s capacity to explore objects in multiple ways notwithstanding, much of the literature has pushed it in a process-philosophical direction (Steyaert, 2007) in order to theorize emergence as a process (Garud et al., 2015). Here, emergence is conceptualized as a unique, yet impermanent, assemblage of multiple actors defined by both their relationships within the given assemblage and the fact that they simultaneously constitute that assemblage (Gehman et al., 2022). The ontological foundation of assemblage theory is processual (Garud et al., 2015; Linstead & Thanem, 2007), which means that what emerges is an instantiation of a more profound and inescapable wave of change (Cloutier & Langley, 2020; Hjorth et al., 2015) incapable of self-determination (Baranovas, 2020). OOO states that processual metaphysics
can only speak of objects in a derivative, epi-
phenomenal fashion due to the assumption that
objects are reduceable to an underlying process
(Harman, 2013). Such a reduction of objects is
what Harman terms undermining; and, as
argued above, reducing things to their compo-
nents fails to explain emergence because the
definition of emergence is that new combina-
tions of things yield new things that cannot be
traced back to their components (Harman,
2018). Latour provides us with a striking exam-
ple here: the combination of a victim, a shooter,
and a loaded gun yields an act of slaughter by
gunfire (Korsgaard, 2011). From OOO’s per-
pective, not only are the victim, the shooter,
and the gun objects, but also the event of mur-
der is an object, for this is what emerges. None
of the individual components alone result in
murder, and neither does murder happen by
arising from a more original plasticity that
somehow already includes this event (as pro-
cess philosophy would invite us to believe), but
rather because it is one object among those
components and, therefore, capable of emerg-
ing without being reduced to a particular source
(Morton, 2022).

The reason OOO advocates for understand-
ing events as objects is to avoid a “fatalistic atti-

dude” (Harman, 2018, p. 110) about events as
contextual lurkings waiting to be unleashed
through specific combinations (Baranovas,
2020; Harman, 2009b). Importantly, this means
that some of the actors that ANT and assem-
blage theory considers constitutive of an event
(Gehman et al., 2022) can change without
changing the event itself. For instance, it is not
impossible to imagine the assassination of
Franz Ferdinand including no gun at all but
instead a grenade, which is what almost hap-
pened in actuality. Understanding events as
objects (Young, 2021) enables us to consider
their uniqueness and intractability to any funda-
mental source or specific combination
(Baranovas, 2020). OOO defiantly defends
“things” over “process,” showing how the latter
constantly undermines the former through
notions of potentiality and virtuality, movement
and perpetual change. OOO therefore sides
with the earlier rather than process-injected
tradition of ANT (Harman, 2009b; Latour,
1996a) by arguing that change is something to
be explained, not assumed.

If “processualized ANT” (Law & Singleton,
2005; Steyaert, 2007) resorts to undermining in
reducing emergent objects to notions of virtual-
ity and potentiality, it is early ANT that over-
mines objects by stressing their relationality
(Harman, 2009b, 2016b). Overmining in the
case of ANT’s relational ontology (Gherardi &
Nicolini, 2005; Korsgaard, 2011) means that
objects are reduced to effects and relations that
hover above the objects themselves (Harman,
2013, 2018). In overmining by way of relation-
ality, things are “defined by their capacities to
affect and be affected, and the compositions
they can or cannot make” (Gehman et al., 2022,
p. 292). However, as we have argued with
OOO, relationality fails to explain actual nov-
elty because there is nothing that outlasts
changes in these relations; that is, organizations
become unable to hold the property of newness.
In other words, for overminers novelty cannot
enter the world through real organizations,
because it is the organizations that are created
in every instant of change and not the other way
around (Cloutier & Langley, 2020; Hjorth et al.,
2015). From OOO’s point of view, novelty is
always a property of things (Harman, 2018): in
order for an organization to be new, it needs to
be able to acquire newness, that is, to become
connected to novelty. As emphasized by Hjorth
and Reay (2022), new organizations emerge in
a world that already includes more organiza-
tions than organization theory currently grasps.
OOO takes early ANT’s “flat ontology” of
objects but avoids overmining by reducing
them to what they do to other objects (Harman,
2009b). Instead, OOO focuses on how new
organizations are able to continue emerging in a
world already replete with organizations, and
how they are able to create new relationships
with other objects.

Our brief review of theoretical approaches to
whom objects matter has included opportunity-
based theories, formal theories of organization,
and, more extensively, the communicative con-
stitution of organizations (CCO) and actor-net-
work theory (ANT). The first two of these are
based on empiricist (formal theories) and realist (opportunity-based theories) approaches to objects, yet omit a discussion of emergent novelty. The remaining two approaches fail to withstand the temptations of under- and overmining. Our argument here is that OOO is a unique approach by which to theorize the emergence of new organizations, because it is the sole ontology where process and matter belong to objects, and where, by extension, novelty is a property of emergent organizations. Hence, OOO is ideally positioned to tackle both objects and processes to explain emergent novelty (Garud et al., 2015). We now proceed to introduce OOO in more detail.

Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology

**OOO: What it is and what it is not**

OOO sets itself the task of rescuing objects from being duo-mined, for there is nothing deeper or more real than objects (Harman, 2010, 2018). To adopt an OOO mindset, Harman often appears to promote a peculiar, aesthetics-based naiveté over radical doubt (Harman, 2018). Indeed, setting aside traditions of debating the possibility of accessing the world (Young, 2020) might return us to (a semblance of) innocence and the ability to see the world beyond the human mind as fascinating, fearsome, and endlessly strange (Harman, 2009a). “Allowing” ourselves to be seduced, mesmerized, and sucked into the great outdoors can open up theory to the “radically unpredictable quality of life-forms” (Morton, 2011, p. 165). Objects are not just strange, Morton notes, but rather strangely strange or, more precisely, strange strangers, as they “recede into strangeness the more we think about them, and whenever they encounter one another—the strangeness is irreducible. Ecological philosophy that does not attend to this strangeness is not thinking coexistence deeply enough” (Morton, 2011, p. 165). This passage highlights one of OOO’s greatest strengths: its emphasis on coexistence over unity (Morton, 2016). This focus on simultaneous existence and absence in co-existence is what pits OOO against “[t]alking about talking, thinking about thinking, confining yourself to a discussion of the condition of the condition of the condition of possibility of ever referring to actual objects” (Morton, 2011, p. 173). OOO is a form of realism that nevertheless accepts the unknowability of the real.

It follows that OOO’s task is to stop thinking of objects as philosophically obsolete passive lumps of substance-matter that either somehow “receive” a vitalizing subject in order to become, or that are the creations of a mightier subject (Morton, 2022). OOO’s objects are neither passive nor static blocks of matter but rather the actual locus of agency in the world (Harman, 2018). At the same time, it is important to remember that, in OOO, objects are not determined by agency (as they are in overmining in particular); indeed, objects act because they exist, not the other way around (Harman, 2016b). Equally important is to understand how under- and overmining work for they are the methods by which objects lose their ontological standing in theory, if not in reality. To avoid misconceptions in future work that might adopt an OOO perspective, we propose four basic assumptions on the creation of object-oriented theories. Other assumptions, especially those refuted here, are not hereby rendered obsolete but, we believe, rightfully belong instead to something other than object-oriented theory.

First, OOO is not a static metaphysics that denies change (Harman, 2018). On the contrary, processes hold our full attention here, since in OOO process belongs to objects. From this perspective, change is not possible unless something is subtracted from the change, that is, a thing must be present to witness or relate to change (Harman, 2010, 2016a). For this reason, in OOO change is explained through objects, rather than vice versa. All objects undergo changes; furthermore, some objects change faster than others, and no object lasts forever (Harman, 2016b). Yet, if nothing escapes process, and if everything perpetually changes, how are we, for example, ever able to change our minds about anything? How can we do one
thing one day, and another thing the following
day, unless something about ourselves survives
the changes that have occurred in the mean-
time? Change is not explained by its relation to
more change but to something that persists—
which is why OOO simply rejects the view that
the ultimate nature of reality is process (Harman,

Second, OOO is not a materialistic philoso-
phy (Harman, 2016a). Throughout his works,
Harman shows at length that materialism is an
undermining position that must be rejected in
order to appreciate objects fully (Harman,
2016b). An underlying palette of matter com-
bined with particular actions does not detract
from the reality of objects (Harman, 2013); and
neither can things in OOO be reduced to their
sociopolitical contexts or sociomaterial rela-
tions (Harman, 2018). Objects are reducible
neither to their material constitution nor to their
activities (Young, 2021).

Third, OOO is not a relational ontology but
an ontology with relations (Harman, 2007b).
This crucial point follows a logic similar to
OOO’s rejection of process ontology and mater-
ialism. Here, a relationship cannot be entered
into unless something exists in advance that is
capable of generating relationships (Harman,
2018). This comes in contrast to such relational
approaches that emphasize human thought in
the creation of objects (Brassier et al., 2007), or
that theorize objects as by-products of relational
systems (Harman, 2018). Moreover, OOO is also
interested in objects that do not fit—or
more specifically exceed—the definition of
“actor” (Harman, 2009b). Objects are more than
“something that acts” (Latour, 1996a, p.
373); OOO is interested in what objects are
beyond their affects and agency (Baranovas,
2020). While relational approaches overstress
the extent to which objects are defined by inter-
objective relations, OOO directs attention to the
qualities of objects that are not revealed in rela-
tions, thereby also refusing relationality as a
worthwhile ontological theory (Young, 2020).

Put differently, what makes objects distinct
from each other is not their relations but the
objects themselves. While many great advances
have been (and arguably will continue to be)
made through relational and relativist positions,
the reduction of objects to their relational con-
figurations is unnecessary when studying how
things are connected (Morton, 2016, 2018).

Fourth, OOO is not a positivist epistemology
disguised as realism (Bryant, Smieck, &
Harman, 2011). Instead, it is an anti-literalistic
approach that affirmatively rejects the view that
reality can be captured in textual or other repre-
sentative practices (Harman, 2018). While there
may be no end in sight to the methodological
quest to minimize the gap between phenomena
and theory, we continue to argue that such
quests highlight, rather than mitigate, theory’s
speculative foundations when facing the
unknowable (Swedberg, 2021). In this endeavor,
a metaphorical, personal language ought to be
favored over an analytical language that is un-
able to express anything other than that which is
written and read, because in object-oriented
theory no object can be more real than each of
us, who also impart our real qualities on the
objects we study (Harman, 2018)—a topic to
which we now turn.

**Objects and qualities**

OOO defines objects as “anything that cannot
be entirely reduced either to the components of
which it is made or to the effects that it has on
other things” (Harman, 2018, p. 43). It is both
indebted to and digressive of Martin Heidegger’s
philosophy of things, which holds that things
and objects are distinct from each other
(Harman, 2007a). For Heidegger, science com-
mits the cardinal sin of annihilating things in
favor of lifeless objects (Heidegger, 1971).
Heidegger sees a thing, such as a jug, both as
constituted by its smaller clay particles and, fur-
ther down, its atoms, as well as, all the way up,
by its usefulness in preventing water from spill-
ing (Heidegger, 1967). Against this, Harman
sees both moves as “harmful” (2018, p. 43), in
fact identifying in them the two ideal-typical
ontological rejections of objects, which have
been discussed above as undermining and
Organization Theory

defends an “object” as a “perfectly clear and flexible term that ought to be retained” (p. 42): a jug is neither the clay or atoms of which it is made, nor the prevention of water from spilling. Instead, a jug is something both sensual and real (Harman, 2018). That an object is sensual means that it is present and can be experienced; that an object is real means that it exists regardless of our, or any other objects’, awareness of it (Harman, 2010).

Not everything, however, is an object. For example, colors are not objects but properties that characterize a given object; and, for this reason, OOO recognizes qualities (Harman, 2018). Qualities are important because if we wish to study an object, we must do so in terms of its qualities: its color, shape, taste, etc., depending on the specific object at hand. Just as in the case of objects, there are two kinds of qualities: the sensual and the real (Harman, 2018, 2022). For Harman, sensual qualities are those properties of objects that can be experienced, that can come and go without compromising the object itself (Harman, 2018). This is why an object, such as the family dog of one of this essay’s authors, a Bolognese named Vertti (who, like most dogs of this breed, sports fluffy white hair), can become very grimy after a stroll through the neighborhood without compromising his status as a beloved family dog. Yet, such transient sensual qualities are contrasted by specific qualities that are not sensual; in our example, Vertti must unconditionally continue to possess specific qualities in order to be Vertti and not Mortti, the hypothetical Bolognese of the author’s neighbor, or even Kultamaha, the real vintage tractor belonging to the author’s real neighbor. These are what OOO theorist Morton states more succinctly that an emergent object is not more but less than the sum of its parts (Morton, 2018). In his discussion of Harman’s theory, Morton insists that nothing that is real can lose itself to a greater whole. In fact, the opposite may be more innovative in terms of theoretical direction, as wholes lose their greatness when ingredients stop determining things (Morton, 2018, 2022). We concur here that these principles deliver an adequate, if yet tentative, ontological grounding for studying organizations as emergent entities.

A Tentative Theory of ‘Really Real’ Organizations: Moving Towards an Object-Oriented Organization Theory

We have thus far sought to use OOO to establish an ontological grounding for a theory of organizational emergence that shows genuine interest in its elusive core object (du Gay, 2020; Frankel, 2021; King et al., 2010). As Guillet de Montlhoux (2015) argues, OOO can help bring organizational research closer to reality, thereby freeing scholarship of the a priori imaginaries that plague “idealist textbooks and obsolete sedimented best practices” (p. 166). This involves a commitment to an aesthetic mode of knowing (Hjorth & Reay, 2022; Hjorth et al., 2018).

Drawing from this “aesthetic turn” in organization theory, we have argued that a real organization is determined neither by that of which it is made (OOO’s critique of undermining) nor by what it does (OOO’s critique of overmining) (Harman, 2010, 2013, 2018). Instead, a real organization emerges as an independent object among all other imaginable (and indeed unimaginable) objects. Although Harman (2018) describes emergence as something “over and above” its constituent parts (Harman, 2018, p. 32), fellow OOO theorist Morton states more succinctly that an emergent object is not more but less than the sum of its parts (Morton, 2018). In his discussion of Harman’s theory, Morton insists that nothing that is real can lose itself to a greater whole. In fact, the opposite may be more innovative in terms of theoretical direction, as wholes lose their greatness when ingredients stop determining things (Morton, 2018, 2022). We concur here that these principles deliver an adequate, if yet tentative, ontological grounding for studying organizations as emergent entities.

An object-oriented approach suggests that organizations are ontologically on a par with licorice bars, the planet Mars, sheep, Batman, and motes of dirt on crumpled shopping lists. This flat landscape of innumerable realities relates to the idea that organizations are determined less by their contingencies than by their autonomous selves (Harman, 2016b). Their autonomy means that organizations are not just real but “really real,” that is, both materially sensible and utterly beyond access (Morton, 2011). That which is autonomous is thus both wholly seen and impossible to see, marked by a mysterious dual presence of mundane nudity and odd
fogginess. Difference, in this sense, stems from something that is “actually here right now” (Harman, 2009b, p. 129) yet whose most intimately vital parts remain beyond grasp (Baranovas, 2020). This leads us to propose for object-oriented organization theory the view that entrepreneurial objects and real organizations can bring about change (Gehman et al., 2022; Mair & Seelos, 2021) only because they keep something crucial to themselves, an element which survives transformative processes—and they are the real novelty amid change. To further elaborate on object-oriented organization theory, we now turn our attention to what it is that enables organizations to emerge as novel autonomy-seeking objects despite the pressures of duo-mining, which OOO (and OOOT) opposes.

Following OOO’s core premises, some objects—including organizations yet also some (but not all) other objects—must possess a distinctive quality that grants them the ability to emerge as organizations and not, for example, as paper mills or sunflowers. In search for a term for this as-yet unnamed quality, we draw on entrepreneurship, which extant theories regard as the process of organization creation (Chiles et al., 2004; Elias, Chiles, & Crawford, 2022; Hjorth et al., 2015, 2018), and arrive at “the entrepreneurial,” which in other circumstances might sound (too) tautological. The entrepreneurial is a quality rather than an object; it characterizes an object as innovative and unprecedented (Schumpeter, 1947) yet is not the object itself (Harman, 2018). Hence, we propose that the entrepreneurial quality can be attached to a human or non-human person, as well as to an inanimate object, such as a spacecraft capable of supporting life in outer space (McCray, 2013), a bushfire (Pierides & Woodman, 2012), a mobile carillon (Elias et al., 2022), or the Jesuit Book of Spiritual Exercises (Bento da Silva et al., 2022). While all of these may possess a range of striking qualities other than the entrepreneurial, it is the latter without which they cannot create unprecedented symbiotic bonds with other objects that irreversibly transform such objects’ reality (Harman, 2016b). Once such bonds are created, they become integral to the emerging organization, thus shaping its destiny.

When used in this way, the term “the entrepreneurial” suggests a transformative, forward-pushing quality that challenges the status quo and takes things to their fringes (Hjorth, 2014). It is what must be possessed in order to engage in innovative symbiosis with other objects.1 Yet, because we cannot prescribe the objects that can attach themselves to a specific quality, and because the entrepreneurial exceeds our sensual experience of it (Juhlin & Holt, 2021), we must treat the entrepreneurial as a real quality (Harman, 2018). As real qualities exist irrespective of experience (Harman, 2022), the entrepreneurial is not a tool of standardization but instead consistent with PES’s core assumption that each new organization is unique (Gartner, 1988; Hjorth et al., 2015). In other words, the entrepreneurial is something that an object absolutely must possess in order to participate in the emergence of an organization. Hence, being attached to the entrepreneurial means that any real object, such as the authors and readers of this essay, a romantic poem (Thompson, 2018), or a mindful walk (Chiles et al., 2021), can be characterized by its abnormal willingness to form symbiotic bonds with other objects in novel, artistic, and surprising ways.

We pause here to consider how objects can become attached to the entrepreneurial, for the process we have outlined can seem improbable. Due to the fact that the entrepreneurial means the ability to combine with others, without laying any claim to what may emerge from such combinations, the next entrepreneurial thing to come into being is unpredictable in nature. Nevertheless, OOO suggests that this would be in the form of another object lending this quality to a further object; or, as Harman (2018) more specifically formulates: “the real qualities of any sensual object we encounter can be found in the unnoticed background assumptions that make it visible to us” (p. 189). Real qualities can be known indirectly but not literally, which is a type of knowledge that Harman (2018) calls “a paradigm sustained by commitment.” Sincere involvement with maintaining the connection
between a given object and a quality is needed lest it rupture. A sincere paradigm that is strong enough not to be abandoned at the first obstacle, yet loose enough to stay open to the real, is real, at least in the sense of OOO. Yet once it evolves into literal orthodoxy, the paradigm loses its entrepreneurial quality and becomes managerial (Schumpeter, 1947).

To summarize our tentative submission of object-oriented organization theory (see Table 2), we suggest that organizations are emergent autonomy-seeking entities. Here, objects are involved that are capable of crafting symbiotic combinations with other objects, irreversibly shaping the fate of the emergent organization. Change flows unevenly from organization to organization, stalling and accelerating in turn. In order for symbiotic combinations to occur, at least one object must possess and impart entrepreneurial qualities by way of sincere commitment, which is the link between real entrepreneurial qualities and sensible organizations.

In the final section of this article we illustrate this theory through a proto-theoretical reading of Sun Ra’s biography (J. P. Cornelissen, 2013), thereby providing a simple example of OOOT and how it differs from CCO and ANT in order to show the usefulness of OOOT for organization theory, as well as to kindle enthusiasm for organizations as objects.

**Table 2. Main premises of OOO and implications for generating OOOT.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object-Oriented Organization Theory (OOOT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inaugural authors of OOO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main inspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Heidegger (Harman, Bryant), Edmund Husserl (Harman), Bruno Latour (Harman), Gilles Deleuze (Bryant), H.P. Lovecraft (Harman), Jacques Derrida (Morton)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat ontology; immaterialism instead of materialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphysical stance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weird realism: things exist independently of their relations with other things, and there is no way to access them in literal terms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenet 1: Objects are real and not ontologically dependent on what humans or other beings think or do about them</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenet 2: Real objects are inherently weird and only accessed vicariously or metaphorically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of objects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objects are emergent entities that are irreducible to that of which they are made or what they do</td>
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<td>Tenet 3: Objects are less than the sum of their parts</td>
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<td>Tenet 4: Objects can determine something out of themselves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implications for object-oriented organization theory (OOOT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Considered as objects, organizations are emergent phenomena that possess self-determining qualities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tenet 5: Organizations are emergent autonomy-seeking objects</td>
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<td>Tenet 6: Objects must be attached to entrepreneurial qualities in order to emerge as organizations</td>
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**OOOT in Action: Sun Ra**

It is not my type of being to be limited. You might call me a catalyst: a catalyst changes everything but remains unchanged.—Sun Ra

Sun Ra was an entrepreneur in the American jazz music industry, a truly weird individual, and, together with the Arkestra, an ideal candidate for illustrating OOOT. Our goal in this section is straightforward: to show that Sun Ra and the Arkestra are exhausted by neither under- nor overmining and should, instead, be treated as an object. As a novel ontological theory, OOOT alone explicitly resists reducing its object to that of which it is made or what it does, opting instead to focus on what it is. Following our
tentative formulation of OOOT above, we approach Sun Ra and the Arkestra as an emergent autonomy-seeking entity that could not be what it is without real entrepreneurial qualities. This involves two major assumptions about organizations: first, organizations are emergent phenomena and, therefore, always less than that of which they are made (Morton, 2011, 2018); and second, organizations are real and as such hold something back from their relations (Harman, 2018). Unlike ANT and CCO, which also consider objects to be real yet over-emphasize relational processes to the point where organizations exist because of them (as opposed to OOOT, which argues that relational processes exist because organizations exist), OOOT can be used to show how real entrepreneurial qualities manifest in objects committing to each other.

In what follows we discuss OOOT’s contribution by using it as a grounding for a proto-theoretical reading (J. P. Cornelissen, 2013) of Sun Ra’s biography (Szweid, 2020). We have chosen Sun Ra and the Arkestra as a reality to be discovered (Guillet de Monthoux, 2015) because it fulfills OOOT’s criteria: first, while engaged in a process of change, something about Sun Ra and the Arkestra resists change; second, it is something other than its components. These characteristics are called autonomy and emergence, respectively. In OOOT, the autonomy of an object means that it retracts something from the processes of change within which its sensual qualities are involved. Crucially, this means that a real organization is not created “on the spot” (that is, in its doings), but rather remains real despite changing what it does. As we have previously argued, CCO fails to take this into account, claiming instead that organizations are determined by their communicative processes (Brummans et al., 2014; Schoeneborn et al., 2019)—a classic example of overmining. Displaying a similar affinity for overmining, ANT misses autonomy because it considers novelty as an after-effect of relational exchanges across ontologically privileged networks (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2005; Korsgaard, 2011).

Sun Ra’s “bioethnography”—composed by an anthropologist working in the field of jazz studies rather than a historian—depicts Sun Ra as a pioneer of free jazz, a founder of Afrofuturism, and dabbler in cosmology (Szweid, 2020). According to official records he was born in 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama as Herman Poole Blount, yet throughout his career Sun Ra denied the event of his birth, insisting instead that he was an extraterrestrial being from Saturn, who had been sent on a mission to show Earthlings their mistaken ways of life. His primary vehicle for doing this was the creation of music, which, if properly received, connected people to outer space so that they could “leave the planet while alive, rather than dead” (Szweid, 2020, p. 260). Clearly, Sun Ra is the kind of peculiar individual that Harman (2016b) looks for in his study of the symbiosis of objects. Although CCO, ANT, and process ontology in general shy away from marking some individuals as more important than others, OOOT privileges strange personalities because “the proximate source of a new stage is more often linked with the idiosyncratic vision or will of one person than the statistical average of a committee or a nation” (Harman, 2016b, p. 56).

While strong process ontology (Cloutier & Langley, 2020) promotes focusing on the verb “entrepreneuring,” thereby detaching creativity from specific heroic individuals (Steyaert, 2007), OOOT is interested in adjectives and nouns, that is, the entrepreneurial characteristics of objects. At first glance this may appear to challenge democratic sensitivities of believing in principle that individuals are capable of doing anything they choose, we call to mind that OOOT is a non-anthropocentric approach that takes into account not only intra-human but also intra-species and intra-objective relations. Hence, while it may be customary to think of humans as more suitable to being characterized as entrepreneurial than, for instance, broken pencils, ultimately this distinction needs to be shown rather than assumed. This, together with Sun Ra’s consistent disregard for his own human subjectivity, should serve to show that
OOOT does not entail a return to the psychological straitjacket of trait-based approaches to entrepreneurship (Ramoglou et al., 2020). At this point, it seems unreasonable to exclude any categories of objects from being capable of exhibiting entrepreneurial qualities.

This, in turn, reflects the close attention paid by OOOT to transformative moments in the formation of an organization rather than to its gradual, purposeful development. For Sun Ra and the Arkestra, each performance was meant as precisely such a transformative moment, which involved all of those individuals moved by the “cosmo-drama” of free improvisation, chanting, ritualistic dancing, space costumes, and musical shifts from highly structured swing numbers to cacophonous outbursts of electronic swirls and screams, defying the sonic possibilities of earthly life itself. The entrepreneurial is manifested in such events, where we are reminded of the fringes of reality (Hjorth, 2014). OOOT is less interested in the cosmo-drama than in its commitment to the metaphysical position where fringes exist because things have fringes. In contrast, strong process ontology attends to virtual fringes, that is, those that are not actual but instead pertain to the relation between human creativity and the rest of the world (Hjorth, 2014). Both theoretically inspired by and metaphysically opposed to process philosophy, OOOT’s aim is to explore the actual fringes of really real, emergent organizations.

It stands to reason that the Arkestra is the organizational vehicle that enables Sun Ra’s entrepreneuring. To be eligible for OOOT, Sun Ra and the Arkestra need to form an organized thing that both changes and remains the same, that is, survives drastic changes to its constituent parts and activities. It should not only appear when it does something, as in the understandings of CCO and ANT. This becomes evident in the striking way in which Sun Ra’s orchestra changes constantly in terms of personnel, instrumentation, and even name (which has almost always included the word Arkestra), as well as how it shifts from jazz to being on a business mission to perform works of a humanitarian nature among all people of earth, to help stamp out (destroy) ignorance destroying its own major purpose, to changing ignorance [in]to constructive live creativity, to own and operate all kinds of research laboratories, studios, electronic equipment, electro-chemical communicational devices of our own design and creativity, and electromechanical equipment, electronic equipment relating to audio and video devices and audio and video devices themselves including sound recordings and tapes as well as video recordings, tapes, teleportation, astral projection devices, mind cleansing sound devices, magnetic computers, electrical and electronic devices related to all phases of enterplanetary [sic.] space travel including magnetic energy producing ships with speeds greater than the speed of light (as presently known), including enterplanetary [sic.] cosmonetic devices of an astro infinity nature, to own real estate including land, buildings, factories, water, including air space above [the] same, to use these values for the greater advancement of all people of earth and creative live beings of this galaxy and other galaxies beyond the sun. (Szwed, 2020, p. 241)

This comes in addition to producing the largest volume of records on an independent label to date, writing music which, once inserted into a tape deck, can by itself transform an automobile into a spaceship that transports its passengers to Saturn (Sun Ra’s planet of birth), and providing ‘worthwhile’ occupation for the unemployed and socially excluded young men of Philadelphia’s suburbs. It may be that all these relational acts help define Sun Ra and the Arkestra; yet reducing this to nothing but them means that nothing is left over that is capable of changing. However, if we adopt the view that these activities result from an emergent organization’s search for autonomy, we may also be better positioned to discover the strangeness of its reality rather than the fantasies imparted upon it one-sidedly by us, as detached theorists. The fact that the present paper was originally conceived as an organization-theory version of Sun Ra’s artistry is, to us at least, living proof of real objects’ capacity to seduce the world entrepreneurially.
Conclusion

This paper has sought to present a tentative ontological theory of organizations as real objects. In this we also hope to have brought metaphysical commitments to the fore as an inevitable aspect of the work done by theorists. Taking OOO as our philosophical bedrock, we have argued that organization theory need not eschew objects but can grant organizations their concreteness and actuality without sacrificing theory’s intellectual openness (J. Cornelissen & Höllerer, 2019). Instead of reducing objects (and hence organizations themselves) to that of which they are made or what they do, we have proffered a tentative object-oriented organization theory that, in our view, allows research itself to be mesmerized by its objects, as well as showing in this way how weird organizations are once we reconsider some of our (positive but also negative) assumptions about them.

Our contribution to organization theory rests on the infusion of Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology into processual entrepreneurship studies (Hjorth et al., 2015). The impetus for this lies in the idea that if an entrepreneurial process is a particular type of process that tests the boundaries of the possible (Hjorth, 2014), then the same quality may be responsible for the emergence of real and sensible organizations within OOO’s universe of objects. Therefore, our proposal is to think of “the entrepreneurial” as a real quality that makes an emergent organization significant, interesting, and innovative. This perspective lends itself to discovering real entrepreneurial qualities at play in any “instance of organization” (Frankel, 2021, p. 1). Furthermore, we argue that entrepreneurial qualities are real rather than sensual; in other words, the entrepreneurial cannot be experienced directly by anything except the object characterized by it, although it can be acknowledged and “loaned out” to other objects in the form of “commitment.” This “loaning out” by way of commitment establishes connections with other objects so as to produce transformative events that grant more autonomy to emergent organizations. The basic idea we thus proffer in the name of OOOT is that organizations emerge and prepare their inevitable demise in the presence of an entrepreneurial paradigm. While we acknowledge that our arguments derive from speculative—and possibly haphazard—thinking, we are confident in believing that the most important matter at hand here is the nature of that which emerges next from entrepreneurial combinations of OOO and OT.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. We would like to emphasize here, that OOO’s ambition is to be—in Harman’s words—a “theory of everything” (Harman, 2018; Morton, 2011). It decidedly downplays the role of context in determining objects. While process-based theories often emphasize the cultural contexts of entrepreneurial processes (Garud, Gehman & Giuliani, 2014), we develop OOOT to provide a novel conceptual point of convergence that helps differentiate entrepreneurial from non-entrepreneurial approaches to organizational emergence, and, subsequently, make more explicit the assumptions about the core of entrepreneurial research (McMullen, Ingram & Adams, 2021).

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