

DISCRETE ONTOLOGIES

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. IAN BOGOST

In late January 2018, I had the opportunity to have a conversation with Dr. Ian Bogost. We spoke about architecture, New Mexico, and Object Oriented Ontology, a relatively new theory in philosophy and one that has infiltrated the halls of architecture schools across the country. A philosopher, author, and an award-winning game designer, Bogost is Professor of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology and a Contributing Editor at The Atlantic.

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I was hoping you could begin by explaining what speculative realism is first, and then what your brand of it is?

This question is getting harder and harder to answer as time goes on because it's sort of like a ghost in some ways. This concept came to the fore in about 2006/2007 from a philosopher named Ray Brassier, who ran a symposium with some roughly similarly minded neo-realists—Graham Harman, Ian Hamilton Grant, and Quentin Meillassoux—and gave it this name “speculative realism.” They all had disparate points of view and positions and they needed a name and to kind of wrap it all together, and so in some ways there never was a speculative realism. There was never a group that really identified with a set of principles or ideas that you could list, that every speculative realist held, except there's some relationship to realism and some relationship to speculation, as well as opposition to this idea of correlationism.

Correlationism is the philosophical assumption that philosophy involves a correlation interrelationship between people, between humans, and between the world. Since Kant, the metaphysical position that everyone has undertaken is that any metaphysical knowledge is necessarily human knowledge—

kind of like we can't think of something outside of thought without thinking it, and therefore it becomes an object of thought and you can't escape it. So, when we are thinking about speculative realism this engages with that question and then rejects it in one form or another.

The branch of it that I've been involved in is one that Graham Harman, who's an American philosopher, started. Harman had a version of this speculative realism stuff that he had named Object Oriented Philosophy.

Harman's Object Oriented Philosophy is particularly intrigued or interested or focused on objects, by which he just means individual entities, not necessarily, you know, books on your desk or toasters or sort of middle-sized objects, as we sometimes call them in philosophy.

The object oriented philosophy name morphed, evolved into a slightly broader term which is Object Oriented Ontology, which is a slightly different way of putting the same idea. And we sometimes abbreviate that with three O's (OOO) and the environmental philosopher, Timothy Morton got us in the habit of pronouncing it “triple-O”, which sounds quite clever and charming.

One idea we've kind of borrowed from Harman, as Harman borrowed from Heidegger, is that things are separate from one another. They're distinct from one another and you can't reconcile them fully with each other. Harman calls this withdrawal, which is a word he borrows directly from Martin Heidegger. It's sometimes confusing to people because it feels like “oh, well don't objects interact with one another? What happens when I hit the hammer against the nail? You're saying that that doesn't take place?” But, rather it's that there's something that is always remaining, there's something that's not exhausted in things by their relationships with other things—either their real or their imagined or their future relationships. Harman has this example that he likes to trot out, which is that you can burn cotton with fire, but cotton isn't solely defined or described by flammability, by its possibility of being burned. Instead, there's all sorts of other potential relations that cotton and fire individually and together can enter into – in fact you could extinguish a fire with cotton under the right circumstances.

So that idea of discreteness and of withdrawal, of disconnection, that there's something that's retained in the thing, it's almost like essence is what it is. This essence that is embedded in OOO is quite

unfashionable these days, and it distinguishes it from from other popular metaphysical positions, especially those of Deleuze and Bergson before him. They had these ideas like potentiality, shifts, becoming, transformation. That focus on kind of smoothness and interconnection is less important for OOO than the uniqueness and separateness of things.

So there is a lot more to say about this, but for the non-philosopher I think the key thing is that one, things are at the center of Object Oriented Ontology, and secondly, that things are not always pledging to human experience. Things have relationships with other things and sometimes those things are people or animals and sometimes they are not, and those are the key principles.

You are a video game designer and theorist, as well as philosopher, and you are beginning to engage with other design fields like architecture. What connections have you made, so far, between these fields and the built environment?

As I’ve watched this coupling take place, where especially architects but other kinds of artists and designers have latched onto OOO, and philosophers and theorists have connected their work and their thinking with artists and designers, I’ve thought about how artists and designers and

architects are much cooler, more interesting people to hang out with than philosophers or critical theorists are. And, you know, they make things. They’re doing creative work. They tend to be more enjoyable company. The work that they do appeals to and connects with a broader sector of culture and society than philosophy or theory does. Not to mention the fact that many philosophers are out of their elements in the space of arts and design and so on. We know where the boundaries of our knowledge is – I think this is one good thing about philosophers. Actually, you know that philosophy means “the love of wisdom”, rather than the possession or acquisition of wisdom. The delightful feeling of seeing creative people take your ideas and run with them and tap into places you couldn’t imagine, that’s great, but it also means that there’s a missed opportunity, potentially a missed opportunity, in helping to shape the adoption of those ideas because the philosophers who devised it, it’s not so much that they know best or that they should come in and police the creative adoption of their work, but rather that they might have a role to play and maybe even a responsibility in helping to shape the way that those ideas are interpreted and put to use. And I think this is particularly true when we start engaging with the built environment.

But I do think that there is an opportunity for productive collaboration between these domains,

and also a real invitation at this moment in time, this interesting pivot point, in the state of the built environment, where we owe it to ourselves, individually, collectively, to be extremely deliberate about the stuff that we make in the world, in the built environment. And so for that reason I think this is a tremendous opportunity, this budding collaboration between OOO and architecture. Maybe we philosophers ought to be playing a bigger role or a more deliberate role in that relationship than say, Deleuzeans did in the adoption of Deleuze in architecture or deconstructionists did in the adoption of Derrida in architecture. Which isn’t to say they got it wrong, but rather that the time is different now, we can look back and see what worked and what didn’t with those approaches, and we can also reflect on the fact that we’re about to make a number of massive fundamental changes to the way that the people live in the world, due to all sorts of things: automation and smart cities, the changing relationship that people have with the physical environment through devices, computation, new materials— changes for the way that the people have chosen to live or haven’t chosen to live change and so on.

I got involved just in my local community, very deeply involved in land use planning and historical preservation. So that’s been sort of a lens through

which I've been thinking about and experimenting with the broader questions I just posed, but I've also been thinking about those as they relate to urban technology or changes in urban design as they are being brought about by technology. I cover things like autonomous vehicles and smart cities and all this stuff for *The Atlantic*, and as I watch this stuff unfolding in both the technology industry and in urban planning communities, it's clear that a lot of stuff is happening without anyone thinking about it. That's another area that I'm invested in and interested in having some kind of intervention.

Is there room for separate employments of OOO, and, if so, how do you see your version of it being applied to architecture?

I've always been interested in getting my hands into things and into making stuff. Sometimes it's software and sometimes it's woodworking and sometimes it's gardening and sometimes it's doing preservation and planning.

I'm more interested in the smaller scale designs and problems with a smaller scale and in the specifics of things rather than in the abstractions of things. My main book of philosophy in OOO is this book called *Alien Phenomenology*, and the premise is that while we can't have the experiences of other

things, whether those are living things or non-living things, we can speculate and ponder what it might be like for them to have something like experience. So, this can be not just a useful tool for philosophical thought, but also for pondering design and also understanding the problems of design.

I do this work in historic preservation in a part of Atlanta that I live, which is in a historic district. We have this board like every historic district does, and we have a planner from the government who manages and directs the board and we have civic associations and other local experts in the community, and when you're there in the room, in the hearing with the plans that you barely got a week or maybe less before, very incomplete, and you're trying to make an argument about why this particular rear massing on a proposed new development is out of rhythm or pattern with the area of influence, then it's just a level of specificity that forces you to think about the design space, let alone the philosophical design space, in a different way.

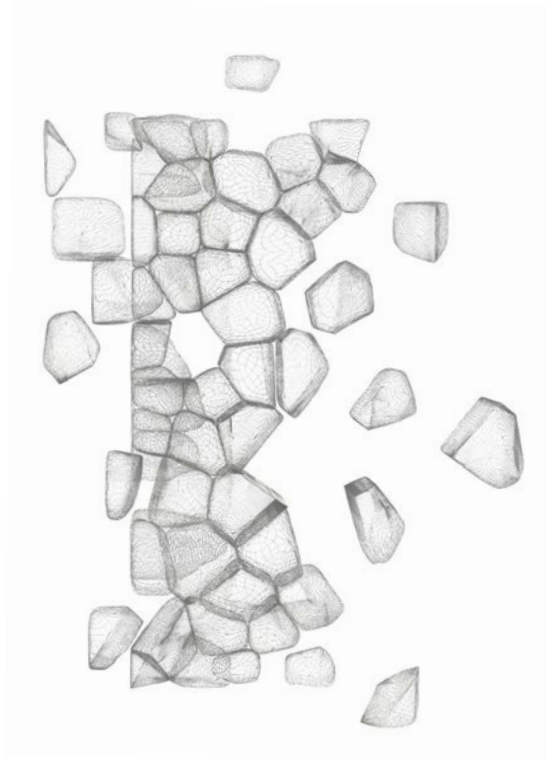
I've been reading all of the architects and designers who have picked up OOO, and the one that I'm most fond of is Tom Wiscombe. He's got this koan-like take on this, which is: discrete things acting upon one another. Instead of thinking of design as



one of wholes and parts, buildings and other kinds of structures become things inside of other things.

When you read Wiscombe on the subject even *he* sounds like a philosopher when he talks— it's very heavy and very abstract. But it's also quite productive. I wouldn't go into the hearing and say "Ah, you know what, this mass is really just an object in another object isn't it?" But, rather, that problem space is the one that has to be described and now my job as someone who is trying to intervene and appeal to my government and to a set of other actors, developers, or homeowners, or whoever they might be, I have to somehow say "let me show you the thing that we're looking at -- let me talk to you about this object that I am pointing to." Because an object like perceived massing or rhythm and pattern of massing in an area of influence is not really a tangible thing at all. You don't put your hands on that. You have to reconstruct it. But it does very much exist. That's just one example. When you start seeing how many such examples there are in everything, all the time in every domain of design then it's clear that there's quite a bit of productive work that might be done with these tools.

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In architecture school we're often confronted with this idea of place, and it's often about understanding or reaching that place and designing around it. I think you touched on this a bit in your book [Alien Phenomenology] when you were mentioning the strange things that exist in New Mexico.

What role does place or space play in OOO, whether it be Alien Phenomenology or another take on it?

I think there are a few answers here to your question here. There's the sort of first principles metaphysical answer, which is that space, place, even void or absence, which we also think about in design, those are things no less than a building is a thing or a toaster is a thing.

One of the things that's hardest for people to wrap their heads around with OOO, and I guess it's our fault for not making it easier, is that when we say objects we don't mean just physical things that you can put your hands on or that you can point to or that you could draw or take a photograph of. Anything whatsoever that exists we give the

name object, and that's just a convenience term. You could call it thing or entity or agents or actants or whatever you want, really. But for historical reasons, or accidental reasons, we've been using the word object, and for designers the challenge becomes one of identifying what object it is that you are acting upon or designing in the first place. And I think this is a super important problem in the built environment.

You get the call for proposals, for a major commission, and it's a museum or it's a library or it's an office tower or whatever it is. And that thing becomes the focus of attention. But, of course, that thing also exists in relation to the space that it's in, the immediate environment that surrounds it. And typically, right now, there's been this sort of desire to contend with the compatibility of the built environment with its surroundings. That goes back a long time in architecture, too. It's the hallmark of Frank Lloyd Wright as much as it is someone like Zaha Hadid in some ways, although in very different ways. But you've kind of already lost by that time, right? Because why is that structure being proposed in the first place or what is the site? What does it mean to even think about this site? What force can I exert on the whole of the community or the area or the region through the

construction of this large or small entity, whatever it might be?

I think this sort of fundamental problem of even identifying what the design problem is like "what are we doing in the first place and what are our goals, and are those goals given to me or are they ones that I've pulled out of air? Do I have a reason to draw the conclusions about them that I do?" That set of processes is much more political, it's much more tactical. It requires a kind of nimbleness of thought and interests and the kind of diversity of knowledge that goes well beyond what any individual designer in any discipline would reasonably be construed to have. And therefore it becomes a problem of pedagogy and of a sort of continuing education. "What do I need to know, and how do I need to know it?"

One of the encounters that I regularly have with architects in my preservation life is that they're just trying to make a living. They just want to go home at the end of the day—they put together a plan and say "here's this spec design and we sort of modified it a little bit..." And here I am, some crazy asshole in the meeting kind of bickering with them about some mass they've added or some light or window or god knows what. Right. Well it makes sense,

you know, because this is what life is. It’s just kind of trying to get through the day. And I’m just trying to get through the day, too. But at the same time, I wonder how the process of thinking about design for any kind of designer might become more fine-tuned or fine grained, more detailed so that those questions would become more intrinsically interesting from the start. Not that you’re like scolding someone for not finishing their site plan accurately, or not putting in a tree save plan or whatever it is. It can’t be about scolding or about discipline. It’s rather, in the face of the reality that all of us are just trying to get through the day, then how do we make the process of getting through the day, as designers of all stripes, more intrinsically interesting? And how do we collaborate more as we do so?

I wanted to ask you about two of my favorite things from your book Alien Phenomenology: your ideas of carpentry and wonder. I think both of them play really well into what architecture does. Specifically, for carpentry you say that it entails “making things that explain how things make their world.”

What do you think your idea of carpentry can offer for architects?

The carpentry concept has been hard for people to understand. One question I often get about carpentry is “how is this different from art? It’s just art — anybody can make stuff and then put it into

the world.” And I think one difference is that of context, it’s the context of use and the sort of desire of the creator.

So carpentry, as a kind of philosophical making, is the construction of something to explain something for the sake of understanding it. In the context of *Alien Phenomenology*, I’m particularly interested in understanding this problem of how things “perceive” — in scare-quotes. How could you demonstrate how something perceives or what it experiences? And I have some examples in that chapter in the book about how we understand how this sort of camera sensor works or how the Atari BCS, which is one of my obsessions that I’ve written about extensively, has a very weird relationship with television. Those examples might seem a little precious, maybe, or kind of disconnected from the real work of design. But you know you’re very often in the world of design asking exactly that question like “How do I even understand what I’m doing and what problem I might need to solve, let alone how to solve it?”

So maybe one way of thinking about adapting the carpentry question is in its relationship to tools and the construction and use of tools, whether those are digital tools or not. We have a lot of tools now, and the tools that architects and designers tend to use, the computational tools, are kind of all fusing with one another—like a videogame developer is now often using the same kinds of tools that an architect is using, which is kind of terrifying in a lot of ways.

And beyond that, the tools especially for parametric design and architecture have been standardized so much they’ve become so powerful and so easy to use that they become these default crutches you go to because, well, what else would you do? And I see this exact same thing in game design when I teach it. A student will go “well, the way that you make a game is you open the Unity game engine and you start making the game,” just like the way that you may design structures, you open Grasshopper and that’s where you start. And those are sentiments that we should be quite skeptical of, I think. Which isn’t to say that we should reject those tools, but we should know where the limits of the tools are. And then once you understand those limits you ask questions like “what other kinds of tools would be useful to me? What are the problems that I might want to see and how can I use the construction of these intermediaries in order to demonstrate that?”

And sometimes the tools that you might want to make, they might not be high tech at all. You know one of the best tools we have in design, broadly speaking, and in architecture is just being able to draw. You have these standard patterns of drawn designs, whether those are site plans or whether those are street elevations or what have you, those tools can often be just as useful in the right context as something that’s far more complex and high tech.

The relationship to me between carpentry — philosophical carpentry, the thing that I mean by

carpentry in the *Alien Phenomenology* book — and the design practice that architects, industrial designers, and urban planners face is one of running into this sort of problem frequently.

You asked about wonder, too, and I actually think it’s related to this. Carpentry might start with a perspective of wonder, but wonder does not need to end in the construction of devices or tools – but unless you have an attitude of deep wonder and intrigue and amusement, at the fact that anything exists at all, let alone the things that exist alongside us, then I just don’t know how you do any of this [design] work in the in the first place. If you go into design school or architecture school thinking that you’re going to be a famous starchitect and make big monuments and skyscrapers, that’s great, maybe you will. But you’ve already foreclosed your mind to the notion that maybe you would also be interested in outcroppings or maybe you’d also be interested in traffic flow or maybe you would also be interested in the problem of site integration or the problem of...whatever it is. There’s a million different problems to be interested in. So remaining open minded — and not just open minded in this kind of sense that you’ve been manipulated into admitting that perhaps these other factors would be worthy of consideration by someone—but that there’s infinite depths of knowledge and meaning in anything whatsoever, that attitude is particularly important for designers of any stripe, but particularly so for those who construct the built environment.

How much does context define a thing?

So here's the weird thing about things—and it goes back to that Wiscombe koan, that objects are wrapped in objects—things are themselves and then they're also something different from themselves when they're inside of something else. So, you can look at a structure, or a site, or a specific design element—a façade, a portico—and you can attend to that specific design element on its own. Now that thing does not exist alone in the universe, otherwise I don't know what we would do. It would be a very strange world, indeed. It exists inside, next to, in the orbit of other entities. So, when you zoom out or in to look at another entity it's a different thing that you're designing. It seems like it's an obvious thing to say, but it's a fundamental shift in the way that you think about the problem of design as it relates to something like context or site specificity or environmental integration or all these sorts of attitudes that we've developed or resisted developing.

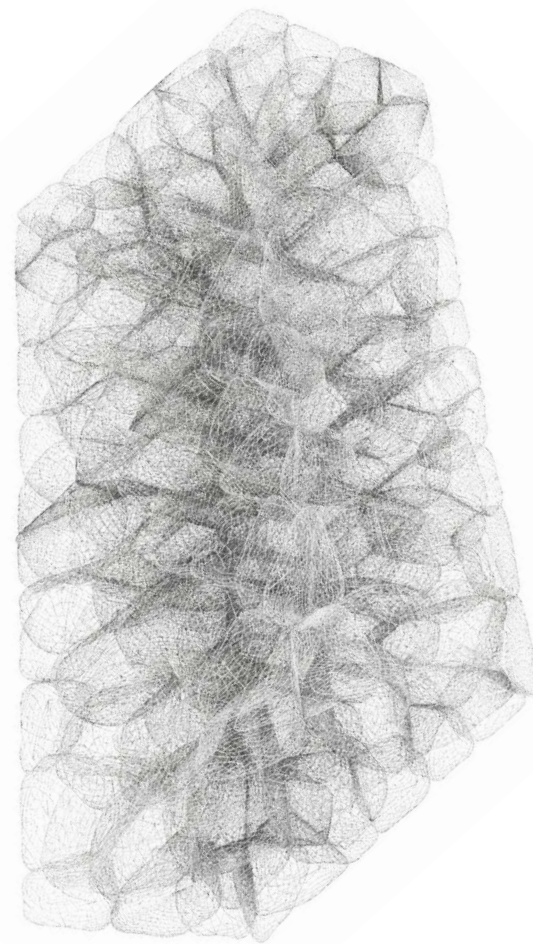
If your attitude is “well all I'm interested in is the structure I'm interested in, the building, and this business of context is just a hurdle I have to get through in order to argue with the city or with the neighbors so I can build the building that I'm after”, then not only are you not engaging with some other problem, but you're missing the design opportunity there. And I think when we talk about things like context or site, we're kind of missing the boat in some ways. Because what you really

mean is not context you mean something much more specific than context. You might mean this block or this area of influence. You might mean “this neighborhood”. You might mean the sort of undefinable texture of this community or this region. You might mean something much more specific like the relationship between last year's zoning law to this year's zoning law.

I think in a place like New Mexico, where I spent many many years living, there's so much space, there's so much just empty space. The way that a city like Albuquerque has developed and built by just spreading, not by sprawl exactly, it's not like Houston or Atlanta, but by occupying space. Why did that happen? How did that happen? There are all sorts of answers, but one answer is just that, well, the nature of openness, of open, empty, low value space becomes a vacuum that fills up relatively quickly and easily.

Maybe here's a better example that's more local. To me, if I had to think of an element, like a physical thing or a part of the built environment that makes me think of the city of Albuquerque more than anything else, I think it would be the cinder block. There are cinder blocks everywhere. I remember as a kid not even noticing and then eventually it had dawned on me that wow, there are cinder blocks everywhere here, cinderblock walls everywhere. Commercial, residential, random places, used as barriers, used as structure, used as decoration, even. And, how did that happen? As a kid you don't

know. The wonder part is easy when you're young. But it's cheap building element, there's dust, you might keep it out. But as a result of that one object's colonization of the city, you end up with these kind of strange barriers between spaces that wouldn't otherwise exist. And I wonder — I mean I'm really just speaking out of turn here because I'm talking as though I know something that I really don't — but you know in what sense would the development



of a city like Albuquerque have been different if communities had been more coherently focused on streetscape rather than on individual plots, whether those are commercial or residential or industrial? There is something very compartmentalized about the built environment in Albuquerque, which doesn't seem like it would make sense in a desert landscape that has infinite space.

So, on the one hand that means all of these things are connected. I started by saying things are separate from one another, and now it certainly sounds like I'm saying things are connected to one another. It's not that they're not—it's rather that those connections are connections of a specific time, and so they have to be isolated and identified. If you're working on a particular problem, you're deciding to work on a particular problem because it seems like the problem to spend your time on at that moment. In many cases, where context, community, construction, design takes place is not on the drafting table or on the computer, or at the site, it's somewhere else entirely. Being open to that possibility and then understanding how to manage it seems like a skill that everyone who works in design for the built environment is going to have to have a lot more of in the future.

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I have one more question — and answer this how you'd like, it can relate to design or not — can one say where an object begins and ends? I guess more specifically, how does OOO address destruction or things perishing? Maybe that's a loaded question, but what are your thoughts?

One way of answering this question is that you could take a thing and another thing, and you put them together and you get a third thing. And that third thing is not just the sum of the two other things, it's something synthetic and different, even if it's not a thing that we have a name for or a word for. We need to be careful not to just sort of devolve metaphysics back into the philosophy of language. And that also means that if you take a thing and you remove something from it then you have a different thing. You can think of this kind of intuitively, and this is where Heidegger's broken tool concept comes into play. One of Heidegger's arguments is that you don't really notice things and how they work and what they do until they stop working, and then you can stop using them and begin attending to them as they are. The pen in my hand, I write with it, I don't really think about it, I click on the end of it to open and close it while

I'm talking to you on the phone, just for something to do with my hand and because it makes an interesting noise, but when I try to write with it I realize it's out of ink. Suddenly, I'm faced with the reality of the pen in a different way. If I take the ballpoint insert out of the tube that contains it and then screw the cap with its spring back on, what I have is something that's not a pen, exactly, anymore. I don't know what that name would be but it's something different, it's a different object, a different entity than it was when it had that pen insert inside of it. even though all I've done is I've taken that thing out of it and moved it to the side.

So when we think about the destruction of things, it's a complicated problem. What do we mean by destruction or conclusion? Like, when a human dies, no matter what you think about the fate of their eternal soul, from a spiritual perspective, this from a physical perspective, their body breaks down over time, but their bones take much, much longer. Actually, your bones persist longer than any other part of you as they decay and degrade, no matter how well embalmed you are or what kind of complex coffin is constructed around you to prevent the decay of your body, as we tend to do nowadays. Your bones extend in space and time, or at least in time much more longitudinally than your

physical lifespan does—Tim Morton has this name for this, he calls them *hyperobjects*, things that have a broad expanse in space and or time—and we don't normally think of our body, which contains our bones, as being a thing that projects forward many centuries into the future. But we might think of it that way if we perceive it slightly differently. And the same thing might be true if you destroyed a physical object, a piece of rock or a structure through demolition. What has happened is not exactly that you destroyed it, you've done something much more complicated than destroy it. And there are different ways of destroying it, for that matter. Like you could go in and you could salvage elements from the structure and then they would find new homes somewhere else. You could burn it down into ash and then there would be smoke that rose into the air, and perhaps it would have health effects on those in the neighboring areas. I'm not trying to dodge the question, but rather to say that we have few nicknames for transformations that take place in and between things. And those nicknames tend to hover over much more complicated situations, and they also prevent us from asking more particular questions about the new entities that are created, even when something is destroyed. You burn something down and you get ash, and that didn't exist before. Or you get toxic fumes which didn't

exist before, or you salvage it and you get new material out of which you construct tables or doors or whatever else you might like.

I'm sort of tuning my answer for the domain a little bit, but there's sometimes an accusation made of OOO that it is just a philosophy of stasis, and that a philosophy of becoming like Deleuze's can account for change better than OOO. Well, absolutely not. It's just that the trick is to see the change as an entity itself, as an object itself. So asking about something's destruction or termination or creation or beginning, that's not enough detail. We need to know the nature of that destruction or creation in order to be able to then address it either philosophically or from a design perspective.