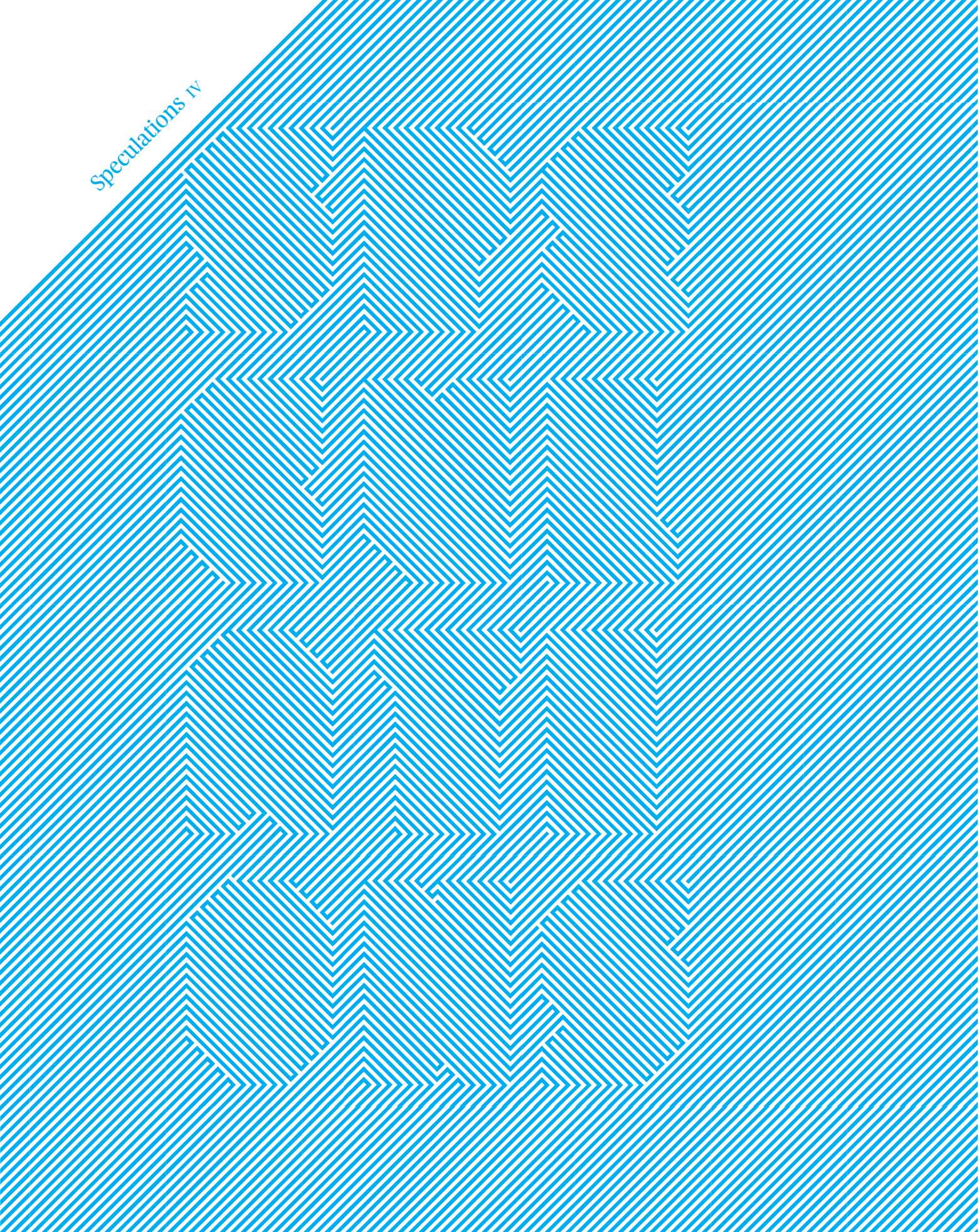


Speculations IV



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speculationsjournal@gmail.com
www.speculations-journal.org


EDITORS
Michael Austin
Paul J. Ennis
Fabio Gironi
Thomas Gokey
Robert Jackson

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

With this special issue of *Speculations* we wanted to challenge the contested term “speculative realism,” offering scholars who have some involvement with it a space to voice their opinions of the network of ideas commonly associated with the name.

Whilst undoubtedly born under speculative realist auspices, *Speculations* has never tried to be the gospel of a dogmatic speculative realist church, but rather instead to cultivate the best theoretical lines sprouting from the resurgence, in the last few years, of those speculative and realist concerns attempting to break free from some of the most stringent constraints of critique. Sociologist Randall Collins observed that, unlike other fields of intellectual inquiry, “[p]hilosophy has the peculiarity of periodically shifting its own grounds, but always in the direction of claiming or at least seeking the standpoint of greatest generality and importance.”¹ If this is the case, to deny that a shift of grounds *has* indeed become manifest in these early decades of the twenty-first century would be, at best, a sign of a severe lack of philosophical sensitivity. On the other hand, whether or not this shift has been towards greater importance (and in respect to what?) is not only a legitimate but a necessary question to ask.

For those interested in answering it, that of whether “speculative realism” might be the *best* name for this new cluster of concerns is, we believe, an altogether moot conundrum. Initially associated with a list of proper names, the “speculative realist” network of intellectual influences has now spread widely throughout various academic environments (often reaching beyond philosophy), preserving an identity via its association with realist and post-critical ambitions, and eliciting reactions ranging from overtly-enthusiastic adoption to sneering dismissal. While the term should be used with caution since certain sectarian appropriations of it remain a danger to be avoided (as is always the case with new intellectual currents promising a break with the past), critics cannot just wish “speculative realism” out of existence.

Having to deal with it, and in order to endow it with *some* heuristic value, an argument in favour of the term “speculative realism” could perhaps be offered. If there is virtue in it, it lies in the way in which the two words should be interpreted as keeping each other in check, mutually constraining their respective ambitions: we need grounded realist commitments (of both epistemological and ontological kinds) to

¹ Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 19.

keep speculative zeal under control, and we need a speculative will to avoid a realism amounting to little more than an encyclopaedic catalogue of the existent. Such a minimal interpretive key, it seems, can leave enough semantic wriggle room to allow for different stances to be included.

Whatever the intrinsic value in the name, the contributors to this volume have all engaged, more or less directly, with a critical analysis of the vices and virtues of “speculative realism”: from the extent to which its adversarial stance towards previous philosophical stances is justified to whether it succeeds (or fails) to address satisfactorily the concerns that ostensibly motivate it, through to an assessment of the methods of dissemination of its core ideas. The contributions are divided in two sections, titled “Reflections” and “Proposals,” describing, with some inevitable overlap, two kinds of approach to the question of speculative realism: one geared towards its retrospective and its critical appraisal and the other concerned with the positive proposition of alternative or parallel approaches to it. We believe that the final result, in its heterogeneity, will be of better service to the philosophical community than a dubiously univocal descriptive recapitulation of “speculative realist tenets.”

While proud of the form that this special issue has taken, there is one aspect we regret: as all too often is the case for publications in our field (and unfortunately many others), a quick glance at the list of contributors will reveal a severe gender imbalance. In the interests of full disclosure (there is no point in being apologetically evasive on this issue, especially when commendable initiatives like the Gendered Conference Campaign are very publicly raising the awareness of the philosophical community), we have tried our best to minimise this imbalance, although with poor results. Given the constraints we posed on the eligibility of invitees (of either gender) we did our best to identify qualified female scholars with direct links to “speculative realist” networks. Unfortunately, of ten such female scholars who received our invitation all but one had to—for various reasons—decline.

We would like to thank all the contributors for their participation in this project: whether or not one believes in something like philosophical progress, it can only be through the intellectual exchange that papers such as theirs will doubtlessly elicit that a new step towards the clarification of contemporary philosophical projects can be taken. We wouldn’t dream of presenting this volume as the last word on the issue of “speculative realism,” but we would like to hope that it might become something of a milestone along the way.

Reflections

LEE BRAVER ON NOT SETTLING THE ISSUE OF REALISM

Philosophy is a means of escape. Our presence in this world is an accident, in both senses of the word, an unfortunate fate that has befallen us as we have fallen into it. This is a world of shadows and reflections, of illusions and elisions, of waste and death. It is a reality in decay that has, paradoxically, always been in decay, a ruins that was never whole.

We are in this world, but we do not belong here. We yearn for a reality that is real, and a truth that is true. Since these are not to be found among the detritus of everyday life, we must seek it in a world beyond or behind this one, a realm that truly exists because it has no whiff of non-existence about it—no destruction, no imperfections, no suffering, no death. Our duty in this life is to escape this life, to withdraw physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually from these shadows, to slip the bonds that hold us—to escape. And philosophy is what shows us our goal and guides us to it.

We are born into a particular place, a particular culture, body, appetites, but these are not who we really are. Like King Arthur, we are of royal blood hidden in a commoner's house, or like Harry Potter we are really a wizard in muggle's clothing. In philosophy, our true self is reason. When we think, we turn away from bodily pleasures and distractions to pure intellectual contemplation, from the contingent to the essential, from the shadows of the cave to the reality waiting outside. Meditating on these matters lets us join ourselves to that realm, aligning us with reality instead of illusion, truth instead of opinion. In doing so, we become like them and, just a little bit, we become them.

This was, with a few notable exceptions, the dominant conception of philosophy, reason, and reality for two millennia. This is the story that centuries of metaphysicians were weaned on. Even the word metaphysics, regardless of its particular origin, captures the idea: the discipline that studies the reality that is beyond or *meta* this changing, empirical *physis*. Now I don't want to lay the blame at the feet of any one individual, but **it is all Plato's fault**. It was Plato who wrote what is surely the greatest story ever told, which has survived many transformations and reincarnations with the main features intact. We can see its outlines in much of Christian philosophy, for which we are children of God who have fallen into a world of sin and corruption. It survives in Descartes' laying of the foundations of science on a Platonic distrust of the senses and the vague

information they give. Methodological doubt is his way out of the cave by revealing the mathematical properties that are true because they do not vary among perceivers or across time. The lesson of these meta-physicians is that we must not *settle* for the world we see around us, but must ever strive to transcend it, for the sake of our minds and our souls.

Now Kant—Kant is an interesting figure in this narrative, as he is in so many histories. Kant is the Janus-faced philosopher. Equal parts empiricist and rationalist, he both brings the early modern period to a close and opens up the space for nineteenth-century thought, which largely consists of a series of footnotes to Kant. He is the last of the great continental realists and at the same time the first in the line of German idealists, a committed determinist while simultaneously a passionate libertarian. He has been praised as the great philosophical hope for finally defeating skepticism, and denounced as the ultimate skeptic. It is small wonder that he is master of the antinomy, the philosophical expression of finding oneself pulled inexorably in contradictory directions. In Yogi Berra's words, whenever Kant came to a fork in the road, he took it.

With regard to our topic, Kant both embraces and rejects Plato's story. He argues that humans are inescapably drawn to transcendent investigations, while working to persuade us in, let's be honest, at times excruciating detail to content ourselves with immanent concerns.¹ He secures the necessary and universal knowledge of one realm while forbidding all knowledge of the other. Kant giveth, and Kant taketh away and, what is most impressive, with the same gesture. He preserves the idea of a reality that in principle transcends our ability to know it and that represents reality as it is in-itself, while at the same time telling us that only the world as we experience it is of any concern to us, at least as far as science goes. He grants us the physics to know the phenomena we can know, the faith to not know the noumena we cannot, and the *Critique* to tell the difference.

This strange, beautiful, endlessly fascinating system—deeply paradoxical and yet meticulously structured—laid the ground for much of the philosophy that followed. Metaphysics had previously enjoyed a fairly settled ground—we had a *basic* agreement on the independence of reality and the definition of knowledge as the accurate capturing

¹ "Human Reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer": Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), A. vii.

of it, and we just disagreed on the details. What is the precise nature of reality in itself? What is the best method for capturing it and how far may we hope to succeed? These are the kind of questions that mark what Kuhn called normal science, where the basic ideas are agreed upon and debates take place on the basis of commensurable terms. Kant changed almost everything, shaking up what had long been settled, redefining some very basic notions.

If we are realists and hold that the world is “out there,” independent of us, and that knowledge means grasping it as it is in itself, then it seems that two possibilities are open: either we can achieve this knowledge or we can’t. The point of traditional pre-Critical epistemology is to teach us how to push our minds beyond their natural limitations so that they can limn reality itself. As Leibniz promised, if we can leave behind the restrictions of the body and senses, we can come to think with God’s head, at least to some degree. Skeptics, of course, take the other option, arguing that we can never surpass our all-too-human ways of knowing. We should give up dreams of transcendence and make peace with common life’s beer, billiards, and backgammon.

But Kant opened up a third path: the world of phenomena is the one we live in, the only world we’ll ever know in this life, so we should stop treating it as second best. We can substitute intersubjective agreement among ourselves for agreement with reality in itself. This would be a new kind of truth, one that is a lesser truth, perhaps, but a truth nonetheless, the only kind fit for creatures like us. There are certainly pragmatic reasons for making the change—if we have no way of ever gaining access to the real world and it cannot directly impact us and, conversely, if knowledge of the phenomenal world allows us to control it reliably, then we’ve made a good trade, even if, judged by absolute standards, we are settling for second best.

But it’s just this sense of settling that I think haunts the idealists. Noumena represent the vestigial remains of traditional metaphysics in Kant’s system, like an ontological appendix, and it threatens to burst. It is the separation between mind and world that makes it necessary to connect the two, and at the same time makes that connection permanently insecure. As Hegel writes, “the divorce between thought and thing is mainly the work of the Critical Philosophy, and runs counter to the conviction of all previous ages, that their agreement was a matter of course. The antithesis between them is the hinge on which modern philosophy turns.”² Earlier thinkers had certainly distinguished between subject and

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1969), 35/§22r.

object, but they firmly believed in their assured compatibility, assuming a pre-established harmony between the ways we think and the ways the world works which guarantees that we can know it.

Kant’s position is revolutionary in that he accepts the divorce between thinker and thing but rejects the dogmatic certitude that the two necessarily run in parallel, compatible ways. In fact, we know that the opposite is true, that the ways we think are *not* the ways the world itself is. We can never capture reality as it truly is because it’s always *we* who are trying to capture it. The very attempt to faithfully represent the world introduces interference, and this distortion gets replicated in all our attempts to get at the world, since all of these attempts bring along ourselves as knowers. This applies not just to perception, in the intuition’s introduction of time and space into experience, but to conception as well. Just to think that a noumenal world exists seems to employ some of the very concepts that Kant restricts to phenomena. If these forms structure our minds all the way down, then they also go all the way down in the world that we perceive and think about, even in just thinking that it exists. As Hegel argues, to say that a world in-itself is out there is always implicitly saying that a world in-itself exists *for-us*; even its in-itselfness is something we’re positing. Without a truly external contrast, the features we “impose” on the world simply become the world’s features or, as he puts it, logic is metaphysics. We can never get out of the world as we see it because we can never get around our ways of seeing it.

If a noumenal reality is something we can in principle never have access to, not even just to think it, then the meaning of phenomena changes. Without the contrast of an in-itself, qualifying experience as *for-us* loses the meaning it had when it served as a contrasting term, as Nietzsche famously concludes: “the true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*”³ On the traditional metaphysical scheme, we must settle for *doxa* and *physis*, second-rate truth and reality, because that’s all we can get. But if we leave behind the conceptual framework that made that contrast meaningful, then we no longer have to make apologies for the world we’re in contact with and the views we cobble together. This idea is what I called Continental Anti-Realism in my first book, *A Thing of This World*—it takes the “meta” out of “metaphysics.”

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 486, italics in original.

I see this Continental Anti-Realism reaching its zenith with Heidegger. He understands being to mean the presentation of something to us, with both “presentation” and “something” understood very broadly. There are many different kinds of things and they can present themselves to us in many different ways or, to put it another way, being is said in many ways. Nevertheless, things must come into the clearing for us to discuss them and assign them any kind of meaning at all, including just the fact that they are.⁴ This undermines Kant’s distinction between appearance and reality:

It is phenomenologically absurd to speak of the phenomenon as if it were something behind which there would be something else of which it would be a phenomenon....One cannot ask for something behind the phenomenon at all, since what the phenomenon gives is precisely that something in itself.⁵

Phenomena are what are; the way we experience the world is the way it is. This is why Heidegger identifies phenomenology, the study of our experience of the world, with ontology, the study of the world as it is, indeed, we can go ahead and say as it is in-itself.⁶ The notion of a reality beyond this one has been rejected, so its effect of demoting our experience to “mere” appearance has been disarmed. Merleau-Ponty makes the point nicely when he says, “we must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive.”⁷

Philosophy can now be used not for escape but for a very different purpose, something like a homecoming. Philosophy can help us see the world that we actually live in, as phenomenology does, and see that this is our world, our place. The way Hegel tells

⁴ “A being can be uncovered...only if the being of this being is already disclosed—only if I already understand it. Only then can I ask whether it is actual or not and embark on some procedure to establish the actuality of the being”: Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 72.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 86. See also: “appearance as appearance or object does not need at all still to correspond to something actual, because appearance itself is the actual”: Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason,”* trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 69.

⁶ “There is no ontology alongside a phenomenology. Rather, scientific ontology is nothing but phenomenology”: Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 72.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), xviii.

it, coming to see that this world is our home is the point of all of history, as we gradually move into it in stages. We can stop our *longing* for something beyond when we see our *belonging* to this place. We are not *settling for* a second best truth and reality, but rather *settling into* our one true home, settling down as we as a species grow up and learn to give up childish dreams of transcendent realms and disguised kings of faraway lands.

The quest for knowledge has three options: finding a way to expand our mind to reach the world out there, giving up that attempt as futile, or shrinking the world to what is within our reach. Pre-Critical Metaphysics attempted the first, skepticism the second, and Continental Anti-Realism pursued the last option.

While the Anti-Realist solution has been quite popular over the last couple of centuries, recently stirrings of discontent have begun to arise. The motivation behind the Anti-Realist redefinition of reality was to get rid of the idea that we were settling for second best. But, a number of recent metaphysicians have argued, isn’t *this* solution *itself* a form of settling? Reducing reality to what we are or can be in contact with seems to sell knowledge and reality short. Anti-Realists are pasting the target onto the end of their rifles and congratulating themselves on hitting bulls-eyes.

These recent metaphysicians, loosely gathered under the name Speculative Realism, yearn for what Quentin Meillassoux calls “the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers.”⁸ Anti-Realism, they believe, has turned out to be little more than a sophisticated form of idealism, and it is high time for some rock-kicking. The Anti-Realists assured us that the exchange of the in-itself-in-itself for the in-itself-for-us would cost us nothing, but it turns out that in the trade we have lost what was most important. After all, what does it profit a philosopher if he gains knowledge but loses the whole world? In the course of the last two centuries of philosophy, these thinkers believe, we have indeed lost the world, and it is a world most badly lost.

The Speculative Realists believe that it is Anti-Realism that represents the childish view, for it amounts to a kind of cosmic narcissism where being exists only in correlation with us or, in Heidegger’s terms, that being can only be in our clearing. This makes the world less our home than our nursery room where everything is organized around us. Kant’s Copernican Revolution turns out to be a Ptolemaic Reversion.

⁸ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 7.

This marks a different sort of confinement in a different kind of cave since we can never get outside our ways of thinking. On Kant's system, we can find out all sorts of information about particular facts in the world, but we know in advance that everything we can ever encounter will obey the laws of Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics. This is simply the flip side of the necessity and universality of math and science. The Anti-Realists have turned us into conceptual solipsists who only find a world fitted to our pre-existing understanding of it.

We get outside this conceptual shell by thinking about what things are like entirely independent of our understanding and experience of them. The Speculative Realists agree with the Pre-Critical Realists that there is more to heaven and earth than is dreamt of in the Anti-Realists' philosophy, but they criticize those Pre-Critical thinkers for not being Realist enough, for surreptitiously importing human-sized concepts and an anthropocentric viewpoint into what they thought of as a genuinely independent reality.

Moreover, the Pre-Critical Realists mistakenly thought that we can only find genuine reality elsewhere, in a transcendent realm. But the Speculative Realists argue that we don't have to look to some beyond to find what exceeds our grasp; *everything* has an inner essence we are not privy to. For the Speculative Realists, studying this world is not *settling for second best*, but neither should we *settle into* a completely domesticated world. Rather, we should *resettle* in more interesting places, away from the anthropocentric city, to study the interactions that take place among beings far away from our prying eyes.

I find this line of thought intriguing and I take their warning about the danger of conceptual solipsism, but I'm still too much of an Anti-Realist to embrace Speculative Realism whole-heartedly. It seems right to me that we always bring our thoughts to any consideration of the world as it is independently of us, which automatically compromises any absolute independence. But the Speculative Realists are right to point out that the Anti-Realists may have exaggerated the comprehensiveness of our pre-forming of experience. If experience were so fully pre-digested by the ways our minds process information, we could never experience surprise. Specific, ontic surprises, sure, but not radical surprises that violate and transform our very notions of what is.

Lately, I've become interested in these moments of revolutionary experience, when our whole sense of what the world is like gets turned inside out and we are forced to form entirely new concepts to process

what is happening. These experiences overwhelm and short-circuit our normal understanding of things, calling for new ways or sometimes perpetually escaping them. According to what I am calling Transgressive Realism (for those counting at home, this is the fourth strain of realism), these are the paradigmatic points of contact with a reality unformed by human concepts, when a true beyond touches us, sending shivers through our conceptual schemes, shaking us out of any complacent feeling-at-home. These moments are what allow us to escape the stultifying enclosure within our own ways of thinking that the Anti-Realists set up, where everything takes place on the basis of transcendental anticipation. However, against the Speculative Realists, I still think that reality has to make some kind of contact with us for us to be able to talk about it. I don't see how discussion of the ways that inanimate objects "experience" or "encounter" each other in the dark after we've all gone to bed could ever be more than mere speculation. It's just that this contact doesn't always fit neatly into our concepts, the way the Anti-Realists had it.⁹

If the Pre-Critical Realists tell us not to settle for the tawdry shabby world we find ourselves in, and the Anti-Realists tell us to settle into this world as our home, and the Speculative Realists urge us to resettle elsewhere, Transgressive Realism emphasizes the way reality *unsettles* us. We can never settle down with a single way of understanding the world because it can always unexpectedly breach these. Such experiences do not get squeezed into our mental structures but instead violate them, cracking and reshaping our categories. This violation is the sign of their externality since everything we conceive remains the offspring of our concepts and so retains a family resemblance with them. Rather than the wholly independent noumenal realm that Hegel rightly rejects, these *are* experiences that we have but which shatter our ways of understanding experience, exceeding our comprehension but not escaping our awareness.

Transgressive Realism, I believe, gives us a reality that transcends our ways of thinking, but not all access to it, offering a middle path that lets us have our ineffable cake and partially eat it too. These aporetic experiences enter our awareness, not through the pathways prepared by our minds but in spite of them, transgressing our anticipatory processes. Sometimes these strange ideas transform our way of thinking, reshaping our categories around their non-Euclidean shapes, but some permanently escape attempts to

⁹ See Lee Braver, "A Brief History of Continental Realism," *Continental Philosophy Review* 45:2 (2012): 261-289.

classify them. These are the wild thoughts that buck all domestication, escaping stable categories; these are the ideas prized by many continental thinkers as the “other” to our normal ways of thinking, which helps explain what may look like willful obfuscation and a casual rejection of basic rational principles. Many of these figures do cultivate the irrational in a sense, but for eminently sensible reasons, once the full conceptual context has been laid out.

We can find strains of this notion in early Heidegger, where the feeling of uncanniness or not-at-homeness reminds us that our being is forever at issue. Although the point of the book is to find the meaning of being, there is a sense in which being cannot have a meaning, that the book as a whole “brings Dasein before the ‘that-it-is’ of its ‘there,’ which, as such, stares it in the face with the inexorability of an enigma.”¹⁰ Our being-there, the fact that there is a there for being to be in, is incomprehensible, and *inexorably* so. The idea also appears in his later work, in ideas like earth, which “appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it.”¹¹

Perhaps the great philosopher of Transgressive Realism, though, is Levinas, who starts from a commitment to phenomenology—we must deal with beings as we experience them—and follows this out until he finds experiences that can’t be experienced, thoughts that think more than they can hold: the face of the other or God or the infinite. Like Heidegger’s earth, such an idea “consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable.”¹² While it surpasses our ways of comprehending it, it still makes contact; indeed, Levinas sometimes seems to think that it is *only* such experiences that truly touch us.

He criticizes most philosophers as closet idealists because they insist that the world be knowable, which means that it must conform to our reason. This happens overtly in Kant’s idea that we introduce the order we find in the world, but Levinas sees the

same idea working clandestinely in the background of most thinkers (with the odd exception of Descartes, who posits an innate idea of God that we could not have created). For everyone who insists that reality be intelligible thereby reduces it to the scale of our minds.¹³ On this model of thought, he says, “one only learns what one already knows...nothing absolutely new, nothing other, nothing strange, nothing transcendent, could either affect or truly enlarge a mind.”¹⁴ But such a fully pre-digested reality does not deserve the name since it represents a mere extension of our selves. As he says of Husserl, the whole world reduces to merely our thoughts of the world, thus betraying the true meaning of intentionality which throws us outside of our minds. “The idea of being does not therefore suffice to sustain the claim of realism, if realism is equivalent to affirming an alterity outside the Same. Only the idea of the infinite renders realism possible.”¹⁵ True realism is founded on “an inassimilable alterity”¹⁶ that can never be absorbed into our categories since these intrinsically reduce the other to the same.

For Levinas, as for Kierkegaard, the very essence of ethics is to never relax, assured of one’s uprightness in good conscience.¹⁷ Being ethical means remaining forever unsettled, never sure if we’re doing the right thing; in fact, it means knowing that, *whatever* we have done—we know that we have not done enough. Our responsibility to the other is inexhaustible as the experience of the other overflows and overloads our ways of understanding, violating the conceptual scheme we use to domesticate experience, brushing up against something fundamentally other, giving us a reality that lives up to the name.

Discussing such ideas presents challenges, to put it mildly. We are talking about, after all, that which we cannot talk about. One of the issues I’m exploring now is the question of whether we can in fact do so without compromising their alterity, whether we can devise concepts for that which escapes conceptuality.

One conclusion I have reached is that this is one area where art seems better equipped than philosophy. It is difficult for philosophy to approach a subject without an elaborate conceptual apparatus designed

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962), 175. “In itself’ it is quite incomprehensible why entities are to be *uncovered*, why *truth* and *Dasein* must be” (271).

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 172.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 19. “What is essential here is the way a meaning that is beyond meaning is inserted in the meaning that remains in an order” *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³ Rationalism “implies that the contours of being fit into the human scale and the measures of thought” *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151. Hegel agrees with this: “Thought is always in its own sphere: its relations are with itself, and it is its own Object”: *Hegel’s Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 49/§28R.

¹⁵ Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷ “The just person who knows himself to be just is no longer just” *Ibid.*, 17.

to capture, lay out, and analyze it. Art, on the other hand, can suggest, it can insinuate, it can indicate without filling in the details that would spoil the mystery that it's trying to bring to our attention, a bit like phenomenology's formal indication. One technique is to place events in a mundane context so the phenomenon in question can make contact with us, thus satisfying the need for access. Then the artist can use other details to blur its continuity with familiar reality, never breaking with it entirely but undermining the subject's obedience to the rules we take for granted and assume to be universal. Like Penelope, the artist undoes with one hand the understandability she constructs with the other.

Horror is a genre that dwells in this conceptual territory. Heidegger draws a famous distinction between fear and anxiety, where fear has a definite source which gives us things to do in order to escape it, whereas anxiety is an indefinite smothering fog that comes from nowhere and nothing to cover everything over with the sickly pallor of insignificance. Let us add horror as a third mood which combines elements of both. In horror, there is a definite horrible thing that is threatening me but it resists attempts to understand it, exceeding laws of nature that we had taken to be inviolable. It isn't just fear of harm befalling me, though it has more of that than the wholly inchoate anxiety; it's ontological horror of what this incomprehensible thing is and what unimaginable things it can do to me beyond just inflicting pain and death. I can't exactly fear it because I cannot get a grip on what it is threatening, and this uncertainty makes it all the more horrifying. I may fear an axe-wielding maniac who is trying to kill me, but I recoil in horror from an axe-wielding maniac who keeps getting up after I've put knitting needles through his neck.

H.P. Lovecraft is a writer popular among Speculative Realists for his view of cosmic indifference: the universe, summed up in the Old Gods, is not out to get us—it just doesn't care about us. We live in a cold, distinctly inhuman reality and one of Lovecraft's great insights is that this cosmic indifference is, in some ways, more horrifying than malevolence. There are elements of Lovecraft that fit my story too—the way otherworldly phenomena frequently violate Euclidean space or show colors we've never seen that drive the scholarly protagonists who study them mad, for example.

But my favorite Transgressive Realist author (along with the Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem who always emphasizes the alienness of aliens), is Philip K. Dick. His works continually verge on collapsing under their own narrative weight as he

removes the signposts that would allow us to orient ourselves in his worlds. Dick's books lead us down narrative Möbius strips. In *Ubik*, for example, two groups of characters are each trying to convince the other that *they* are the ones who survived an explosion which put the other in a hallucinatory cryogenic half-life and, as best I can tell, they're both right. *The Man in the High Castle* tells an alternate history where the Germans won World War II, and an author uses aleatory techniques to write a strange alternate history in which the Germans lost. By the end of the book the characters are unsure which history actually happened and begin to suspect that they're actually living in a fictional alternate history. His masterpiece, *VALIS*, is about a science fiction writer named Phil Dick who finds the announcement of the coming of the messiah encoded in a work of science fiction, thereby encoding this announcement in the science fiction novel *VALIS*.

If philosophy begins in wonder, then where does it end? What is its end? Aristotle said that while it begins in wondrous questioning, it ends with “the better state” of attaining answers, like an itch we get rid of with a good scratch or a childhood disease that, once gotten over, never returns.¹⁸ How depressing! Why can't a good question continue being questionable or, in a more literal translation of the German, “question-worthy?” As Heidegger puts it, “philosophical questions are in principle never settled as if some day one could set them aside.”¹⁹ Couldn't we learn from questions without trying to settle them, resolve ourselves to not resolving them? Couldn't wisdom be found in reconciling ourselves to its perpetual love, and never its possession? Wittgenstein once wrote that “a philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don't know my way about,’”²⁰ which was the symptom of the deep confusion that constituted philosophy for him. But Heidegger loved wandering aimlessly in the woods, following *Holzwege* or paths that lead nowhere, stumbling onto dead-ends which could also be clearings.

¹⁸ Aristotle claims that philosophy begins in wonder, but “we must end up in the contrary and (according to the proverb) the better state, the one that people achieve by learning” the answer. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 938a, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House), 18–20.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press), 44.

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., rev. trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Madsen: Blackwell, 2001), §123.

LEVI R. BRYANT

POLITICS AND SPECULATIVE REALISM

Is it our fault if the networks are simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society? — Latour¹

1. STRANGE BEDFELLOWS SR AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY

Since its birth in 2007, speculative realism (SR) has generated a great deal of controversy in journals, the theory blogosphere, and at conferences. One would search in vain for a unified “speculative realist” position or doctrine. The four original speculative realists who coined the term—Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Quentin Meillassoux—argue for very different ontologies and epistemologies, opposed to one another in a number of respects. If there is anything that unites their positions, it is 1) a defense of some variant of realism or materialism, and 2) a critique of correlationism. First coined by Meillassoux, correlationism is the thesis that we can only ever speak of being as a correlate of the subject and never the world and subject apart from one another.² Beyond that, the sort of realism (or materialism) each of these thinkers defends and how they critique correlationism diverges quite substantially.

I will not here discuss the various speculative realist positions nor the many divergent variants of object-oriented ontology. Rather, in this article what interests me are the controversies that have emerged around SR. These debates have not primarily taken place in the discipline of philosophy, but have rather unfolded in disciplines outside of philosophy such as literary studies, media studies, the social sciences, and variants of social and political thought inflected by neo-Marxist theory, feminism, race theory, and queer theory. Given that correlationism is a rather classical and abstract epistemological issue in philosophy, the question arises as to just why a fairly technical issue in philosophy has generated such heated debate in politically oriented branches of the humanities? Moreover, given that SR, in the hands of its original four founders has been a rather apolitical set of philosophical concerns focused on questions of the being of the real, the nature of materiality, and questions of epistemology, it

¹ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 6.

² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 5.

is striking that debates surrounding SR have been focused on questions of the social and political. In what follows my aim is to outline just why SR has generated these controversies and discuss what it might have to offer to politically oriented theory in our current historical moment.

2. THE BASIC SCHEMA OF CRITICAL THEORY

Broadly speaking, a critical theory (CT) can be defined as any theory that contests the *naturalness* of categories pertaining to human identities and social relations, revealing how they are socially constructed, contingent, and historical. Arguably, the first formulation of critical theory can be found in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. There Lucretius writes,

Whatever exists you will always find connected,
To these two things, or as by-products of them;
Connected meaning that the quality
Can never be subtracted from its object
No more than weight from stone, or heat from fire,
Wetness from water. On the other hand,
Slavery, riches, freedom, poverty,
War, peace, and so on, transitory things
Whose comings and goings do not alter substance—
These, and quite properly, we call *by-products*.³

Lucretius draws a distinction between properties that belong to things themselves such as mass, and properties that arise from how we *relate* to other things such as slavery. Unlike heat which is an *intrinsic* property of fire, slavery is not an intrinsic property of a person, but rather people are *made* into slaves by other people.

While a number of people—generally those in power or who stand to benefit from a particular way of ordering society—might try to claim that people are *naturally* slaves, that sexuality is naturally structured in particular ways, that certain groups are naturally inferior, that a particular economic system is the natural form of exchange, and so on, a critical theory reveals how *we* have *constructed* these things. Two thousand years later, Marx will sum up the elementary gesture of critical theory when he writes that the commodity “is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes... for them, the fantastic relation between things.”⁴ When purchasing a commodity, we take

³ Lucretius, *The Way Things Are: The De Rerum Natura of Titus Lucretius Carus*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 33.

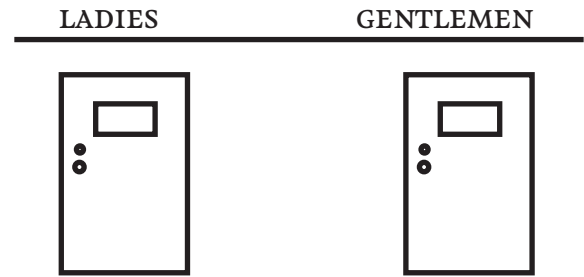
⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 165.

our relationship to this object as 1) merely being a relation between a person, the seller, and the thing, and 2) treat the value as being an *intrinsic* feature of the thing itself. For example, we treat the value of gold as being a real property of the thing like its color or atomic weight. What Marx reveals in his celebrated analysis of commodity fetishism is that value arises from the labor required to produce the commodity. The consequences of this are profound, for it allows Marx to demonstrate that a) exchange relations are not merely relations between a person and a thing, but open on to a broader network of social relations by virtue of the productive relations that go into producing the commodity, b) that value is not an intrinsic feature of things, but arises out of a particular system of production, c) that value arises from workers, not owners or capital, and d) that these relations under capitalism are unjust insofar as they usurp workers of what is rightfully theirs because more value is produced in production than workers are compensated for in their labor. Accompanying this analysis, Marx presents a history of modes of production showing that in the past there have been very different systems of production as well as the possibility of other modes of production. In doing so, he thus shows that the capitalist mode of production is social and historical, undermining the thesis that it is a natural universal or that social relations *have* to be this way.

Formally, rather than at the level of content, Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism will become the guiding schema of revolutionary social and political analysis for critical theory. Henceforth, the critical operation will consist in showing a fetish—in Marx's sense—at work in those social formations and relations claiming to be natural and therefore ineluctably necessary. Thus, for example, where sexist, heteronormative, and racist discourses will argue that forms of social inequality are *justified* because certain groups of people are *intrinsically* inferior to others and therefore are unsuited to various occupations and naturally need to be led, the critical theorist will show how these identities are socially constructed, historical, and have been and can be otherwise. Where the apologist will argue that capitalism is the *natural* form of exchange and that it has existed at all times and places throughout history, the critical theorist will demonstrate how capitalism arose under particular historical conditions and that other systems of production and distribution are possible.

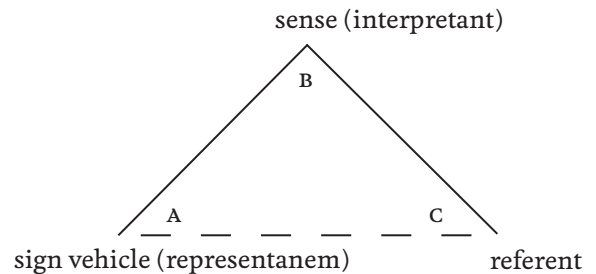
The critical gesture thus consists in showing that something we took to be a property of the things themselves is instead social and cultural. Lacan

illustrates this point nicely in his example of the two doors in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious”⁵:



It will be noted that the two doors in Lacan's diagram are *identical*. Materially, physically, there is no difference between the door on the left and the one on the right. Apart from their position in time and space, there is nothing in the doors *themselves* that makes them one type of door rather than another. Put differently, there is nothing in the *referent* of the signifiers <<Ladies>> and <<Gentlemen>> that makes one door the Ladies' room and another door the Gentlemen's room. It is instead the *signifier* itself—the social and cultural component—that introduces this difference between the doors.

Drawing on the Peircian concept of the sign, we can thus see how critical theories proceed in their distinctive form of critique. Peirce argues that signs are a triadic relational structure composed of a sign-vehicle or the sound or writing that conveys the sign, an interpretant or the conceptualized meaning behind the sign, and the referent or that which the sign denotes in the world:



In essentialist discourses such as racism, those properties that make a thing the *type* of thing it is, are found in the *referent*. They are held to be what

⁵ Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 416.

Lucretius called “connected properties.” In other words, the essentialist argues that things themselves have these properties regardless of how we speak about them. By contrast, the critical theorist attempts to show that what we took to be a property of the referent is instead—in Saussurean language—an *effect* of the signifier (sign-vehicle) and the signified (interpretant) sorting or carving up the world in particular ways. Like Lacan’s doors, the critical theorist argues that there is nothing in the referent itself that makes things what they are for society, but rather that it is language, discourse, and practice that carves up the world in a particular way.

The political implications of the social constructivist thesis are obvious. If it is true that signs are arbitrary—which is to say, that signs have no *natural* or mimetic link with what they signify and that signifying systems can carve up the world in a variety of ways—and if it is true that how things are sorted into kinds is an effect of the signifier/signified relation, rather than properties belonging to the things themselves, then it follows that justifications for inequality premised on claims about what is natural and intrinsic—and therefore, ineluctable—fall apart because it is language and practices that carve up the world in this way, not the world *itself* that is structured in this way. Insofar as language is historical and has—both across different languages and throughout history—carved up the world in a variety of different ways, there is no one way the world must be carved. We could just as easily name our two doors <<Workers>> and <<Owners>>. There is nothing in the doors themselves that dictates that people must be sorted to pass through them in one way rather than another. Rather what makes a door <<Ladies>> is what Lucretius called a “by-product” of how *we relate* to the doors.

The critique of fetishism and the semiotic turn has thus been profoundly important to emancipatory struggles. In showing that certain social formations are the effect of our practices and how we signify things, we undercut justifications for oppressive social relations that claim that things must be this way because they are natural and therefore people are merely occupying their ineluctable and necessary social positions; and, in showing that these things are socially constructed—that we are the ones who made things this way—we open up the possibility of constructing alternatives. As Žižek puts it,

“Being-a-king” is an effect of the network of social relations between a “king” and his “subjects;” but—and here is the fetishistic misrecognition—to the participants of this social bond, the relationship

appears necessarily in an inverse form: they think that they are subjects giving the king royal treatment because the king is already himself, outside the relationship to his subjects, a king; as if the determination of “being-a-king” were a “natural” property of the person of a king.⁶

That framework that sees “being-a-king” as a *natural* property of being king, *also* sees obedience to the king as just and legitimate by nature. By contrast, a theoretical orientation that recognizes that a king is only a king because of the social relations that make him a king, calls into question the legitimacy of the king’s sovereignty by showing that it is *we* that make kings kings, and that we can choose to rescind this sovereignty and organize society in different ways. At the formal level, similar arguments have been deployed against capitalism, racism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. The basic operation of CT consists in unmasking essentialist, theological, and naturalist justifications for social systems premised on inequality, demonstrating that in reality they are social constructions that unjustly defend the privilege of a few and that are capable of being otherwise.

3. THE DANGERS OF SR AND THE LIMITS OF CT

In light of the foregoing, we can see why the *apparently* abstract concerns of SR have generated so much controversy in politically oriented domains of the humanities. Through its critique of correlationism and its defense of realism, SR risks arguing that the king *really* is a king. In other words, critiques of correlationism and defenses of realism are not mere technical philosophical issues, but have very significant political implications. Radical emancipatory political theory has been correlationist and anti-realist through and through. In arguing that it is language and social practices that carve up the world, CT is correlationist in that it treats categories or types as resulting from our discourse about the world. It is anti-realist in arguing that types or kinds that we attribute to the social world—“male,” “female,” “straight,” “gay,” “black,” “white,” and so on—are the result of social constructions, of discourses and practices, and are therefore not natural kinds. Seen in this light, blanket condemnations of correlationism risk undermining decades of hard-won emancipatory victories in the name of justice and equality.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008).

However, before proceeding, it is important to note that matters are significantly more complex than the foregoing might suggest. First, many political critiques in the tradition of CT proceed on the basis of *realist* premises. In other words, they *both* show that certain social categorizations are socially constructed, *and* that they are based on *false* claims about our biology. For example, in seeking to demonstrate that the male/female binary is performative or socially constructed, Butler attempts to show how even biology does not support this binary.⁷ This is a realist argument. Similarly, when Stephen J. Gould critiques eugenics, he shows, among other things, how biology does not support the claims of the race theorists.⁸ Often it is realist appeals to the nature of human beings—that we are plastic and that there are no significant genetic differences between men and women and people of different “races”—that serve as grounds for the unmasking of fetishes practices by CT.

Second, it is not clear that whether or not one is a correlationist or a realist is an either/or. It is possible to be a correlationist about some things and a realist about others. In discussions of SR, there has been a tendency to overlook the fact that CT has largely been concerned with critiques of *social* kinds. While there are important examples to the contrary, CT has largely been occupied with demonstrating that categories or kinds pertaining to human identities and how societies are organized are socially constructed. Ian Hacking has argued that if we are to understand these debates, it’s important to distinguish between interactive kinds and non-interactive kinds.⁹ An interactive kind is a kind that has the capacity to *change* the thing that it represents. As such, it functions as *both* a description *and* a norm. Following Butler, for example, we can treat a kind like “female” as interactive. When a person is categorized as female, this category doesn’t simply *describe* features of the referent subsumed underneath it, but also presents a *normative* script defining how women *ought* to be in order to be women. Is it because women naturally have these properties that they are classified as women, or do women *perform* these things as a result of being categorized in this way? Interactive kinds change the social status of the person assumed under them—consider how becoming a professor

or being categorized as mentally ill changes one’s social status—and the people subsumed under them adopt attitudes and practices towards these categorizations. This suggests that they denote not natural features, but rather are socially constructed. By contrast, a non-interactive kind such as “being-hydrogen” changes nothing in hydrogen atoms. Unlike the person subsumed under the kind of “being-depressed” who might begin to *enact* or perform symptoms of depression as a consequence of being categorized in this way, hydrogen atoms don’t change their behavior and properties as a result of being categorized in a particular way. Interactive kinds are reflexive in that they change what they categorize and we can adopt stances towards them, while non-interactive kinds are non-reflexive. It is possible to be a realist about some things and an anti-realist and correlationist about other things. Debates surrounding SR need to be far more precise about these issues, exploring questions of whether or not all kinds are natural, whether some kinds are natural and others are constructed, and determining just where we might draw the line.

Where SR risks undermining advances in global struggles by dismissing wide bodies of anti-realist critique well supported by ethnography, sociology, and linguistics, CT has made it very difficult to address certain contemporary political questions. As we saw in the last section, the gesture of CT consists in bracketing the referent so as to reveal the fetishistic misrecognition at the heart of essentialist social categorizations and the naturalization of certain types of social organization such as those found in patriarchy, capitalism, and heteronormativity. This has led to a tendency to treat all political inequalities as *discursive* or *semiotic*, and to treat all political problems as problems of discursivity. Under this model of politics, the production of political change consists in unmasking the fetishistic misrecognition upon which unjust social relations are based, thereby disclosing the illegitimacy of certain social relations and opening the possibility for forging new social relations.

Critical unmasking has been an extremely powerful tool in emancipatory struggles—especially in struggles for gender equality, racial equality, fights against monarchical power, and struggles for sexual freedom—but is nonetheless problematic for two reasons. First, it is not clear that the power structuring social relations is *solely* discursive or semiotic in character. Features of geography, technologies, how infrastructure is arranged, the number of calories a person gets a day, mediums and channels of communication, how time is structured in day to day life,

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 136–141.

⁸ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).

⁹ Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 36.

and networks and paths of distribution all contribute to the organization of social relations and function to reinforce power relations. A people might very well know that their circumstances are unjust, but have little option but tolerating them because the structuration of their geographical conditions allow for no other alternatives. CT tends to proceed from the premise that people tolerate unjust conditions because they have mistaken *beliefs* and that it is merely a question of revealing the untruth of these beliefs to produce change. While ideology, no doubt, plays a significant role in sustaining unjust social assemblages, this overlooks the role that things themselves play in organizing power.

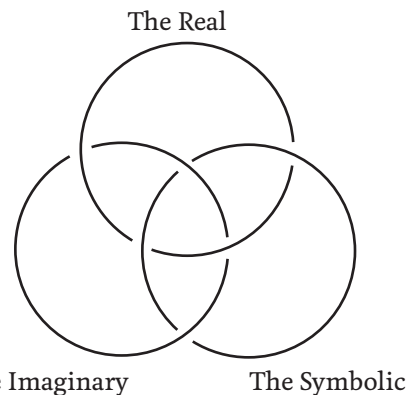
Second, the basic schema of CT makes it difficult to raise the necessary political questions pertaining to one of the most important issues of our time: global warming. The political questions posed by global warming are of a different order than those found in traditional CT and practices of debunking fetishistic misrecognitions. The tendency of CT is to reduce the world to discursivity or the semiotic. While clearly fetishistic misrecognition plays a role in social practices that contribute to global warming, climate change also raises questions about the albedo of the earth, the properties of fossil fuels, the release of frozen methane gases in the tundra into the atmosphere, the number of calories required to sustain global populations, the units of energy required to distribute those calories, produce them, and to run cities and homes, the impact of various agricultural practices, and so on. These questions cannot be adequately addressed so long as we bracket the referent. No, responding to these issues requires realist or materialist ontologies that recognize the efficacy of things themselves. In bracketing the referent in the name of the discursively and semiotically constructed, CT makes it difficult to even recognize these things as sites of the political.

4. THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY OF SR

I would like to suggest that SR, in its best moments, is not a *rejection* or *annulment* of CT's critiques of fetishistic misrecognition premised on social constructivism, but is a theoretical framework that both expands our understanding of what exercises power in social assemblages and what sites belong to the sphere of the political. Seen in this light, SR's various critiques of correlationism and defenses of realism need not be taken as rejecting weak social constructivisms, but as delimiting the domain where these models of critique are appropriate and applicable, while opening a space to recognize

the political efficacy of things, as well as opening new sites of political import where recognition of the real is necessary, such as climate change. From this vantage, the problem with CT is not that it is correlationist because there are domains such as monarchy, sexual identities, racial identities, and so on that are indeed socially constructed, but that it *overstates* its correlationism. Its tendency is to see *all* power as semiotic or discursive and to see all beings as effects of the signifier, foreclosing the role that non-signifying entities play in exercising power or social relations, and making it difficult to analyze the real properties of nonhuman entities and the differences they make in the world.

By contrast, the theoretical orientation suggest by some variants of SR, the new materialist feminisms, actor-network theory (ANT), and the assemblage theory of Deleuze and Guattari, suggests a broader political theory and set of strategies that can be modeled on Lacan's borromean knot¹⁰:



In his final teaching, Lacan flattens his three orders, conceiving them as interrelated domains that are all on equal footing without one domain overcoding the others. In Lacan's earliest teaching, it was the order of the Imaginary that was dominant. In the second phase of his thought, the order of the Symbolic structured the others. In the third phase, it is the Real that organizes the other two orders. In the final phase, we are to think the simultaneous and synchronous interrelation of all three orders, without one order overcoding the other two orders.

A political theory inflected by SR, the new materialisms, and ANT, yet sympathetic to CT, would attempt a similar gesture. The domain of the Symbolic would retain the claims of traditional CT and would constitute what we might call "semiopolitics" or the

¹⁰ Cf. Jaques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), chapter 10.

critical unmasking and debunking of discourses and narratives legitimizing various power relations and identities through appeals to nature, divine orders, and ahistorical essences. The domain of the Imaginary would be the domain of human and alien phenomenology,¹¹ exploring the lived experience of how humans encounter the world about them, but also how various nonhumans such as animals, bacteria, plants, technologies, and institutions selectively relate to the world about them. Finally, the domain of the Real would be the exploration of those properties that really do belong to things and the efficacy things organize on other things.

Here my remarks must be brief and impressionistic, but with borromean critical theory (BCT), new domains of political inquiry and intervention are opened. For example, we now learn that semiopolitics only tells us part of the story regarding power relations. While discursive and semiotic agencies play an important role in the form that social relations take, it is also true that all sorts of *nonsignifying* agencies pertaining to the order of the Real contribute to the organization of social relations and power as well. A difficult to pass mountain range, for example, contributes to the form social relations and economy take, not by virtue of how we signify the mountain, but by virtue of what the mountain is. Premised on the Real, BCT would add four additional forms of political analysis to our repertoire of theoretical tools: geopolitics, infrapolitics (from “infrastructure”), thermopolitics (from “thermodynamics”), chronopolitics (from “time”). In drawing attention to these other domains, BCT would also open a space for perhaps unrecognized ways in which power functions to perpetuate unjust social relations, while also assisting in the invention of new strategies for political invention.

Geopolitics would explore the impact of features of geography—the availability of resources, ocean currents, weather patterns, local fauna, mountain ranges, rivers, and so on—on the form that social assemblages take, but would also investigate political questions outside of questions of human justice and equality, such as those posed by ecoteorists and critical animal theorists. With some notable exceptions, the tendency of semiopolitics has been to restrict the political to questions of human justice and equality, almost entirely ignoring the animal and the ecological as a site of the political. We need new political categories and frameworks to raise these issues (Alaimo, Braidotti, Calarco, and Wolfe,

¹¹ Cf. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

among others, have all done an excellent job in beginning to develop this framework¹²).

Infrapolitics would investigate the role that technological and urban infrastructures play on the structuration of social relations and power. Here we would investigate how roads, train lines, the properties of various media such as the telegraph, the sort of power used, contribute to the form that social assemblages take and how politics functions *not* by virtue of how we *signify* them, but by virtue of what they *are* and how they're configured. Similarly, thermopolitics would begin from the premise that in order for people to live, for cities to run, for production to take place, and so on, *energy* is required in the form of calories and various fuels. Moreover, this energy must be produced and distributed to be consumed. And, of course, the consumption of energy produces *waste*. Thermopolitics would investigate how energetic concerns contribute to the form social relations take, the impact of consumption and waste, and the manner in which energetic requirements exercise power over life. Finally, chronopolitics would investigate how temporal constraints contribute to the structuration of social relations and the perpetuation of oppressive forms of power.

In opening political thought to the domain of the Real rather than restricting it to the domain of the Imaginary and Symbolic, BCT promises to disclose unexpected ways in which oppressive power functions and maintains itself, both unmasking new sites of political struggle and new possibilities of intervention. At the level of infrapolitics, for example, it's difficult to imagine the possibility of the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street in the absence of the internet and social media such as Twitter and Facebook because prior to this information had to be transported through the channels of the news media or face to face encounters. These new media opened the possibility of new forms of organization (while also allowing emancipatory collectives to bypass party systems that were before required to disseminate and organize action due to infrastructural limitations on communication). The point isn't that these media *caused* these forms of political action, but that they rendered it *possible*. Recognizing that the material mediums of communication can render entirely new forms of emancipatory politics

¹² See Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013); Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

possible, might lead us to see the construction and proliferation of such infrastructure integral to political emancipation.

The case is similar with thermopolitics and chronopolitics. The tendency of semiopolitics is to claim that people tolerate oppressive social assemblages because they are duped by signifying regimes, failing to recognize that *they* are the ones that give power to these constructions. The critical gesture thus becomes an unmasking that allows us to see that *we* are the source of this power and have the capacity to make things otherwise. Clearly this is an important emancipatory gesture, but thermopolitics and chronopolitics suggest that other mechanisms of power are in play as well. At the level of energy, collectives of people might very well recognize that the social assemblage in which they exist is unjust and contingent, while nonetheless tolerating it because they can't draw the energy they require to live and sustain themselves in any other way. Similarly, at the level of time, we might find that how the working day is structured leaves little time for anything else, much less political change. The average working and middle class person wakes up early in the morning, has to feed, dress, and get their child ready for school, then goes to a job where they work for nine to twelve hours a day at mind-numbing and energy-sapping labor, comes home, does chores, feeds themselves and their family, and falls asleep with a glass of Wild Turkey watching brainless reality television. Is it that they are duped by an ideology, by a system of signification, that leads them to tolerate this system, or is it that their time is structured in such a way that they have little time for anything else and can only enjoy mindless little pleasures? Often the CT speaks as if it were the former, while a chrono- and thermopolitical perspective might suspect the latter. While BCT readily recognizes the dangers outlined so well by Rancière with such arguments, as historically they've been used to defend the need for "philosopher-kings" or an *avant garde* intellectual party to represent the interests of the working and middle class,¹³ we believe that the reflections of thermo- and chronopolitics reveal time and energy as sites of political struggle, where we encounter strategies of oppression through the structuration of time and the formation of dependence on forms of energy, and suspect that transformations in the space of time and the availability of energy can contribute to bringing about emancipatory change. Here energy and time exercise power and emancipation not by

¹³ Cf. Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

how they are signified, but by what they are in the lives of peoples.

If, then, there is a political opportunity to be found in SR, ANT, and the new materialisms, this will arise from the ability of these orientations to reveal unexpected sites of political concern, unexpected ways in which power functions through non-signifying agencies, and through opening new and creative ways of responding to destructive and oppressive forms of power. Sometimes it makes more sense to *literally* tunnel through a mountain, and sometimes the question of politics is a question of time not mistaken beliefs. In academia today, for example, we see the State developing all sorts of strategies for exhausting the time of faculty, thereby undermining the possibility of exploring other forms of intellectual, educational, and social life. The problem here is not mistaken beliefs, but chronopolitical political strategies aimed at the Taylorization of the Academy. Whether or not SR grabs this political opportunity, whether or not it becomes a discourse that defends oppressive forms of social organization through appeals to the Real, essences, nature, and divine orders is something that only time will tell. Clearly the debate so far reveals that there is a lot of work to do.

GRAHAM HARMAN

THE CURRENT STATE OF SPECULATIVE REALISM

1. CORRELATIONISM

Elsewhere I have told the history of Speculative Realism, and will not repeat it here.¹ Though some prefer the lower-case phrase “speculative realism,” I deliberately use capital letters, since Speculative Realism is a proper name. It originally referred to an assembly of four philosophers for an April 2007 workshop in London: Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Quentin Meillassoux, and the author of this article. So much for the history of the movement.

Any discussion of Speculative Realism needs to begin by avoiding the intermittent and pointless debate over whether Speculative Realism “really exists.” This question comes five years too late to be meaningful, and generally takes the form of a put-down rather than a bona fide question. Speculative Realism is now the topic of a thriving book series at a major university press, and the subject of at least one forthcoming monograph.² It is embedded in the editorial policy of several philosophy journals. It has become a *terme d'art* in architecture, archaeology, geography, the visual arts, and even history. It has crossed national boundaries with ease, and is surely the central theme of discussion in the growing continental philosophy blogosphere. Speculative Realism is the topic of several postdoctoral fellowships offered in the United States this year. It has been the subject of semester-long classes at universities as well as graduate theses in Paris. Though there are still tough tests ahead concerning the breadth and durability of Speculative Realism, it has long since passed the “existence” test to a far greater degree than most of its critics.

This article is meant as a rapid geographic survey of the basic intellectual differences among the Speculative Realists as of late 2012. This is not the place for detailed conceptual engagement with these authors, which I have done elsewhere and will continue to do. Also, for reasons of space I will confine myself to the original 2007 group along with the object-oriented ontology strand to which I belong. No slight is intended to those left unanalyzed here (Steven Shaviro comes to mind, among others).

¹ For the fullest version of the story to have reached print so far, see of Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 77–80.

² Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Network Education Press, forthcoming 2013).

In a recent online interview, *Speculations* founder Paul Ennis remarks as follow: “Continental realism is the fringe of the fringe. It might be popular for now, but we can already see a sort of knuckling down by the antirealists...the backlash. Most of them find the whole anti-correlationism thing silly and I don’t think continental realism is actually a threat to the dominance of antirealism...”³ What Ennis neglects to mention is that the continental “antirealists” would never even have called themselves antirealists until quite recently. The fact that we speak of continental antirealism at all is due partly to the counter-models of Speculative Realism and Manuel DeLanda, and partly to Lee Braver’s triumphalistic antirealist book *A Thing of This World*.⁴ The year 2002 witnessed the publication of my book *Tool-Being* and DeLanda’s *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, both of them candid statements of realism.⁵ This was something new in the continental tradition. While analytic philosophy has always been attentive to the realism vs. anti-realism debate, in continental circles the mere act of proposing such a debate was treated as a sort of vulgar gaffe. Realism vs. anti-realism had been defined as a “pseudo-problem,” especially in the phenomenological school that set the agenda for nearly a century’s worth of continental philosophy. It was said for example that there is no idealism in Husserl, since intentionality is “always already outside itself” in aiming at intentional objects. More recently there has been the emergence of “Derrida was a realist” claimants such as John Caputo and Michael Marder, who make their case not by challenging previous readings of Derrida, but simply by bending the meaning of the term “realism” to signify what Derrida was doing all along.⁶

In short, we now have a rather lively realism vs. antirealism debate in continental philosophy that simply did not exist ten years ago. The reason that

³ Paul Ennis interviewed by Liam Jones, *Figure/Ground*, November 12, 2012: <http://figureground.ca/interviews/paul-ennis/>

⁴ Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

⁵ See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002.); Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002).

⁶ See John D. Caputo, “For Love of Things Themselves: Derrida’s Hyper-realism,” 2001: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/01.3/caputo.shtml>; Michael Marder, *The Event of the Thing: Derrida’s Post-Deconstructive Realism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

debate did not exist was because continental philosophy was in fact *correlationist*, just as Meillassoux holds.⁷ In his 2002 book, DeLanda praised “[those] philosophers who grant reality full autonomy from the human mind, disregarding the difference between the observable and the unobservable, and the anthropocentrism this distinction implies. These philosophers are said to have a *realist* ontology.”⁸ With some rare and ineffectual exceptions (the wonderful Xavier Zubiri comes to mind⁹), no one in the continental tradition was declaring realism *devoid of ironic etymological tricks* prior to 2002. These earlier continental philosophers generally held that realism was a pseudo-problem, since we cannot think of humans without world or world without humans, but only of a primal correlation or rapport between the two. I had already used the term “philosophies of access” to describe this phenomenon, but Meillassoux’s “correlationism” is catchier and more to the point. Correlationism is the doctrine that we can only speak of the human/world interplay, not of human or world in their own right.

As Ennis mentions, there are now some who call the critique of correlationism “silly,” as I heard with my own ears at perfectly good events in Germany and Sweden during 2012. That is exactly the word that is being used: much like “idiosyncratic” in the 1980’s/1990’s, “silly” is today’s term of choice for continental philosophers who want to dismiss without argument something that they happen to dislike. But Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism makes a rather lucid metaphysical claim. It says that much continental philosophy is neither realist nor idealist, but *correlationist*. That is to say, it adopts an intermediate position in which we cannot say that the world either exists or fails to exist outside human thought. Instead, all we can talk about is the correlation of world and thought in their inseparability. This claim by Meillassoux can only be right or wrong, not “silly.” And if Meillassoux is wrong to say that most continental philosophers are correlationists, then they must be either realists or idealists, and it is their duty to state which of these positions they prefer.

To summarize, it is impossible for continental philosophers simply to dodge the critique of correlationism made by Speculative Realism. Even if

you reject a realist position, you cannot treat it as a poorly formulated cliché, as Husserl and Heidegger and most of their descendants unfortunately did. Instead, you have to adopt either a correlationist position or an outright idealist one. The shared basis of Speculative Realist philosophies is a rejection of all correlationist positions, and that rejection has had palpable impact on the landscape of continental philosophy. The question is not, “What has Speculative Realism accomplished?” but rather, “What will Speculative Realism still accomplish?” And here we reach a different and more interesting topic: the ongoing duel between various forms of Speculative Realism.

2. DIFFERING FORMS OF ANTI-CORRELATIONISM

During the 2007 Speculative Realism workshop at Goldsmiths, I noted that the four participants could be grouped up in differing teams of two vs. two or three vs. one, depending on which points of disagreement were viewed as most important.¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek makes an exaggerated version of the same point when he describes Speculative Realism as a Greimasian “semiotic square” formed from the axes of science/anti-science and religion/anti-religion. But the latter axis is possible only due to Žižek’s incorrect portrayal of me as a “religious” philosopher.¹¹ In fact, all we can really be sure of is a twofold cut that should not be described *à la* Žižek as science/anti-science, but as what I would call epistemist/anti-epistemist. To explain the meaning of “epistemism,” we must briefly consider Meillassoux’s April 2012 Berlin lecture.¹² Despite my disagreement with most of the content of that lecture, I agree completely with Meillassoux’s claim that the key division places him and Brassier on one side of the fence and me and Grant on the other.

In the aforementioned Berlin lecture, Meillassoux clarifies an ambiguity in the term “correlationism.” In *After Finitude*, the term was sometimes used to refer solely to a skeptical position that cannot be sure about what might exist outside thought, as in the philosophy of Kant. But at other times, “correlationism” was broadened to include outright idealism. This ambiguity is clarified in the Berlin lecture, which draws a new distinction in terminology. The

⁷ Quentin Meillassoux introduces the term “correlationism” on page 5 of *After Finitude*, trans. R. Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁸ Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, (Lodon: Continuum, 2002), 4.

⁹ Xavier Zubiri, *On Essence*, trans. A.R. Caponigri (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1980).

¹⁰ See pp. 368-369 of Ray Brassier et al., “Speculative Realism,” *Collapse III*, 2007: 306-449.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 640.

¹² Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign,” trans. R. Mackay, April 20, 2012, forthcoming.

new and wider term is now “the Era of Correlation,” which begins with Berkeley and allows nothing to exist outside the subjective realm.

But this Era of Correlation occurs in two (actually three) forms in Meillassoux’s new model of the history of philosophy. First, there is correlationism in the strict sense, a basically skeptical position that finds it impossible to escape from thought so as to make contact with something that is not already affected by our mode of thinking. In this sense both Hume and Kant presumably count as correlationists, as would Husserl, Heidegger, and various postmodernists. But second, there is also what Meillassoux now calls “subjectalism,” a type of philosophy that encompasses both “idealism” and “vitalism,” which according to Meillassoux have an “essential relatedness and [an] original anti-materialist complicity.” For Meillassoux, an exemplar of the idealists is Hegel, and good examples of the vitalist pole would be Nietzsche and Deleuze. While the idealists and vitalists may seem to be radically opposed—since the first give privilege to human thought while the latter abolish such privilege—both are supposedly alike insofar as they “absolutize the subject.” They make the entire universe purely subjective, and thereby eliminate the “dead matter” that true materialists must recognize in the world alongside the thought that tries to know this dead matter. At this point, Meillassoux redraws the alliances within Speculative Realism. His preferred ally is Brassier, despite his open surprise that Brassier can see anything of merit in François Laruelle. Meanwhile, Grant and I are assigned to the “subjectalist” camp. Concerning my own position, Meillassoux writes:

Harman, in particular, develops a very original and paradoxical subjectalism, since he hypostatizes the relation we have with things that, according to him, withdraw continually from the contact that we can make with them. To make of our subjective relation to things that withdraw from their (full) contact with us, the universal relation of things to things—this is a typically subjectalist gesture, carried out in a new and brilliant form, but which still belongs to what I have called the “Era of Correlation.”¹³

There is no space here to push back at length, which I plan to do in a forthcoming book.¹⁴ But first, Meil-

¹³ Ibid. Using the capitalized phrase “Era of Correlation” rather than Robin Mackay’s “era of Correlation,” which accurately mirrors what Meillassoux does in the French original, but which strikes me as more confusing for the English reader than Era of Correlation.

¹⁴ Graham Harman, *On Epistemism: Continental Mathematics and Scientism* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities

Press, forthcoming).

lassoux is wrong to claim that I project human psychism onto the world as a whole. Indeed, he already knows my argument better than this. The argument is that all relation is a form of translation, so that inanimate objects fail to exhaust each other during collision just as human perception or knowledge of those objects fails to know them. Real objects do not encounter each other directly, but only encounter *sensual* objects, or images of real objects. All contact between real objects is indirect, mediated by sensual reality, and this holds for raindrops and stones no less than for humans. We need to view this “sensual” realm in the most ultra-primitive terms. Meillassoux complains that this leaves only a “difference of degree” between sand grains and humans. Yet it is unclear why this is *prima facie* more absurd than Meillassoux’s own theory of contingent and groundless jumps from matter, to life, to thought, to the justice of a virtual God.

But the real problem is that Meillassoux simply equivocates when he says that both idealism and vitalism “absolutize the subject.”¹⁵ For it is one thing to say (like an idealist) that the thing-in-itself is just a special case of the thing-for-thought and that there cannot be anything inaccessible to the subject. But it is quite another to say (like a “vitalist”) that everything is a subject. For even if we postulate that a rock is a perceiving entity, it would not follow that its existence consists entirely in perceiving. Indeed, this is ruled out from the very first step of my philosophy, which states that *nothing* is ever exhausted by its relations. If I were nothing more than my perceptions, intentions, and relations in this moment, there is no way that these relations could ever change. For Meillassoux to claim that both idealism and vitalism “absolutize the subject” is analogous to accusing both flags and nations of “flagism”—since flags are entirely flags, while all nations have flags. The analogy to the “materialist” position would thus amount to insisting that many nations give up their flags; such flagless nations would then be analogous to the “dead matter” of Meillassoux’s materialism. Only in this way could the “absolutizing of flags” be prevented. The object-oriented position, by contrast, is that even if all nations have flags, nations are nonetheless more than their flags, and the same would hold for flagless nations. In short, there is no such thing as a unified “subjectalism” that unifies idealism and vitalism any more than there is a “flagism” that unifies flag and

Press, forthcoming).

¹⁵ “Panpsychism” would have been a more effective choice than “vitalism,” since life is a different theme from psyche altogether. But I have made this terminological conflation myself in the past.

nations under a single class of entities. The fact that “subjectalism” allows Meillassoux a convenient way of pigeonholing me and Grant as non-materialists does not entail that anything like subjectalism exists.

Of the other criticisms Meillassoux makes of my position in Berlin, there is another that is easy to address quickly. He writes:

Harman designates with the position “philosophies of access” philosophies that base themselves upon the relation between humans and things, and which consider that we have access only to this access, not to things themselves. But Harman, to my mind, does not escape from this “access,” since on the contrary he hypostatizes it for the things themselves: there is no longer any chance of our escaping from access, since from now on, it is everywhere.¹⁶

What Meillassoux fails to note is that my phrase “philosophies of access” is simply an abbreviation of the longer phrase “philosophies of *human* access.” In other words, Meillassoux and I simply disagree as to what is harmful about Kant’s legacy. On the one hand, Kant proclaims finitude: there are things-in-themselves that can be thought but not directly known. For Meillassoux this is a sin against reason, and his entire career is passionately devoted to fighting it. For me, this finitude is inevitable. The problem, as I see it, is that Kant made it a special *human* finitude rather than a global one pertaining to all entities. If we discuss the collision of two rocks, then it is we who are discussing it, and therefore it is really a discussion about our own conditions of access to the rocks rather than about the rocks themselves. This Kantian anthropocentrism is one that does not bother Meillassoux in the least. Indeed, his embrace of the correlational circle (“we can’t think the thing outside thought without turning it into a thought”), as though it were an argument of impassable rigor, shows that his rejection of Kantian finitude does not entail a rejection of Kant’s privileging of the human-world relation over all others. That is the real impasse between me and Meillassoux, and thus he is wrong to blame me for inconsistently adopting two opposed principles (finitude and the passage beyond finitude) when I simply do not accept the second. If I were writing a short treatise with a Meillassouxian flavor, I would not call it *After Finitude* (which I take to be impossible) but something like *After the Correlational Circle*—not in Meillassoux’s sense that we need to pass beyond the circle through crafty argumentation, but simply in the sense that the correlational circle was never a good argument in the first place.

¹⁶ Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition.”

This brings us to the theme of “epistemism.” The reason that Meillassoux and Brassier are very close indeed is that both are epistemists. I have coined this phrase to describe the mathematism and scientism that are now so widespread in continental philosophy (originally thanks to Žižek and Badiou). Mathematism deems itself capable of deducing eternal truths, as Meillassoux claims to be able to do at the start of his Berlin lecture (and he means it literally, despite the scare quotes around “eternal truths”). Scientism, forever burned and bitten and aroused by the surprises of scientific theory change, is forced to proceed in more indirect fashion. A scientism like Brassier’s knows it can never reach a final scientific theory, and thus it proceeds in self-negating fashion along a kind of *via dolorosa*, destroying all the “folk images” it encounters while hoping to approach the “scientific images” that are only a *telos* and can never be attained. What Meillassoux and Brassier share in common is the idea that reason *ought* to be able to attain the direct presence of the thing. Meillassoux, much like Descartes, is sure he can do this given sufficient time for reflection and careful self-critique. Brassier, a more turbulent intellectual persona, holds that the best we can do is continually strip away our gullible delusions by way of an asymptotic approach.

Yet despite their shared claim to be ardent realists, both Meillassoux and Brassier have surprisingly weak models of reality-in-itself apart from humans. Meillassoux’s things-in-themselves exist “in themselves” only because they are able to outlast the human lifespan. But insofar as a human thinker is present, his things-in-themselves are fully commensurable with the thinker’s adequate mathematization of them. Meillassoux gives no clear explanation as to why a mathematized artillery shell in knowledge would not itself become an artillery shell. Presumably he has some theory of how the mathematized primary qualities of a thing “inhere” in “dead matter,” but we have not yet seen such a theory from him. Meillassoux seems to see no problem with fully translating a thing into knowledge of that thing, identifying its primary qualities with the mathematizable ones. As for Brassier, the ultimate reality for him (as for his model Wilfrid Sellars) is made up of “scientific images.” But note that these are still *images*, which means that in principle someone might witness them directly. Our sense of the in-itself needs to be much stronger than this, as Socrates already held: by preferring *philosophia* over *sophia*, love of wisdom over wisdom, Socrates already drew a strict line of separation between reality and any knowledge of it. In this respect, epistemism cuts against the grain of the mission of philosophy.

Let's now turn briefly to Iain Hamilton Grant. In Berlin, Meillassoux defined realist philosophies as those that ensure that human thought can *attain* the real. I have argued above that this is the exact opposite of realism, since it makes the real fully translatable into something else (such as knowledge), though the real is precisely that which can never be perfectly translated. On this question, Grant appears to be solidly on my side, since he treats thoughts as "phenomenal products" of a dynamic nature rather than as privileged ontological royalty able to copy the world without transforming it.¹⁷ In my 2009 lecture in Bristol, I criticized Grant's position (along with the much older philosophy of Giordano Bruno) for leading us back to a philosophy of the One in which individual objects are treated as temporary obstructions of a unified dynamic matter from which all things emerge.¹⁸ Grant responded in *The Speculative Turn*, counter-arguing that Bruno's One is still a substance whereas Grant's concept is of nature as a dynamic process, and therefore that he cannot be identified with Bruno.¹⁹ I counter that the difference between Grant's process and Bruno's substance is less important than their shared reluctance to grant autonomous power to individual entities. For both thinkers, reality is something like a pre-Socratic *apeiron* from which individuals temporarily arise and into which they eventually descend. Grant goes so far as to describe particular objects, throughout his book on Schelling, as "retardations" of a more primal productive force. I regard this position as untenable, since there is no evident reason why a unified productive force would ever meet with retardations or obstructions so as to generate objects, just as there is no good reason why the pre-Socratic *apeiron* would ever generate individual entities. Philosophies that begin with a One have always had problems accounting for a Many, and Grant's case is no different. He certainly deserves credit for avoiding epistemism in his starting point, but an ontology of the real must deal primarily with objects, with *individuals*, and not with disembodied productive forces and becomings.

For these reasons, I think that object-oriented philosophy must ultimately prevail in the struggles over the legacy of Speculative Realism, however strong epistemism looks at the moment due to

¹⁷ Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006).

¹⁸ Graham Harman, "On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 21-40.

¹⁹ Iain Hamilton Grant, "Mining Conditions: A Response to Harman," in *The Speculative Turn*, 41-46.

the obvious preference of Badiou and Žižek for epistemist versions of Speculative Realism. I hold instead that Grant and I are on the right side of this particular struggle, but hold further that Grant's attempt to subordinate objects to the productive forces that generate them is an unacceptable method of undermining objects.

3. DIFFERING FORMS OF OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

My first use of the term "object-oriented philosophy" was in the late 1990's, before there was any such thing as Speculative Realism, and long before I had heard of Brassier, Grant, or Meillassoux. The wider umbrella term "Object-Oriented Ontology" (OOO) was coined by Levi Bryant in 2009, and has always seemed to me like a good term for describing a range of object-oriented positions that differ in various ways from my own. The first OOO group consisted of me, Bryant, and Ian Bogost; the initially skeptical Timothy Morton joined us wholeheartedly in 2010. OOO is the most visible brand of Speculative Realism in the blogosphere, and hence has been subjected to more of the characteristic attacks of that medium than other brands of Speculative Realism. But OOO has also been the most productive wing of Speculative Realism in traditional academic media such as books and articles, refuting the strange claim that the movement is primarily internet-based. Although OOO has had impact on fields such as architecture, archaeology, and the visual arts, I will focus here on philosophical disagreements between its chief practitioners. Those practitioners include not only Bogost, Bryant, Morton, and me, but also the newborn French *Heldentenor* Tristan Garcia.

Since it is Bryant and Garcia who have articulated contrasts between their positions and my own in the greatest detail, I will focus on the two of them here. The primary objection of Bogost so far seems to be what he describes as the bookish character of my philosophy (and Bruno Latour's), with too little experiment in the fabrication of objects other than books.²⁰ Bogost himself is an outstanding fabricator of non-traditional objects (primarily videogames), and I do like the notion of philosophers making unexpected things. At present, I simply do not have any good ideas for making such alternative objects, and am generally less inclined than Bogost to see books as unimaginative products of the ivory tower. Yet his point is well taken, given the potential for major changes in intellectual media over the next few decades.

²⁰ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

As for Morton, he retains a certain sympathy for deconstruction that I am unable to share. But more important in philosophical terms is his view that OOO's distinction between real and sensual objects (which Bryant instead calls "virtual proper being" and "local manifestations") implies a breach of the law of non-contradiction that we must boldly embrace.²¹ The primary sources of this view are the Australian analytic philosopher Graham Priest and the ancient Buddhist thinker Nagarjuna (one of Priest's own heroes as well).²² For now I will say only that I am more skeptical than Morton about abandoning non-contradiction, and will reserve my thoughts on this issue for a riper moment.

As for Bryant, there seem to be two primary differences between us from which all the others follow.²³ The first is his rejection of vicarious or indirect causation, and the second is his avoidance of the fourfold structure that is characteristic of my own position. Both of these points can only be sketched briefly here. Concerning the need for indirect causation, so central to my own position, Bryant often blogs in the following spirit: "My theory of relations differs from Harman's. I have no problem with direct relations, they [are] just detachable."²⁴ The problem for Bryant in proclaiming such a view is that he is also enthusiastically in favor of the idea that all relations between objects are necessarily *translations*. When humans view apples or when raindrops strike forests, these relations do not exhaust their relata; there is always a depth to apples, forests, raindrops, and humans that is not fully deployed in the relation. This is a core feature of OOO (but not of Latour or Whitehead) and Bryant accepts it. What Bryant seems not to get is that translation is not just a result, but also a starting point. It is not just that raindrops *directly* encounter forests and *only then* translate them for some reason. This would be ontologically pointless. Instead, objects only encounter each other as translations from the very start, and to encounter the translation of an object means not to encounter the object itself. The only way Bryant's position becomes coherent is if he defends a common watered-down alternative,

²¹ Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2013).

²² Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²³ Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

²⁴ This comes from comment #6 by Bryant on his own blog post "The Strange Ontology of Incorporeal Machines: Writing," *Larval Subjects* October 18, 2012: <http://larval-subjects.wordpress.com/2012/10/18/the-strange-ontology-of-incorporeal-machines-writing/>

widely popular in the blogosphere, that "relations are direct but partial." In other words, the human and the apple would make *direct* contact, but with only a partial number of qualities of the apple visible to the human. But in the first place I have never heard Bryant defend such a "direct but partial" model; and in the second place it does not work, as I have argued elsewhere and will argue all the more forcefully in my coming books, given the surprising durability of this "Object-Oriented Lite" alternative to full-blown withdrawal. There is no such thing as "direct but partial" contact with an object, for the simple reason that an object is a unit as Husserl says, and not a bundle as Hume says. I am not saying that Bryant has defended such a direct-but-partial view (I am not aware that he ever has), only that he is driven towards such a position by the tension between his acceptance of translation and his non-acceptance of vicarious causation.

The second main difference between Bryant's system and mine is his refusal of my fourfold structure, that results in a twofold division in the cosmos of real vs. sensual and objects vs. qualities. For Bryant, objects are defined by their "virtual proper being." He insists that this virtual proper being cannot have "qualities," because then it would have a fixed identity and never be able to change. So on the level of the real, Bryant gives us objects (defined in Deleuzian fashion by their "powers") but not qualities. The reverse is true on the level of "local manifestations." Here, Bryant ignores the lessons of Husserl by not recognizing a sensual world of apples and mailboxes that nonetheless endure as the same through various relational permutations. Instead, Bryant's position implies that a mailbox seen from the front is actually a different local manifestation than the same mailbox seen from the left side. Fair enough, but then no place is left for Husserl's intentional objects, and Bryant is left to defend a twofold model of the world: (1) virtual proper beings that have powers but no qualities, and (2) local manifestations that have fixed qualities and no powers. Despite Bryant's great interest as a philosopher, I find this model unappealing on both levels. On the "deep" level of virtual proper beings, it does not explain how one virtual proper being differs from another except in terms of "capacities," and to think in terms of capacities is to relationize objects to an unacceptable degree. Things are not different because they affect other things differently; rather, they affect other things differently because they are already different from each other. And on the "surface" level of local manifestations, I find Bryant too Humean in his view that the sensual

realm is always completely determinate in its status. After all, ducks, earthworms, and waterfalls are not a series of overdetermined images saturated with meticulous detail, so that Duck 1, Duck 2, Duck 3, etc. are all slightly different manifestations and are only unified retroactively as the “same” object by way of their family resemblances. Here Bryant is too much of an empiricist, and like most Deleuze-inspired authors he does not give Husserl his due.

With time running short we must speak more briefly of Tristan Garcia, whose marvelous 2011 book *Forme et objet* established him as a significant figure in the debates to come.²⁵ Garcia begins with an extremely flat ontology, even flatter than that of the famously “inflationary” thinker Alexius Meinong. Anything is a thing, no-matter-what. While my own position emerged from phenomenology and Garcia’s from Hegel, Wittgenstein, and the Frankfurt School, there are surprising convergences between our respective positions. We agree that things descend infinitely downward but not infinitely upward, and that the relationship of container and contained is of tremendous importance. The main difference is that I retain a classical notion of the in-itself, while for Garcia the thing is precisely what is *never* in-itself, but is rather *the difference* between its components and its environment. In my view this is an excessive concession to relationist, anti-object-oriented positions. It makes things hypersensitive to their environment in two directions, as if the tiniest rumblings in the atoms of a hammer could change that hammer, and as if distant planetary movements could change that hammer as well. A fuller debate between me and Garcia will appear in Spring 2013 in the Australian journal *Parrhesia*.

This has been a quick pencil sketch of the state of Speculative Realism at the end of 2012. So much has changed since that April 2007 workshop at Goldsmiths, and it is likely that more surprises are in store during the coming five years. We can expect refined positions from already visible authors, the unexpected emergence of new authors, and the use of Speculative Realism in a wider range of fields outside philosophy. The question is not whether Speculative Realism exists, but whether anything better will arise to stop it.

²⁵ Tristan Garcia, *Forme et objet: Un traité des choses* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2011).

EILEEN A. JOY WEIRD READING¹

for Michael Witmore

Experience of being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself...What is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse.

—Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*

SOMETHING LIKE THE WEATHER

It may seem strange to open an essay on the possibilities of Speculative Realist (SR) literary reading modes with a quotation from Derrida, whose status as one of the architects of the “linguistic turn” within the humanities supposedly makes him an enemy (or at least, an often convenient whipping post) of the new realists. Such is the odd flavor of this essay, which, situated outside of philosophy proper, seeks a more anti-disciplinary and even autistic relational field—that is to say, an amodal, synaesthetic, fluid, and diffusely intentional model for discerning relations among thinkers and objects.² Unlike Graham Harman (although very much influenced by him), who opened his essay “Vicarious Causation” by saying his theory of causation “is not some autistic moonbeam entering the window of an asylum,” but rather a “launching pad for a rigorous post-Heideggerian philosophy,”³ I am hoping to follow just such moonbeams into many-chambered asylums. My thinking is hopefully rigorous, but also unreasonable.

This issue of *Speculations* was designed to bring together multiple voices to address the *question*, from a wide variety of disciplinary angles, of the definition and practice of Speculative Realism—a

¹ This essay is a mutation, or meltdown, of Eileen A. Joy, “Notes Toward a Speculative Realist Literary Criticism,” *Svenska Twitteruniversitet* [Swedish Twitter University], December 20, 2011: <http://svtwuni.wordpress.com/2011/12/21/eileen-a-joy-stuo9/>. My thanks to Marcus Nilsson for inviting me to give that lecture, and to the interlocutors there who helped me to refine my thinking, especially Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Robert Jackson, John Russell and Karl Steel.

² My thinking on autistic modes of thought within the positive register of neurodiversity is inspired by Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), and also by Steven Shaviro, “Value Experience,” *The Pinocchio Theory*, September 30, 2012: <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1086>

³ Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse II* (March 2007): 171.

term, a turn, an approach, a mode, and never a unified school or movement, of critical thought. My essay will not attempt to sketch out any sort of history of SR (especially within the currents of contemporary post-continental, anti-correlationist, eliminative, and nihilist philosophies), nor to delineate its various present forms, adjudicating among them, nor to craft some sort of unified definition. Rather, I wish to sketch out (somewhat elliptically) what I see as the possible value of SR, and also of one of its most visible off-shoots, Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), to reading literary texts, and to also producing commentaries on those texts, outside of strictly human-centered, historicist frames of reference. These historicist frames of reference (whether the older or newer forms of historicism) have been enormously important for helping us to delineate certain cultural, social, historical, and material conditions that have given rise to certain literary texts and the discursive-expressive networks within which they have circulated as carriers (or symptoms) of various (often violent) orders of meaning (and we can't forget either, that real entities, institutions, nations, etc. are composed and held together, with no uncertain force, in human language). Nevertheless, works of literature are also unique events that possess a penumbra of effects that can never be fully rationalized nor instrumentalized, and there is no one set of relations within which the whole range of any one text's possible effects can be fully plumbed or measured. There is always something left over, some remainder, or some non-responsive item, that has to be left to the side of any schematic critique, and this is an occasion for every text's becoming-otherwise. Art is inherently subversive, after all, as much an act of doing as undoing.

All narratives have over-arching propulsive qualities, of course. All stories tend in a certain, and not any other, direction: Anna Karenina will always jump in front of that onrushing train every time you read Tolstoy's novel, and there will always be that boy on the platform, selling bottles of beer, when she does it. Macbeth always gets his head chopped off by Macduff, and Hamlet never gets around to killing Claudius until it's too late (although "too late" is a matter of opinion), and so on. Stories are like deterministic, machinic systems in which characters, situations, and other details are frozen, as it were, in certain poses, while also being always "wound," like watches, to keep the same time. Yet, narratives also contain discrete, disconnected instances of being and becoming that are always attempting to expand beyond or subvert the larger narrative system—these instances, or "units" (as Ian Bogost would term them⁴) are like

⁴ See Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame*

things, material elements with their own *conatus* (Spinoza's term for any thing's tendency to persist in existing), which always leaves the system open to a creative and possibly fruitful chaos (a plenitude of generative unruliness whose historical tense would be the future perfect subjunctive: *what would have been*, or *what would have not been*). Reading is the activity by which these elements might spring to new life, and perhaps always do, when we consider that every reading is idiosyncratic in some way, always embedded in a unique set of relations and conditions (social, psychic, mechanic, etc.).

Whereas traditional literary criticism often seeks to reveal the psychic-cultural-historical orders in which texts play an important part (and thereby, for all of contemporary critique's disdain for what is "universal," texts are often subsumed, whether as willing or more subversive actors, into larger and supposedly totalizing orders of meaning, referred to, with some suppleness, as "context"⁵), a speculative reading practice might pay more attention to the ways in which any given unit of a text has its own propensities and relations that might pull against the system and open it to productive errancy (literally, "rambling," "wandering"—moments of becoming-stray). Any given moment in a literary work (all the way down to specific words and even parts of words, and all the way up to the work as a whole), like any object or thing, is "fatally torn" between its deeper reality and its "accidents, relations, and qualities: a set of tensions that makes everything in the universe possible, including space and time,"⁶ and literary criticism might re-purpose itself as the mapping of these (often in- and non-human) tensions and rifts, as well as of the excess of meanings that might pour out of these crevasses, or wormholes.⁷ We'll call

Criticism (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

⁵ As Rita Felski writes, "Instead of swarms of actors moving toward each other, we imagine an immobile textual object enclosed within an all-determining contextual frame. Frozen in time and space, the literary work is deprived of the very mobility that forms the precondition of our own experience of it. Imploded on the pin of our historical categories and coordinates, it exists only as an object-to-be-explained rather than a fellow actor and cocreator of relations, attitudes, and attachments": Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 590. This entire issue of *NLH*, devoted to the *question* of context in literary interpretation, is worth reading.

⁶ Graham Harman, "Space, Time, and Essence: An Object-Oriented Approach," in Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 150.

⁷ I might argue that this is a reading strategy that has already been employed in some quarters, such as queer studies; see, for example, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," in *Novel Gazing: Queer*

this reading for the *weird*, which is fitting when you consider that the word “weird” (traditionally related to “wyrd,” or “fate”) is related to the Old English *weorðan* [“to become”], rooted in Indo-European **wer-* [“to turn, bend”]. This will entail being open to incoherence as well, as one possible route toward a non-routinized un-disciplinarity that privileges unknowing over mastery of knowledge. The idea here would be to unground texts from their conventional, human-centered contexts, just as we would unground ourselves, getting lost in order to flee what is (at times) the deadening status quo of literary-historical studies at present, aiming for the carnivalesque over the accounting office.⁸

An object-oriented (or unit operations) approach to literary works would not (in its supposed de-centering up of historical-materialist critique) necessarily be an apolitical or ethically vacuous project, as some might suppose,⁹ but rather is focused on (and maybe

Readings in Fiction (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–38, and *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), esp. Part 2: Toward an Aesthetic Subject; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); and Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸ This is not to say that conventional (whether older or newer) historicist frames of critique have lost their usefulness—they will always be useful and can work hand-in-hand with many different approaches, including the ones I am sketching out here. I do not wish to partake in the debates that pitch critique against anti-critique, as I believe that all engagements with artworks can be considered interventions into those artworks, and thus are critical in some way. Plus, I’m a pluralist. I’m personally interested in different modes of playing with texts, via creative supplementarity, recombination, parataxis, collocation, and the like. But I support all reading strategies that might help us amplify the world’s expressivity.

⁹ Alexander Galloway has recently argued that recent strands of philosophical realism somehow “ventriloquize the current industrial arrangement,” have no real relation to or alignment with material history (and are therefore amoral and “dangerous”), and that “there is little to differentiate the new philosophical realism from the most austere forms of capitalist realism,” and therefore these new modes of realist thinking are “politically retrograde”: Alexander R. Galloway, “The Poverty of Philosophy and Post-Fordism,” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (Winter 2013): 348, 364. Part of the problem with Galloway’s argument is the assumption that SR and OOO (and even actor-network theory) flatten everything out in their ontologies such that all objects are just as “meaningless” or “absolute” as every other object, which is a real distortion of the work that has been done by figures such as Jane Bennett, Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, Bruno Latour, and others. Galloway’s

even affirms) a pluralism of being and worlds. To do so, as the political theorist William Connolly has argued, “is to worry about the excesses of humanism,” which “too often supports a consummate conception of human agency; it is not alert enough to multiple modes of proto-agency in other aspects of nature and culture that often exceed, overlap, and perplex us. It thus readily becomes too enamored of its own agency.”¹⁰ Making things (such as a novel, or a poem) that are weird even more weird is, I will argue, an ethical act, one invested in maximizing the sensual and other richness of the world’s expressivity.

My own purpose in crafting speculative reading modes follows from a desire to capture the traces of the strange voluptuousness and singular, in- or post-human tendencies of textual objects, but without mystifying texts and/or risking some kind of neo-sanctity, or theology, of texts, which are always co-agential with us in “earthy” ways—which is to say, enworlded with us. Our consciousness is as much formed by real-world experience as it is by experience in imaginary worlds, and the lines between the two are so entangled as to be impossible to separate (and do we want to live entirely outside of our illusions, anyway?—these can be therapeutic, after all).¹¹ I’m influenced by Jane Bennett’s “vibrant” materialism in which objects, which could be texts, are seen to “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own,” outside of human will and human design¹²—the “quasi” here is important because it helps us to see the ways in which something, including a human or a text, is neither fully a subject nor fully an object, but a sort of “constructor of intersubjectivity” (which could also be interobjectivity), a “station” or “relay” between being and relation, between the “I” and the “It.”¹³ Persons are thingly, too, after all, especially when we consider the ways in which selves are epiphenomena of consciousness, and therefore also aesthetic.¹⁴ *Human persons, as real objects* (as essay is a good example (unfortunately) of argument by weak, or false, analogy.

¹⁰ William E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹¹ On this point, see L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, “Living Chaucer,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 33 (2011): 41–64.

¹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

¹³ See Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 227.

¹⁴ See Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), for a rich exploration of the thingliness of persons. On the self as epiphenomenon of the brain, see Francesco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), and

Harman would aver), can make important contact with another object (such as a haiku), “not through impossible contact with its interior life, but...by brushing its surface in such a manner as to bring its inner life into play.”¹⁵

My thinking here is also influenced by Julian Yates, who has suggested that a post-human literary studies influenced by speculative metaphysics might “reanimat[e] aesthetics as a contact zone in which the presence of things is understood to manifest via the installed thoughts and feelings of their human screens.”¹⁶ Michael Witmore, also under the sway of speculative realist philosophy, has suggested, in Borgesian fashion, that “a text might be thought of as a vector through a meta-table of all possible worlds” (because “a text can be queried at the level of single words and then related to other texts at the same level of abstraction”),¹⁷ and this might lead—fruitfully, I think—to a re-consideration (neglected somewhat within SR circles) of the narratologist-metaphysicians of the 1960s through 1980s, such as Thomas Pavel, who were influenced by set theory and modal realism (possible world theory).¹⁸ This is all by way of saying that I believe there are many avenues by which to craft a productive convergence between SR and new modes of reading literary texts, especially if we want to give to texts any sort of agential realism that doesn’t always devolve to their supposed role(s) in well-worn historical contexts.

Relative to the post-human and so-called “distant” and “descriptive” turns in literary-historical studies,¹⁹ I’m also interested in working on ways to see Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).

¹⁵ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 203-204.

¹⁶ Julian Yates, “It’s (for) You; or, The Tele-t/r/opical Post-human,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 228.

¹⁷ Michael Witmore, “Text: A Massively Addressable Object,” *Wine Dark Sea: Drifting in a Sea of Texts and Data*, December 31, 2010: <http://winedarksea.org/?p=926>

¹⁸ See, for example, David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) and Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). Those of us interested in human-independent realisms and object oriented ontologies could reap some new benefits, I think, in returning to certain signature works of mathematical-cybernetic-cognitive philosophy, such as Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

¹⁹ See, for example, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108 (2009): 1-21; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics,*

what happens when I start looking for things in texts that don’t typically get observed because they don’t easily correspond or answer to traditionally humanist questions and concerns. And I want to see what happens when I work to recognize better how inhuman and weird texts are, especially when I recall that through a magical process called “lying to myself” I turn a small, rectangular object filled with black marks called a book into a world teeming with persons, animals, mountains, buildings, butterflies, continents, weather, cashmere sweaters, beer bottles, baseball teams, streetcars, crannied walls, centipedes, top hats, tables, clouds, various magical acts of transfiguration, and so on. And the idea might then be, not to necessarily make sense of a literary text and its figures (human and otherwise)—to humanistically re-boot the narrative by always referring it to the (always human-centered) Real (context, historical or otherwise, for example, or human psychology)²⁰—but to better render the chatter and noise, the movements and operations, the signals and transmissions, the appearances and disappearances of the *weird* worlds, and their figures, that are compressed in books (a different sort of realism that always exceeds the intentions of authors and readers, and thanks to language’s errant-deconstructive tendencies, cannot be fully captured in the nets of our semantics only²¹), and to see better how these teeming pseudo-worlds are part of my brain already, hard-wired into the black box of a kind of co-implicate, enworlded inter-subject-object-ivity in which it is difficult and challenging to trace the edges between self and Other, between the Real and the fabulated. And here I will maintain, again, that the fabulated is as much as part of the Real as the so-called non-fictional, or as Timothy Morton has recently put it, “Losing a fantasy is much harder

Literature, and Informatics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Eileen A. Joy and Craig Dionne, eds., *When Did We Become Post/human?* special issue of *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2010); Heather Love, “Close, but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371-391; Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007); Stephen Ramsay, *Reading Machines: Toward an Algorithmic Criticism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

²⁰ On recent debates over the question of context in literary and historical studies, see the recent issue of *New Literary History*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker, *Context?* (42.2: Autumn 2011).

²¹ What we may need instead of semantics is something like an alien semiotics, and those who work in more observational fields, like cultural anthropology and animal behavior, may provide some helpful models to follow.

than losing a reality.”²² This will thus necessitate allowing the lines between criticism proper and art to dissolve somewhat, or to at least relax their checkpoint procedures.

Now might be a propitious time to craft new reading practices that would multiply and thicken a literary text’s sentient reality, and to also develop new practices of commentary that would seek to open and not close a text’s possible “signatures,”²³ which are never entirely collapsible to either the deep reality of the object itself, always partially hidden from us (call this history, or interiority), nor merely its sensual surfaces (what appears before us, as a sort of shifting series of spatio-temporal façades), but instead register what Graham Harman has termed “allure”: “a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing’s unity and its plurality of notes somehow partially disintegrates.”²⁴ In this scenario, “allure” names something (an experience, but also a time-space, of literary texts) that I think those of us who work in literary studies have been aware of for a very long time, but have not yet mapped in quite this ingenuous way—an “aesthetic experience” that “splits the atoms of the world and puts their particles on display.”²⁵ Or, more dryly and practically, one can only really (interpretively) work the vein of the split, or the rift, between what anything really is (again, always partially withdrawn from our sight) and the qualities and “notes” that stream out of objects all of the time, and our texts are like collapsed mine-shafts that, nevertheless, keep producing working mine-shafts. And literary critics might be like Zeno, laboring to split the paradoxical difference, to keep the allure coming. Maybe that’s not so dry, after all.

As Morton puts it, “*The aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension*,”²⁶ and for a long time now, literary critics have been analyzing aesthetic causality, albeit

²² Timothy Morton, “Introduction: Objects in the Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear,” in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press/MPublishing, 2013), riffing on Jacques Lacan: “What constitutes pretense is that, in the end, you don’t know whether it’s pretense or not”: Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre III: Les psychoses* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1981), 48.

²³ I am thinking here of Derrida’s comment, in an interview with Derek Attridge, that “[g]ood literary criticism, the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or countersignature, an inventive experience of language, in language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read”: Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 52.

²⁴ Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 143.

²⁵ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 173.

²⁶ Morton, “Introduction,” in *Realist Magic*; italics in original.

with the caveat that they are analyzing historical objects that, even when they are seen to move through time and in and out of different historical horizons and contexts (and thus possess a felicitous swarm-like motility), still have a somewhat narrowly-defined status as *static objects* that impose certain constraints (historical, semantic, and otherwise) upon their interpretation. To better describe aesthetics-as-[weird]-causality in the present, with regard to literature, outside of traditional frames of critical-historical reference, is partly what I’m hoping for. As Derek Attridge has argued, historical reconstruction is not adequate to demonstrating the ways in which a literary work represents a singular “event,” whereby “an object or a practice or a conceptual paradigm—hitherto nonexistent and apparently unthinkable—comes into being.”²⁷ The literary work’s “singularity,” its object-ness, however, is never “pure: it is constitutively impure, always open to contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization.”²⁸ One hopes for new modes of reading that would allow texts a certain anti-reductionist and autopoetic, yet also intermediate, ontology—something like the weather, an atmospheric medium with an unpredictable life of its own that nevertheless drenches us.

A WELCOMING PAVILION OF THOUGHT

Every culture is the terrible gush of its splendid outward forms. . . . Enough dialectical stuttering. We propose a theoretical device that amplifies the cognition of thresholds. It would add to the body the vertiginously unthinkable. That is, a pavilion.

—Lisa Robertson, “Spatial Synthetics: A Theory”

To talk about literature in relation to SR is difficult, of course, given SR’s emphasis on human-independent realities, for it is not really possible to disentangle the human entirely from the process of reading—what, after all, is a Henry James novel when it is not being read at all, or even by a machine that still produces outputs for humans to interpret?²⁹ This is a

²⁷ Derek Attridge, “Context, Ideoculture, Invention,” *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 681. See also Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²⁸ Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 63.

²⁹ Claire Colebrook, however, has ruminated such a situation of “radical rhetorical abandonment,” when she writes that, “it is because of the pure and inhuman materiality of the text—its existence outside and beyond any present and governing intention—that sense is possible,” and that, “[a]s the end of humanity comes to be more and more apparent, and as the prospect of a future without humans promises to be literally the case, we would be better served to think of processes of textual complexity that could not

pleasurable activity, after all (reading, interpretation, commentary), and not one some of us are willing to relinquish even as we embrace post-human modes of analysis. With Michael Witmore, I would aver that, “what makes a text a text” is “its susceptibility to varying levels of address,” and a reader (any reader, whether a computer or a human) is the “maker of a momentary *dispositif*,” of the “continual redistribution of levels of address” to the text, and what some of us want now is “a phenomenology of these acts [of reading], one that would allow us to link quantitative work on a culture’s ‘built environment’ to words of the kinesthetic and imaginative dimensions of life at a given moment.”³⁰ What some of us also want, in relation to making that readerly *dispositif* as creatively active as possible, is a (critically) recombinatory poetics of texts themselves (which might be computational but could also be humanly Borgesian-cognitive), to see *what texts can do* (a “potential” literature³¹) when they are not constrained by either their most manifest properties or their so-called historical environments (there’s that rift again, that vein of allure); or, as Harman has posed it, “Why not imagine that a letter by Shelley was actually written by Nietzsche, and consider the resulting consequences and *lack* of consequences?”³² I’d like to point out, however, that Borges’s Pierre Menard beat Harman to that punch:

Menard...has enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of deliberate anachronism and the erroneous attribution. This technique, whose applications are infinite, prompts us to go through the *Odyssey* as if it were posterior to the *Aeneid* and the book *Le jardin du Centaure* of Madame Henri Bachelier as if it were by Madame Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the most placid works with adventure.³³

be returned or contained by what we mean, must have meant or can imagine”: Claire Colebrook, “Matter without Bodies,” *Derrida Today* 4.1 (2011): 18, 19.

³⁰ Witmore, “Text: A Massively Addressable Object.”

³¹ “Who has not felt, in reading a text—whatever its quality—the need to improve it through a little judicious retouching? No work is invulnerable to this. The whole world of literature ought to become the object of numerous and discerningly conceived prostheses”: François Le Lionnais, “Second Manifesto,” in *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, ed. and trans. Warren Motte (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 31.

³² Graham Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism,” *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 202.

³³ Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York:

The task now might be to out-Menard Menard. Some will say this is fiction. We will call it critical (non-intentionalist) play, or if you prefer more sophisticated neologisms, we’ll call it ontography (fittingly, a fake academic occupation originally fabricated by the ghost story writer, M.R. James), a sort of “aesthetic set theory”—“a general inscriptive strategy” that would uncover “the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity” without “necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind.” Similar to “a medieval bestiary, ontography can take the form of a compendium, a record of things [such as a list] juxtaposed to demonstrate their overlap and imply interactions through collocation.”³⁴ This would be a process of assembly and re-assembly (of what Ian Bogost calls “carpentry”), engineered simply to see what *might* happen, what *might* occur, when we randomize (and also re-construct) literary objects, which would then be one way (among many possible ways) of simultaneously defamiliarizing and registering the, or a, world. This is also a way to produce shocks to the systems of our thought by “patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life.”³⁵

The simple act of placing two “unlike” textual and other objects alongside each other, that are not believed to have any relation to each other, culturally-historically or otherwise (such as Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* alongside Lars von Trier’s film *Breaking the Waves*, or *Beowulf*’s Grendel alongside a Chechen suicide bomber, or an Old English poem alongside a Tony Kushner play, as I have done in my own work³⁶), can be a productive act of what Harman calls “vicarious causation,” where two sensual objects “touch without touching” each other on the “interior” of the reader’s attention, and all parties “break free of the epistemological deadlock and reawaken the metaphysical question of what relation means.”³⁷ The encounter is rife with “accidents” (sensual façades,

New Directions, 1962), 44.

³⁴ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 38.

³⁵ W.G. Sebald, “An Attempt at Restitution,” in W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005), 200.

³⁶ See Eileen A. Joy, “Like Two Autistic Moonbeams Entering the Window of My Asylum: Chaucer’s Griselda and Lars von Trier’s Bess McNeill,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2.3 (2011): 316-328; “Exteriority Is Not a Negation, But a Marvel: Hospitality, Terrorism, *Beowulf*, Levinas,” in Eileen A. Joy et al., eds., *Cultural Studies of the Modern Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 237-267; and “On the Hither Side of Time: Tony Kushner’s *Homebody/Kabul* and the Old English *Ruin*,” *Medieval Perspectives* 19 (2005): 175-205.

³⁷ Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 173.

or clusters of “notes”), a certain “frosting-over [of the objects] with peripheral qualities,” which then forms a carnal realm unfolding “in a space that always lies somewhere between objects in their duels with one another.”³⁸ It is here, in this carnal realm, where objects don’t quite line up with each other, that reading might be configured as an accounting, or description, of the sticky residues of accidents that reveal the places where objects both do, and do not, bleed into one another.

I want to note here as well that a concern for play, for pleasure, and also for enjoyment, can be an importantly ethical matter, especially in academic disciplines (literary studies, historical studies, philosophy, etc.) that are often suspicious of pleasure and enjoyment, privileging instead what some term “strong,” “skeptical,” “sober,” “serious,” and “rational” critique. I will note here that if there is one thing I am skeptical of, it is the idea there is such a thing as “rational clarity,” or Reason (with a capital “R”), with its strong investments in post-Enlightenment modes of disenchantment, and I realize that is a heretical thing to say in a journal dominated by the discipline of philosophy. But intellectual (and other forms of) “enlightenment” come in many forms, not all of them “rational.”³⁹ Certain forms of enchantment may also be necessary components of ethical and political life.⁴⁰ On this count, I depart somewhat from one of the editors of the journal, Fabio Gironi, that what is important now in the development of SR thought is a certain commitment to Enlightenment values, where “[t]o value reason means unwavering vigilance concerning the validity of our epistemic principles” as well as avoiding the “slippery slope of uninhibited conceptual inventiveness,” while I also admire his fierce and elegantly intelligent commitment to the potentially emancipatory power of the discipline of philosophy.⁴¹ In my mind, it is precisely “uninhibited conceptual inventiveness” that will get us anywhere, and that will also make Derrida’s “university without condition” more possible.⁴² There is no good reason to put a limit

³⁸ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 187.

³⁹ This is where much current work in neuroscience on embodied, affective cognition is important; see, for example, Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Picador, 1994).

⁴⁰ See, for example, Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴¹ Fabio Gironi, “Between Naturalism and Rationalism: A New Realist Landscape,” *Journal of Critical Realism* 11.3 (2012): 383.

⁴² See Jacques Derrida, “The University Without Condition,” in *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford

University Press, 2002), 202-237.

to thought within the setting of the university; one must allow in the mad, the chimeric, the deviant, the teratological.

Part of my interest in SR and OOO is precisely because I see the (acid-trip) modes of thought opened within these intellectual realms as possible allies in transversally re-wiring the sensorium of reading with an eye toward increasing the pleasures and enjoyment of, not just reading, but of a heightened contact with the world itself, in all of its extra-human (but also co-implicate) vibrations, with what Harman has called “the sheer sincerity of existence.”⁴³ And with Anna Klosowska, I want “a different [critical] theory of pleasure,” one “grounded in presence,” where pleasure isn’t “conceived through an avaricious Marxist critique along the lines of symbolic capital, or [through] a cultural studies reading that would [negatively] label pleasure’s material and imaginative parameters,” surrounding it “with yellow tape as the crime-scene of simulacrum.”⁴⁴ In weird reading, we might discover a non-projective, non-hermeneutic wedge against our usual ontological intransivity. This may be playful (skating dangerously, or perhaps seriously-pleasurably, around the edges of decadence), but it is also non-destructive. It might make of our work a welcoming pavilion of thought.

University Press, 2002), 202-237.

⁴³ Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 135.

⁴⁴ Anna Klosowska, “Like We Need It,” unpublished paper, presented at the 44th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, May 8, 2009. This is not to, in any way, malign or unfairly parody the often brilliant work undertaken under the banners of “Marxist” and/or materialist “Cultural Studies,” but only to ask that we reserve some room for the radicalizing potential of enjoyment(s) that don’t always proceed through theories of lack, power/knowledge, or false consciousness.

ADAM KOTSKO
A DANGEROUS SUPPLEMENT
SPECULATIVE REALISM, ACADEMIC BLOGGING,
AND THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY

In many ways, the rise of Speculative Realism has been one of the most promising developments in contemporary continental philosophy. It has brought to the fore many concerns—above all the philosophy of science—that have been neglected by Anglophone continentalists, and it has introduced the English-speaking world to a range of new or previously neglected thinkers (such as Quentin Meillassoux and François Laruelle, respectively). In a field that has always had a tendency toward commentary, the movement has also emboldened Anglophone continentalists to begin writing “primary sources,” developing their own concepts and systems. The excitement surrounding these new developments has been so great that John D. Caputo, a dyed-in-the-wool Derridean, went so far as to devote his final graduate seminar to thinkers associated with this new push toward realism.

Yet not all is well in the world of Speculative Realism. This discontent is expressed most vividly by Ray Brassier, widely considered to be one of the founding members due to his participation in the 2007 conference that gave the movement its name. In an interview with the Polish magazine *Kronos*, he firmly dissociates himself from anything called Speculative Realism, saying,

The “speculative realist movement” exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don’t believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze’s remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a “movement” whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity.¹

Brassier’s words are, in my view, excessively harsh, and yet he is not alone in expressing a certain dis-

¹ Ray Brassier, “I Am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in Truth” (interview with Marcin Rychter), *Kronos*, March 4, 2011: <http://www.kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151,896>.

satisfaction with Speculative Realism (or its close cousin Object-Oriented Ontology) based on its online manifestations. There are many blogs associated with the movement, but there is a significant and seemingly growing number that devote considerable space to critiquing—and in some cases openly mocking—the movement’s claims.² More than that, I have personally found that whenever I post about something related to SR or OOO, the comments sooner or later devolve into a discussion of how ill-mannered, close-minded, and resistant to criticism some SR/OOO figure has shown himself to be.

This is a curious phenomenon, because in general, the leading figures in the SR/OOO blogging world have been enthusiastic about the role of blogging and social media in the spread of the movement. Levi Bryant has perhaps gone the furthest, suggesting that SR/OOO would never have proliferated without such technologies and even claiming a natural fit between the movements’ claims and the media it has made such effective use of.³ Now it is hard to disagree with Bryant’s assessment of the benefits of open-access online publishing, which has removed arbitrary financial and—most frustrating for the author—temporal obstacles that traditional publishing placed in the way of the dissemination of academic work. Further, it is obvious that blogs and social media are the most natural means of publicizing open-access scholarship (as well as small-press print publications, such as Graham Harman’s works under the Zero Books imprint).

Whence this ill-will, then, this loose talk of an “online orgy of stupidity?” What I want to suggest in this article is that there is a grain of truth in Ray Brassier’s dismissive barb—there are genuine deficiencies in blogging as a medium, which help to account for the “blowback” that has accompanied the rise to prominence of SR/OOO. This deficiency cannot be expressed in the cliché distinctions such as that between “shallow” blogging and “serious” traditional publications or between the “rapid fire” of blog comments and the “slow churn” of

² For an example of the latter, see Kevin von Duuglas-Ittu, “Harman’s Speculative Bubble: The Runaway Capitalism of OOP,” *Frames/sing*, November 13, 2009: <http://kvond.wordpress.com/2009/11/13/harmans-speculative-bubble-the-runaway-capitalism-of-oop/>

³ Levi Bryant, “The Materiality of SR/OOO: Why Has It Proliferated?” *Larval Subjects*, June 3, 2012: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/the-materiality-of-sroooo-why-has-it-proliferated/>, and “A Brief Actor-Network-Theory History of Speculative Realism,” *Larval Subjects*, November 20, 2009: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2009/11/20/a-brief-actor-network-theory-history-of-speculative-realism/>.

peer review. (After all, live conversation is the most rapid-fire medium of all and no one has suggested eliminating it as a medium for philosophy.) These tired binaries do not capture what is new in the situation of blogging—and what is so profoundly strange about it.

My contention is that blogging must be viewed as a total situation, as a social and material dynamic with its own semi-autonomous forces. These social and material forces act on people within the blogging situation in ways that they are often unaware of and—perhaps more importantly—in ways that often cut against their own conscious intentions. And that happens in large part because blogging as a phenomenon is still new to us.

Very little explicit reflection has been done on the subjective experience of blogging and the specific ways that it affects us differently than other forms of interaction. What discussion there has been has tended to focus on all the many problems that *other people* cause on blogs. People abuse anonymity, they project the most negative possible tone onto our innocuous statements, they read superficially and respond too quickly....I want to suggest that these very critiques are themselves symptoms of the blogging situation, insofar as the structure of that situation inclines all participants to view themselves as victims.

The reason for this is the paradoxical public/private status of blogging. On the one hand, it is obviously a public sphere—indeed, a much larger public sphere than almost any of us will ever have access to in person. On the other hand, two decades of training on the internet have led us to identify our internet space as *personal space*, indeed arguably the most intimate personal space of all. (Think of how much more upsetting it would be to learn someone has read our e-mail than that someone has rifled through our physical mail.) We naturally feel both more vulnerable *and* more entitled in the personal space of the internet than we would in a physical public place. There is an inherent tendency to take things personally, including relatively innocuous things (such as simple misunderstanding) that we would likely shrug off in an in-person conversation. More than that, there is an inherent desire to control the terms of debate in “my” space—as witnessed by the constant demands for “charity” from one’s interlocutors, which can all too often amount to a demand for others to start from the assumption that one is correct.

The problem, then, is not that blogging turns *everyone else* into an inconsiderate jerk, but that blogging is always at work turning *me* into a prickly narcissist.

The perception of the former stems directly from the latter. “I am totally innocent,” the blogger says, “and I am set upon by *barbarians!* I am just trying to have a conversation, but my interlocutors are all *horribly close-minded!* Indeed, they all seem to have a personal vendetta against me!” From here, it is only a short step toward responding in kind, as seems only fair. And so begins yet another of the vicious cycles of ill-will and abuse that litter the history of the blogosphere—because of course the other person persists in believing (incredibly) that *I* started it!

I have seen these dynamics play out many times in my decade as a blogger, and I have regrettably also participated in such vicious cycles. Counteracting the inherent tendency of blogging toward conflict requires constant vigilance, and I don’t think anyone can blog for any significant amount of time without falling victim to the forces I am describing here. It may even be the case—absent a developed body of reflection on the nature and inherent dangers of blogging as a new mode of communication—that participating in a few pointless battles may be a necessary and unavoidable part of the learning curve. Hence I am far from blaming any of the SR/OOO-related bloggers for occasionally getting pulled into this dynamic.

The question does remain, however, of why SR/OOO seems to have generated such an exceptional amount of online animosity. Some explanations that probably have a degree of truth to them—for instance, some might simply be jealous of the movement’s success, or may harbor an automatic suspicion of anything that smacks of marketing or “branding”—strike me as extrinsic. If the animosity is specifically directed toward SR/OOO as an online phenomenon, then there should be a specifically online explanation for why that is the case. And I believe the explanation comes, contrary to Bryant’s claims, from a fundamental mismatch between the inherently conflict-generating dynamics of blogging as a medium and the task SR/OOO has set for itself in the online arena: of introducing and developing what is presented as an entirely new school of thought. This task is fundamentally different from promotional work and is a much worse fit with the medium.

Judging from the experience of SR/OOO, it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that using blogs as a primary platform for introducing a new school of thought exacerbates the conflict-generating dynamics I have described. The room for misunderstanding is naturally much greater, so that the blogger feels peppered with repetitive basic questions and quickly tires of offering up the same explanations over and

over. The situation is even worse when it comes to basic critiques or counterarguments—the same objections will recur again and again, *Groundhog's Day*-style, driving him to despair. The sense of the blog as personal space reinforces these natural frustrations: he is simply *inundated* with these repetitive questions and objections, all but *assaulted* by them.

The blogger has two ways of responding to this sense of being under attack. First, he can increasingly demand that readers “do their homework” before commenting—for instance, by posting primers online as Bryant has done. Leaving aside the question of how to adequately publicize the existence of such primers (most existing blog formats handle archives remarkably ineffectively), there will always be a critical mass of readers who view the demand of reading lengthy blog posts before asking a simple question as exorbitant. The inevitable failure of the “do your homework” strategy thus only accelerates the cycle. This reinforces the second possible reaction: drawing battle lines and creating a defensive in-group. SR/OOO bloggers have long been accused of doing this, and there was in fact a time when they employed a “bestiary” of commenter types to castigate those who were attacking them by being overly skeptical (“trolls”) or asking too many questions (“grey vampires”).⁴

As a result of these battles lines, I am often viewed as being “against” SR/OOO, though I am not.⁵ I am simply a skeptic of the blog phenomenon associated with SR/OOO, which carries very real potential for doing more harm than good for the movement in the long run—not because anyone involved is a bad person or acting in bad faith, but simply because

of an inadequate grasp of the dangerous dynamics of the blogging situation itself. If blogs are to play a positive role in philosophy, it is absolutely crucial that we do more to understand the peculiar social forces at work in the blogging situation and develop strategies to catch ourselves when we start to succumb to them. And the first step, it seems to me, is to recognize and resist the almost overwhelming pressure the blogging platform puts on us to identify as passive victims and always blame others when things go wrong. Blogging, it seems, is a tool that we can never hope to understand unless we factor our own subjective experience into the equation.

⁴ Perhaps the apogee of in-group defensiveness among SR/OOO bloggers is a post by Timothy Morton in which he implausibly suggests that he knows a great deal about women’s experiences on the internet due to his experiences of being persecuted for his OOO perspective. Timothy Morton, “Of Trolls and Gray Vampires: Gender, Blogging and You,” *Arcade*, February 8, 2011: <http://arcade.stanford.edu/of-trolls-and-gray-vampires-gender-blogging-and-you>. A more recent example is a blog post in which Graham Harman interprets a two-sentence abstract of a public lecture on Laruelle as a veiled attack. Graham Harman, “Laruelle’s ‘Seeming Closeness to Speculative Realism,’” *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, November 29, 2012: <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2012/11/29/laruelles-seeming-closeness-to-speculative-realism/>

⁵ In addition to all I have said about the potentially salutary effect of the movement’s concerns on Anglophone continental philosophy, I am fascinated by the thought of Quentin Meillassoux. See Adam Kotsko, “Quentin Meillassoux and the Crackpot Sublime,” *The New Inquiry*, May 9, 2012: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/quentin-meillassoux-and-the-crackpot-sublime/>

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS
SPECULATIVE REALISM
INTERIM REPORT WITH JUST A FEW CAVEATS

I

Like a good many others I was greatly impressed when I first read Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*—at any rate its opening section—and even more so to witness its extraordinary impact among the livelier sections of the continental philosophy community over the next few years.¹ What the book clearly marked was a full-scale retreat (for which, read “advance”) from the kinds of far-out anti-realist, constructivist, or socio-linguistic-relativist position that had captured the high ground across large swathes of the post-1970 continentally influenced humanities, philosophy included. In its place there now emerged a hard-line objectivist realism which defined itself squarely against that whole theoretical-cultural mindset. Moreover it did so with primary reference to just those disputed zones, like epistemology and philosophy of science, where anti-realism had pressed its case with maximum vehemence and rhetorical if not argumentative force.

Hence the effect of high drama that Meillassoux achieved with his now-famous opening passage concerning the “arche-fossil” and its erstwhile habitat, the “ancestral realm.” He takes these to offer a standing refutation of the basic anti-realist idea that truth is coextensive with the scope and limits of attainable human knowledge, or that it cannot exceed the bounds of cognitive-linguistic representation.² This doctrine is simply not capable of accommodating truths, such as that embodied in the fossil, which confront it with the sheer impossibility of thinking that the truth of their having existed pre-historically could be somehow ruled out by the fact that there were no human beings (or other sentient life-forms) around at the time. If such is indeed the logical upshot, whatever the various attempts to avoid it by producing some compromise formula, then better give up that whole misconceived project and accept that truth and reality are in no way dependent on human

perceptual, cognitive, or linguistic-representational capacities.³ Thus speculative realism, on Meillassoux's account, constitutes a really decisive break with those sundry movements of thought—from hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, Foucauldian discourse-theory, and Rortian neo-pragmatism to social constructivism and the strong sociology of knowledge—which had made it a high point of radical doctrine to assert just the opposite case.⁴ This is no doubt why his book became first a debating-point and then, very soon, something of a cult object amongst the swelling company of those—mostly younger philosophers with an existing interest in one or other of those movements—who signed up as speculative realists. Indeed there soon emerged the first signs of that fissile tendency or proneness to generate internal rifts, groupings, and (in this case, fairly amicable) differences of view that has often gone along with such collective shifts of allegiance.⁵

Still there is a good measure of agreement as to what marks out speculative realism (henceforth SR) from the major currencies of post-war continental thought, or—to be precise—those mainly French-influenced movements that have achieved greatest visibility as cultural exports. One claim that emphatically unites the SR clan is that the linguistic turn in its structuralist and post-structuralist manifestations, as well as its sundry analytic forms, stands in a direct line of descent from German idealism. On their diagnosis things went grossly awry when Kant, having been roused from his dogmatic slumbers by the challenge of Humean scepticism, responded by announcing his “Copernican revolution” in epistemology.⁶ Earlier philosophers, from Descartes down, had treated the problem of knowledge as a problem about somehow proving that our cognitive faculties were reliably in touch with an external, objective, mind-independent reality. Since Kant considered Hume to have shown once and for all that this was

³ In this moderating vein, see especially Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); also—for a range of critical views—John Haldane and Crispin Wright, eds., *Reality, Representation, and Projection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ I offer a highly critical survey of these various movements of thought in Christopher Norris, *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

⁵ For a representative sampling, see *The Speculative Turn: Essays in Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011).

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1964).

¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

² For further discussion see Christopher Norris, *Truth Matters: Realism, Anti-Realism and Response-Dependence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) and *Philosophy of Language and the Challenge to Scientific Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

an impossible project—since human knowers had no conceivable access to reality except by way of the various concepts, categories, and sensuous intuitions that alone afforded such access—therefore philosophy must now renounce its old, self-deluding quest and instead seek to limn the scope and the limits of that same cognitive apparatus. Hence the whole immensely complicated business of Kantian epistemological critique, designed to beat the bounds of human cognitive capacity and preclude any speculative overreaching, whether by knowledge in its vain attempt to scale the metaphysical heights or by metaphysics in its equally vain pretension to offer itself as a source of probative knowledge.

It is chiefly these negative or cautionary aspects of Kant's philosophy—its constant placing of limits, restrictions, or *ne plus ultra* conditions on the enterprise of human enquiry—that Meillassoux, like his mentor Alain Badiou, finds so very irksome.⁷ More specifically, it is the twofold dogmatic requirement: first, that philosophy not bother its head with those old, strictly unanswerable questions concerning the existence, nature, and properties of objective, mind-independent reality, and second: that it not indulge itself in metaphysical speculations that transgress the limits of human phenomenal or sensuous cognition yet none the less see fit to claim some kind of cognitive warrant. Thus the twin terms “speculative” and “realism” both have a strong anti-Kantian charge closely linked to the central claims and motivation of the SR project. “Speculation” is what its proponents rely on to carry them past the limits of phenomenal cognition or beyond any epistemology, like Kant's, for which phenomenal cognition provides both a model and a strict boundary-marker. It is also, and for just that reason, what enables thought to make strong argumentative use of certain instances, like the arche-fossil, that are taken to confront the idealist, constructivist, or anti-realist with the fact of an objective reality that far antedated the emergence of human cognition. Such strictly pre-historical objects bear witness to the basic realist claim that human beings and their particular (as it happens highly limited) powers of sensory, perceptual, or cognitive grasp are by no means prerequisite to the existence or indeed the nature, structure or properties of what those beings sometimes manage to cognise. Of course anti-realism comes in various strengths and kinds, some of them seeking to head off the standard range of counter-arguments by

⁷ For a particular waspish passage on Kant, see Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2006), 535-536.

giving themselves suitably emollient names like “internal realism,” “framework-relative realism,” or “quasi-realism.”⁸ However, these compromise theories invariably work out as a more or less fig-leaf version of “realism” which in the end yields so much ground to anti-realism (and relativism) that the fig-leaf might as well be discarded.

This is why any properly realist philosophy of science has to adopt an objectivist ontology—that is to say, one that allows the truth-value of our various statements, theories and predictions to be fixed by the way things stand in reality whatever our present-best belief concerning them—as well as a workable epistemology that convincingly explains our knowledge of the growth of knowledge.⁹ Anything less—any concession to the idea of truth as epistemically constrained—can easily be used as the thin end of an anti-realist or ontological-relativist wedge. One may even end up in the absurd position of a “constructive empiricist” like Bas van Fraassen according to whom we should not ascribe reality to anything that exceeds the powers of technologically unaided human perception through its being too small, too large, too fast, too remote, or too complex to be registered clearly by creatures with our kind of sensory-physical constitution.¹⁰ Or rather, those items have a decent claim to reality when perceived with the aid of relatively simple pieces of apparatus (such as optical telescopes or microscopes), but not if they require more advanced and sophisticated, hence less “direct,” means of observation. Thus, on his account, we are better off trusting to our eyesight and peering at the moons of Jupiter through a spaceship window than deploying the latest radio telescope with superlative powers of

⁸ See especially Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); also Christopher Norris, *Hilary Putnam: Realism, Reason, and the Uses of Uncertainty* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

⁹ For statements of the realist-objectivist position, see Christopher Norris, *On Truth and Meaning: Language, Logic and the Grounds of Belief* (London: Continuum, 2006); also William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, 2nd edn. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jerrold J. Katz, *Realistic Rationalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

¹⁰ See Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); also—for an extended critique of van Fraassen's approach—Norris, “Anti-Realism and Constructive Empiricism: is there a (real) difference?” and “Ontology According to Van Fraassen: some problems with constructive empiricism,” in *Against Relativism*, 166-195 and 196-217.

resolution and based on design and construction principles that are well understood.¹¹ Such are the warpings of critical intelligence brought about by a commitment to the perverse logic of anti-realism conjoined with a basically Lockean empiricist epistemology and a deep scepticism regarding the scope and truth-indicative power of rational inference to the best explanation. Hence the countervailing SR emphasis on the verification-transcendent character of truth or the fact—albeit knowable only through an exercise of speculative reason—that human knowledge may always fall short of objectivity and truth. From this objectivist standpoint reality must be thought to extend unknowably far beyond the confines of human perceptual-conceptual grasp and its spatio-temporally indexed character. Thus the arche-fossil is (or should be) enough to convince us of the extreme parochialism entailed by any version of the anti-realist doctrine which supposes that truth or knowledge are epistemically constrained, i.e., that they are ineluctably subject to the scope and limits of human knowledge.

This latter notion is one that Meillassoux deems to have taken hold with Kant, and thereafter—very largely through Kant’s ubiquitous and diverse influence—to have exerted something like a stranglehold on philosophy right down to the currently prevailing strains of continental and analytic thought. His watchword for it is “correlationism,” a term that is nowadays bandied about by speculative realists with the tone of mixed pity and contempt that once, in the heyday of post-structuralism and postmodernism, attached to the term “realism.” It connotes the idea—basic to the “old” correspondence theory of truth—that knowledge consists in a correlation or matching-up between, on the one hand, perceptions, observations, mind-states, beliefs, propositions, statements, theories, hypotheses, predictions, etc., and on the other hand various real-world existent or physically instantiated states of affairs. Of course, when expressed in these terms, the idea might seem

¹¹ Van Fraassen’s views on this topic are strongly contested in Ian Hacking, “Do We See Through a Microscope?,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 62 (1981): 305-322 and *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Other relevant sources include G. Maxwell, “The Ontological Status of Theoretical Entities,” in H. Feigl and G. Maxwell eds., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 3-27; C.J. Misak, *Verificationism: Its History and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 1995); Paul M. Churchland and C.M. Hooker eds., *Images of Science: Essays on Realism and Empiricism, With a Reply from Bas C. van Fraassen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

perfectly consistent with a realist outlook according to which truth consists precisely in the correlation, correspondence, or matching-up between the way things stand in reality and the way that they are represented by this or that aspirant truth-claim or candidate theory. However, as is clear from large swathes of post-Kantian intellectual history, this understanding of the doctrine has very often come under sceptical strain or pressure when it is asked—in familiar anti-realist fashion—what could possibly constitute or serve to legitimise the kind of “correspondence” here in question. Or again: how can those putative “facts,” to which our statements, beliefs, descriptions, theories, and so forth are supposed to correspond, be taken as themselves anything other than linguistic (or at any rate conceptually articulated) entities? After all, if truth is humanly (epistemically) accessible then it must come in forms adapted to the intelligence of human knowers. And if this is the case—if all known or knowable truths are in some sense pre-adapted to human cognition—then correspondence theorists who suppose the contrary (who take it that truth, objectively conceived, dictates what shall count as veridical knowledge) are *ex hypothesi* barking up the wrong tree.¹²

On this view the realist conception with respect to every branch of human enquiry is in the same dead-end predicament as that supposedly identified by Paul Benacerraf in a well-known essay on philosophy of mathematics.¹³ That is, it runs up against the dilemma that if truth is objective then it might always exceed, surpass or transcend the powers of present-best (or even best-humanly-attainable) knowledge, while if truth is re-defined (in constructivist, anti-realist, or other such non-objectivist) terms then it is no longer truth as the realist would have it but something more like “‘truth’ to the best of our always fallible, error-prone, or corrigible best belief.” Although the issue is posed most strikingly with respect to mathematics and the formal sciences, it is one that has been raised to broadly

¹² On the issue of truth and epistemic constraint, see especially Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978) and *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Duckworth, 1991); Michael Luntley, *Language, Logic and Experience: The Case for Anti-Realism* (London: Duckworth, 1988); Gerald Vision, *Modern Anti-Realism and Manufactured Truth* (London: Routledge, 1988); Neil Tennant, *The Taming of the True* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

¹³ Paul Benacerraf, “What Numbers Could Not Be,” *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 47-73. For further discussion see Norris, *Truth Matters* and Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam eds., *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

similar effect across a wide range of subject-areas, including philosophy of science and epistemology.¹⁴ In each case the argument standardly proceeds from correlationist premises—or some version of truth-as-correspondence—to the claim that this realist order of priorities needs to be reversed since truth can only be a matter of attainable human knowledge and human knowledge only a matter of optimized epistemic warrant. It is here—in its steadfast opposition to precisely this sceptical twist on the correspondence theory—that speculative realism stakes out its distinctive philosophical ground. “Correlationism” is thus held to signify the fateful inversion of priorities that philosophy suffered when it followed Kant in his “Copernican revolution”—falsely so called—and henceforth took epistemology, rather than ontology, as its primary concern. Indeed, as Meillassoux says, it is ironic that Kant should advance that immodest comparison since the effect of his revolution in thought, so far from conceptually displacing humanity from the centre of the cosmos, has rather been to confirm human beings in the presumption that they (or their particular species-relative range of cognitive powers) are the final arbiters of reality and truth.

II

If Meillassoux deploys his arche-fossil as a standing rebuke to anti-realist pretensions at one end of the historical time-scale then Ray Brassier mounts the same sort of challenge from the opposite end.¹⁵ For him, the great fault of mainstream epistemology and philosophy of science is that they buy into an agenda where the terms of debate, whatever their professed stance on this issue, are always at some point subject to assessment with reference to an ultimately anthropocentric framework of beliefs. According to Brassier, this is most apparent in their striking failure—or plain incapacity—to reckon not only with the fact of human mortal finitude but also with the prospect, brought home very forcibly by present-day physics, that human beings and all other sentient (including extra-terrestrial) life-forms will be subject to total extinction with the heat-death and final dissolution of the universe. Thus he takes a decidedly sceptical view—in common with other SR thinkers—of Kant’s claim (like Husserl’s after him) to be reasoning in a transcendental rather than a merely empirical mode—that is—to be talking about the *a priori* conditions of

¹⁴ See Notes 3, 8, 12 and 13, above.

¹⁵ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

possibility for thought, knowledge, judgement, and experience in general rather than about some given psychological, dispositional, cultural, or more broadly anthropological mind-set.¹⁶ For it is a basic part of the SR project to insist that nothing short of objectivist realism—certainly no Kantian attempt to make up for the loss of it by the appeal to some supposedly invariant set of *a priori* conditions on the scope and limits of human knowledge—can account for what science tells us concerning the mind-independence of reality and truth.

Moreover, that project has ambitions beyond what might, as I have presented it so far, strike many analytic philosophers of science as a fairly familiar (if dramatically worked-up) rendition of the standard case against anti-realism in its relativist, constructivist, instrumentalist, pragmatist, conventionalist, or framework-internalist forms. Those ambitions take it into speculative territory where analytic philosophers would fear (or disdain) to tread, although—to be fair—the SR community would hardly take this as reason for grave concern. Brassier’s above-mentioned animadversions on the heat-death of the universe and what it means for our conduct of epistemological debate are one fairly obvious instance of this step beyond anything that those in the analytic mainstream would count as philosophically valid. Another is the line of speculative reasoning that Meillassoux broaches in the second part of *After Finitude*, having devoted the first part to putting the realist-objectivist case in a way that is perhaps more striking and forceful than genuinely radical or original. Indeed I shall argue that the somewhat disjointed or broken-backed character of his book is symptomatic of certain deep-laid strains and tensions not only within Meillassoux’s project but within the SR project as a whole. Other commentators—notably Perry Anderson—have remarked upon something similar in relation to earlier efflorescences of theory in times of real-world political setback or retreat.¹⁷ Thus it is often the case with self-consciously radical movements of thought which emerge despite (or perhaps in response to) adverse political circumstances that they exhibit a kind of structural ambivalence or chronic oscilla-

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*; Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969) and *Experience and Judgment: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

¹⁷ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976); also Christopher Norris, *Reclaiming Truth: Contribution to a Critique of Cultural Relativism* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996).

tion between overt radicalism and something that is ultimately far less challenging to received ways of thought. In the SR case this duality—or conceptual fault-line—runs between a scientific-realist outlook which, although expressed with dramatic flair, is distinctly under-theorised or lacking in philosophical substance and, on the other hand, a speculative bent that leans so far in a “radical” (self-consciously heterodox) direction as to lose touch with any workable variety of scientific realism.

In other words, there comes a tipping-point where certain kinds or degrees of speculative licence, conjoined with a certain fondness for extravagant (not always very pertinent) cosmic scenarios, tend to weaken a thinker’s critical purchase on the issues under review. This is especially the case when, as here, the variety of realism in question is one that has emerged in reactive opposition to a regnant anti-realism and which—perhaps for that reason—tends to adopt a hard-line contrary stance without having yet developed the resources (in particular the modal and logico-semantic resources) to fully support its claims.¹⁸ Hence, I suggest, the marked SR inclination toward lines of (strictly speaking) metaphysical speculation that rather too often pass themselves off as having some direct or decisive import for science and philosophy of science. Of course there is no thinking about philosophy of science—nor indeed about science—without a whole range of metaphysical commitments, whether of a Kuhnian “normal” or “revolutionary” kind. One common error of sundry, otherwise highly diverse movements of twentieth-century thought, from logical positivism/empiricism to structuralism and post-structuralism, was to ignore this simple truth and habitually invest their usage of the term “metaphysics” with a routine pejorative force. Yet if philosophy of science has worked its way clear of this massively disabling prejudice, then it has done so by dint of much hard critical and clarificatory work at the interstices of logic, metaphysics, and

¹⁸ On the crucial relevance of this sort of work, see Norris, *Philosophy of Language and the Challenge to Scientific Realism* and Hilary Putnam; also—for the classic texts on this topic—Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) and Hilary Putnam, “Is Semantics Possible?” “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” and “Language and Reality,” in *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 139-152, 215-271, and 272-290. For further discussion from a range of viewpoints see Leonard Linsky (ed.), *Reference and Modality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Stephen Schwartz (ed.), *Naming, Necessity, and Natural Kinds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

epistemology.¹⁹ For all the reasons cited above this has not—or not yet—been the case with SR, despite nascent signs that some of its exponents are moving in that direction.²⁰

Briefly summarised, Meillassoux’s claim in the second part of *After Finitude* is that the best way to break with Kant’s malign influence is to go back to Hume, but to a thinker who bears absolutely no resemblance either to the Hume that Kant acknowledges as having delivered his wake-up call or to the Hume that nowadays figures as a football in current analytic debate. This has to do with the question whether Hume was indeed, as widely thought, a deep-dyed sceptic about the existence of causal laws and (by implication) physical reality along with all its imputed structures, properties, dispositions, etc., or whether on the contrary he espoused an outlook of epistemological (rather than ontological) scepticism and merely doubted our capacity ever to achieve certain knowledge of them.²¹ But if the “new Hume” is deemed a radical departure from orthodoxy by the standards laid down for interpreting classical thinkers amongst mainstream analytic types, it is tame stuff when compared with the reading of Hume that Meillassoux comes up with. His Hume is a realist in the sense that Humean scepticism about laws of nature is taken as a downright disbelief that such laws really, truly exist—or a belief that they really, truly don’t—rather than a mere disbelief in our capacity (as epistemically restricted human knowers) to find them out. More than that: Meillassoux’s Hume is one who thinks—who argues with impeccable logic and consistency—that if there exist “laws of nature” or physical ground-rules of any sort then they are utterly contingent, momentarily changeable, subject to random fluctuation, or apt to transmute into something radically different without any underlying cause or reason explaining why this should have occurred. For Meillassoux the only real necessity is the necessity of contingency, or the rational requirement—in a shrewdly-aimed *bouleversement* of Leibniz—that we should reason from the infinite multiplicity of possible worlds to the necessarily possible existence of innumerable worlds in which the “basic” or “fundamental” laws of physics in our particular world no longer apply. The Leibnizian principle of reason is thereby turned back against

¹⁹ See entries under Note 18, above.

²⁰ See Note 5, above.

²¹ See especially Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman eds., *The New Hume Debate* (London: Routledge, 2000); Galen Strawson *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

itself and becomes, in effect, a principle declaring the rationally demonstrable non-existence of any reasons (or causal explanations) for anything that would hold good beyond the solitary moment of their happening to state some (necessarily transient) necessary truth.

Thus Meillassoux proposes a flat-out reversal of Leibniz's argument from God's omniscience to the idea that all truths are necessary although many will appear contingent through our creaturely lack of such divine knowledge. On the contrary: what reason does (or should) tell us is that any intelligence with the power to see beyond those human cognitive limits would be prey to no such high-rationalist illusion. It would then reveal that in truth the very canons of rationality, logic, evidential warrant, abductive inference to the best explanation, and so forth, are (for all that we can know) epistemically valid—if at all—only for some limited time and thereafter quite possibly subject to radical change. One might expect Meillassoux to argue for this extraordinary thesis partly through an appeal to the “evidence” of various physical-scientific developments (especially the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics) and partly through modal-logical considerations having to do with the supposedly “real” existence of possible though non-actual worlds.²² However, more crucial to his thinking is the argument from post-Cantorian set theory—elaborated by his mentor Alain Badiou—to the effect that “inconsistent multiplicity” will always and necessarily exceed any limiting order of consistency imposed upon it.²³ That is to say, the history of set-theoretical methods, concepts, and techniques has been one of constantly pushing back the borders of that new-found “mathematicians' paradise” that David Hilbert acclaimed in 1900.²⁴ It started out with Cantor's breakthrough discovery, contrary to the teaching of philosophers from Plato and Aristotle down, that there existed a real or actual (as distinct from merely virtual) order of infinity, defined as applying to any set whose members could be placed in a one-to-one relation with one of its proper sub-sets. (Consider the infinity of natural numbers, or integers, *vis-à-vis* the infinities of even or odd numbers.) That discovery led on to Cantor's

²² For a detailed treatment of these topics, see Christopher Norris, *Quantum Theory and the Flight from Realism: Philosophical Perspectives on Quantum Mechanics* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²³ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005).

²⁴ For an illuminating survey of these developments, see Michael Potter, *Set Theory and its Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); also Badiou, *Being and Event*.

epochal proof—an affront to commonsense intuition as well as to many eminent mathematicians at the time—that the infinity of integers was only the first in a series of larger orders of infinity, such as that of the real numbers.

This is not the place for any lengthier treatment of the ontological, political, scientific, and other far-reaching consequences that Badiou draws from his intensive engagement with set theory and its philosophy. My point is that Meillassoux takes its lessons very much to heart in constructing his radically heterodox reading of Hume and his argument for the absolute contingency of anything that might count as a “law” of nature. The result is to make of Hume both the ultimate epistemological sceptic (in so far as he takes any such “laws” to be radically contingent and hence beyond our best powers of rational grasp) and the ultimate ontological realist (in so far as he takes this to be an objective truth about the physical world and not just a way of acknowledging our own strictly limited or temporally indexed epistemic powers). Hence the crucial significance, for Meillassoux, of Badiou's claim that “mathematics is ontology” and his exposition of post-Cantorian set theory—especially in so far as it reveals the existence of multiple orders of infinity—as our best (indeed our sole adequate) guide in ontological matters. What this enables (Meillassoux would say: absolutely requires) us to think is that there is—must be—an infinite number of ways in which the “laws of physics” might lie, or an infinite range of possible transformations from moment to moment in the radically contingent or underdetermined structure of physical reality. No doubt the objection could be raised that this makes it hard, or downright impossible, to explain how techno-science has achieved such an impressive record of achievements to date. Such arguments are something of a realist stock-in-trade, especially in response to sceptical or relativist claims that since scientists are now known to have got so many things wrong in the past then surely it is hubris to suppose that their present-day efforts are at last managing to cut nature at the joints.²⁵ To which realists just as often respond with a version of the “no miracles” case, i.e., that if science hadn't got most things right with regard to the nature and structure of physical reality then the fact that our technologies work so well could only be due to some massive cosmic coincidence.²⁶

²⁵ See for instance Larry Laudan, “A Confutation of Convergent Realism,” *Philosophy of Science* 48 (1981): 19–49.

²⁶ On this side of the debate, see J. Aronson, R. Harré and E. Way, *Realism Rescued: How Scientific Progress is Possible* (London: Duckworth, 1994); Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of*

Meillassoux again has a novel twist on this familiar topic of debate. If his “necessity of contingency” thesis holds good—if any presently existing “laws of nature” are merely an infinitesimal subset of the infinitely many such laws that could come into force from one millisecond to the next—this must surely be thought to throw a huge paradox into any argument on either side of the realism/anti-realism issue. Thus it allows, even strictly requires, that there will sometimes be intervals—of which the present might just be one—when they keep falling out the same way over a long enough period for scientific knowledge (and human enquiry generally) to get up and running. These intervals will in effect be “singularities” by suggestive analogy with the current mathematical-physical sense of that term, but subject to the fairly mind-boggling difference that what here renders them so massively improbable, hence infrequent, is precisely the reverse of that standard usage. It is not the fact of their constituting a singular exception to the fundamental constants or the baseline physical laws—since these are (for all that we can know) changing momentarily for no assignable reason—but rather their happening (against all the odds) to remain in place or in force throughout some appreciable timespan. It is only by the sheerest of flukes that the conditions could exist whereby those laws might come to provide a basis for any physical science meriting the name. In which case the old debates over scientific realism must seem hopelessly naïve or off-the-point, as must the closely related dispute between “old” and “new” Humeans over whether Hume was a full-strength or only half-strength sceptic. What all those parties fail to grasp—on Meillassoux’s submission—is that Hume got it right about the problem of knowledge but got it right in a way that he himself failed to grasp and moreover, paradoxically, could not have taken on board without undermining his professed sceptical outlook. For if this outlook finds its justification in the inconstancy of nature itself, rather than the uncertain or error-prone character of human knowledge, then of course that truth about the world—along with our capacity, as speculative realists, to grasp it—is sufficient to refute the sceptic’s claim, albeit while raising other problems that might make the traditional problem of knowledge appear philosophical child’s play.

Science (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975); Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*; Jarrett Leplin (ed.), *Scientific Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), especially Richard Boyd, “The Current Status of Scientific Realism,” 41–82; Stathis Psillos, *Scientific Realism: How Science Tracks Truth* (London: Routledge, 1999); Wesley C. Salmon, *Scientific Realism and the Causal Structure of the World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

Clearly for Meillassoux there is no discrepancy between the first and second portions of *After Finitude*, or no good reason to suppose that a strong ontological-realist approach of the sort that his book propounds with such eloquence might come into conflict with his doctrine of absolute contingency. Yet if the latter is taken at anything like face value—as it certainly asks to be taken—then it is certainly not realism-compatible in any sense of “realism” that will hold up against various well-honed lines of attack from the sceptical-relativist, constructivist, conventionalist, or anti-realist quarter. More specifically, it blocks the appeal to abduction—or the argument from inference to the best explanation—which has long been a staple of the realist case against Humean and other forms of sceptical doubt.²⁷ For, as I have said, that argument gains its strength from a version of the no-miracles (or cosmic-coincidence) rejoinder whereby the realist requires of the sceptic that he explain the various notable achievements of science by some means other than the well-supported rational inference that it has managed to accumulate a fair stock of knowledge concerning a good range of really existent objects along with their properties, structures, dispositions, causal powers, and so forth.²⁸ No doubt the previous sentence contains a good many terms and associated concepts—including “rational inference”—that will strike the sceptic as flagrantly begging all the main points at issue. Still the realist’s challenge retains its force since the sceptic has yet to meet it by doing what the realist quite reasonably requires—i.e., providing that non-miraculist alternative—rather than retreating, as so often happens, into a somewhat childish “who says?” posture of reiterated flat denial.

At this stage the realist is right to claim, on the basis of inference to the best explanation, that scepticism of this all-purpose or indiscriminate variety—as distinct from the scepticism that comes of a critical and questioning attitude to received ideas—is nothing more than a tedious irrelevance or product of hyper-cultivated doubt. However, the speculative realist who follows Meillassoux to the point of endorsing his “necessity of contingency” argument along with his extraordinary reading of Hume will in consequence be deprived of any such resource in battling the diehard sceptic. That resource

²⁷ Gilbert Harman, “Inference to the Best Explanation,” *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 88–95; Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2004).

²⁸ See entries under Note 26, above.

is available only on condition that one not deny, as a matter of *a priori* commitment, that there exists sufficient continuity, stability, or permanence about the basic laws of nature to ensure that knowledge has something determinate to be knowledge about, or that the truth (or falsehood) of our scientific theories, hypotheses, and predictions has to do with the way things stand in objective reality. After all, if Meillassoux is right—and (*concesso non dato*) if this could ever be established by any means at our scientific, theoretical, or speculative disposal—then for that very reason it is impossible to conceive what might properly count as confirming or falsifying any such claim. Quite simply, and again for all that we could know, the truth-conditions would be in such a state of undetectably rapid and discontinuous change that the realist—at any rate the champion of realism in a genuine and substantive rather than a purely notional sense—would be played off the field for lack of any means to specify, define, or apply them.

No doubt it could be argued, in support of Meillassoux's position, that ontological realism of his uncompromising kind is sure to involve the always possible coming-apart of present-best knowledge (or optimal belief by the lights of this or that expert community) from truth objectively conceived. However, as shown by the recent history of analytic debate on this topic, any statement of the strong ontological case had better go along with a convincingly worked-out epistemology—an adequate account of how such truths might come within range of human apprehension or cognitive grasp—if it is not to court the standard range of sceptical responses. Otherwise it will invite some version of the Benacerraf-type argument (first proposed with reference to philosophy of mathematics but capable of extension across other domains of scientific knowledge) that one can either have truth objectively conceived or truth within the limits of human epistemic capacity but surely not both on pain of self-contradiction.²⁹ What the realist above all needs to demonstrate is the falsity of this *tertium non datur* line of argument since it ignores—or perforce has to reject in keeping with its own fixed anti-realist agenda—the possibility that truth is both objective (i.e., epistemically unconstrained) and nevertheless sometimes capable, under benign epistemic conditions, of falling within human cognitive ken. There are quite a few Anglophone philosophers of science and epistemologists (myself included) who have for some time now been pursuing this project of supplying the *tertium* or arguing against that drastic and misconceived pseudo-dilemma.³⁰ However such

²⁹ See Note 13, above.

³⁰ See Notes 2, 18, 26 and 27, above.

arguments require a lot more than the kind of wire-drawn dialectic that Meillassoux—to this extent in company with the sceptics and anti-realists—deploys in his heterodox reading of Hume and his equally heterodox (since scepticism-inducing) conception of a realism based on or conducive to the doctrine of absolute contingency. Thus any readers who endorse the arguments to be found in the first part of *After Finitude* should find themselves at odds with, or utterly perplexed by, the arguments put forward in its second part.

I think there are several reasons for what I have called this curiously broken-backed character of Meillassoux's book. One is the multiform fixation of post-War French philosophy—starting out with the existentialist Sartre's *pour soi/en soi* dichotomy and continued in his later Marxist-inflected distinction between praxis and the practico-inert—on resistance to what is perceived as the threatening encroachment of scientific or “positivist” methodologies into the space of human autonomy and freedom.³¹ This is still very evident, albeit in a heavily repressed and displaced guise, even after the late-1960s structuralist/post-structuralist turn against existentialism, humanist Marxism, and all such subject-centred philosophies. Thus it typically issues in an emphasis on infinitized textual polysemy as opposed to the methodological ambitions of classic high structuralism, on the “molecular” flows of desiring-production as opposed to the “molar” forms of self-authorized rational discourse, on the criss-crossing patterns of “rhizomatic” coupling as opposed to all tree-like (hierarchical) structures, and on that whole nexus of radically antinomian ideas that goes under the name “French Nietzsche.”³² To which might be added the way that Meillassoux blithely swings across, in the course of one short book, from a hard-line objectivist or ontological realism that takes absolutely no hostages from that Janus-faced adversary camp to a far-out speculative (quasi-)ontology of Heraclitean flux that offers no hold for any but a notional and explanatorily vacu-

³¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003); *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 1: *Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. A. Sheridan-Smith (London: New Left Books, 1976) and Vol. 2, *The Intelligibility of History*, trans. Quentin Hoare (London: Verso, 1991).

³² For representative surveys, see Etienne Balibar and John Rajchman eds., *French Philosophy since 1945: Problems, Concepts, Inventions* (New York: New Press, 2011); Garry Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French philosophy since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John McCumber, *Time and Philosophy: a History of Continental Thought* (Durham, NC: Acumen, 2011).

ous realism. One doesn't need to be a card-carrying Freudian in order to remark how SR manages to combine a conscious—indeed programmatic—reaction against these old anti-*chosiste* obsessions with a lingering attraction to them, or a residual (unacknowledged) desire to debunk any ontology that would find room for realism in any guise.

Another reason, I suggest, is the fact that SR has emerged on the “continental” scene as a kind of hot-house plant that appears all the more strange and exotic for its having taken root and actually blossomed in that improbable locale. Thus the very idea that large numbers of younger philosophers and theorists with a background (mostly) in continental thought and with distinctly “radical” leanings should now be flocking to the banner of objectivist realism is one that is still apt to raise eyebrows among those who belatedly stumble across it. However, this situation has also brought certain disadvantages, among them the marked SR tendency to ignore a whole range of significant ideas and developments within analytic philosophy of science. I have already mentioned one aspect of this, namely the absence of any adequate engagement with the debates around causal realism and inference to the best explanation, debates which are—or should be—central to its own interests. Again, there is the so-far missed opportunity of a sustained and productive encounter with the advocates of Critical Realism, an intellectually mature and broad-based movement which might supply—among other things—a more nuanced and substantive account of the complex or variously “stratified” relationship between ontology and epistemology.³³ Without such active exposure to currents of thought beyond its own, rather self-enclosed domain, SR runs the risk not only of neglecting important developments elsewhere but also of becoming overly attached to a set of ideas—or a canon of texts and thinkers—that are thereby exempted from adequately critical treatment.

One sign that SR has grown up in a somewhat hermetic research environment is precisely the above-noted tendency, most visible in the writings of Graham Harman, to substitute the word for the

³³ See for instance Roy Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (London: New Left Books, 1986); Roy Bhaskar et al. eds., *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998); Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994); José Lopez and Garry Potter eds., *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* (London: Athlone, 2001); William Outhwaite, *New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1987).

deed—or the slogan for the detailed investigative work—when it comes to that real-world object domain that supposedly occupies its main focus of enquiry. After all, there is not much point in continually reeling off great lists of wildly assorted objects if the upshot is merely to remark on their extreme diversity, or irreducible thinginess, without (as it seems) much interest in just what makes them the way they are.³⁴ Thus one looks in vain for any serious attempt to link up the abstract realist-objectivist commitment with a depth-ontological or causal-explanatory account of the structures, properties, or dispositions that—according to our present-best physical theories—play that constitutive role. To some extent this can be put down to the strong Heideggerian influence on SR, and on Harman's work in particular. After all, it is a high point of principle for Heidegger, in his joint meditation on thing-hood and the “question of technology,” to discount such science-led concerns as merely ontic and a product of the age-old Western metaphysical will-to-power over subject and object alike.³⁵ To be sure, Harman has a novel take on these themes and certainly shares nothing of that downright anti-scientific prejudice. Much better is his light-touch way with Heidegger—his breezy (if somewhat routine) celebration of the sheer multiplicity of objects each flaunting its strictly irreducible *haeccitas*—than the Schwarzwald redneck's solemn lubrications. Nevertheless, Harman's thinking has this much in common with depth-ontology in the *echt*-Heideggerian mode: that it finds no room for anything like what a scientist (or science-led philosopher of science) would count as a contribution to knowledge or a claim worth serious evaluation in point of truth-content or validity.

For Heidegger, of course, such objections are completely off the track and a sure sign that the objector is still in the grip of that same vulgar misconception that substitutes the ontic for the ontological, or confuses physical beings—including their scientifically determinable properties—with the issues they raise for a thinking attuned to the primordial question of Being. Although Harman eschews this heavyweight rhetoric of authenticity, he does carry over from it the idea that the thingness of things—or the objectivity of objects—is best

³⁴ See for instance Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002); *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005); *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).

³⁵ See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

conserved by simply letting them be in their own, uniquely individual character rather than seeking to analyse, conceptualise, or explain their constitutive properties by subjecting them to the investigative methods developed by the physical sciences. This is no doubt why he gets into problems—having to press speculation to the limit and beyond—when it comes to the issue of causality or the question as to how all those diverse and utterly singular objects could possibly enter into causal relationship. Hence Harman’s somewhat desperate recourse to a version of the old occasionalist doctrine—recast as a notion of “vicarious causation”—by way of explaining how, despite their impregnable isolated status, they can none the less be observed to act upon each other, or at least be observed to behave somehow in concert.³⁶

Nor does it help very much to be told that this comes about through a kind of diffuse intentionality, or an agentive power whose ill-defined locus seems to involve a panpsychist appeal to quasi-mental forces somehow vested in the objects themselves. Here one really wants to say: yes, speculate all you like when you reach the limits of present-best science—and present-best philosophy of science—but do (for realism’s sake) first test its limits and see what’s available in the way of other, less whacky or credibility-stretching resources. Among the latter, as I have said, is a good amount of broadly analytic work that engages with the closely related topics of causality, rational inference, and scientific theory-selection. That SR has mostly ignored that work, or noticed it only in cursory fashion, is especially unfortunate given the vital role it might play in strengthening the realist component of the SR project and somewhat curbing the tendency to various forms of speculative excess. This might go some way toward providing a robust and reliable bridge between the continental-rationalist tradition (which SR inherits, albeit in significantly modified form) and those elements in the mainly British empiricist tradition that have striven to overcome what was, until recently, its pronounced Humean-sceptical bias. It is primarily the lack of such a bridge—the disconnect between speculative thought and that real-world object domain to which it pays fulsome but notional tribute—that constitutes the main unresolved difficulty with the SR project as presently conceived. Very probably this is attributable in part to the influence of Badiou’s set-theoretically based ontology, one which (a point often raised by commentators on *Being and Event*) operates at a fairly abstract or generalised level and leaves a good deal of work to be done by way of linkage to

³⁶ See entries under Note 34, above.

specific situations or real-world states of affairs.³⁷

More recently, in its sequel *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou has set out to answer this objection by providing a more grounded ontology where situations are indexed according to the degree of “appearance” or perceptible/intelligible salience in them of various participant (or relatively non-participant) objects, properties, persons, groups, etc.³⁸ However, compared with *Being and Event*, this is a somewhat discursive and roundabout—even, at times, self-indulgent—work which has some passages of extraordinary brilliance but which doesn’t have anything like the sustained argumentative power of that earlier text. Besides, it is still pitched at a pretty high level of abstraction if one takes the scientific-realist view (as endorsed by Meillassoux and, with varying degrees of conviction, by other SR theorists) that science—and physics in particular—should serve as the primary reference-point for assignments of reality and truth. My point, to repeat, is that SR has grown up in a context where the fact of its being a distinctly “continental” and markedly Francophile movement has brought certain disadvantages in terms of its genesis and reception-history. On the one hand this has tended to exaggerate its intellectual novelty—since realism has generally had a poor press among recent French philosophers—and on the other to cut it off from those developments in analytic ontology, epistemology and philosophy of science that might have helped strengthen its realist credentials. Ironically enough, given its anti-Kantian stance, there is a sense in which these problems are reminiscent of those that Kant identified in the rationalist metaphysicians of his day whose attempts to derive substantive or real-world-applicable truths by the exercise of pure (speculative) reason miscarried and thereby reopened the door to Humean scepticism.³⁹ Such is the danger with any new movement of thought that stakes its claim against a ruling doxology and tends to take this squarely oppositional stance as sufficient guarantee of its own doctrinal rectitude. But of course SR is a young and vigorous movement, and moreover one with sufficient diversity within its own ranks to resist the lure of any single orthodox creed.

³⁷ See especially Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

³⁸ See Note 7, above.

³⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

JON ROFFE
THE FUTURE OF AN ILLUSION

“Frank Auerbach’s career says little about the ‘art world,’ except that it may not matter much to a real artist’s growth.” So begins what is likely Robert Hughes’ best book on the work of a single artist, with the possible exception of the brilliant if patchy *Goya*. The sentiment, it seems to me, is equally applicable to the Frankenstein’s monster called speculative realism. Insofar as the various acts of this genre are philosophical, they remain within Plato’s ambit, and must be considered on the same grounds. This means, first (a first patently obvious claim), that whatever the novel new content of philosophy, its form is what it has always been. In other words, to paraphrase a famous sentiment about music, there are still only two types of philosophy: good and bad. That someone nominates themselves as a Platonist, an empiricist, or as engaged in object oriented philosophy is of absolutely zero philosophical import. What matters is the philosophical work that they engage in, what they manage to construct and support in this effort. Philosophy is not a game of proper names, despite the profoundly boring role played in the contemporary culture of thought. Patronymy is to philosophy a facsimile of Zarathustra’s ape. Here is one of the key differences between philosophy and psychoanalysis: in the former, the proper name, despite its ubiquity, has no essential significance. Or, to be more precise, the proper name does not function patronymically, but rather to index a problem or problematic conceptual nexus. That beautiful figment in the Foucauldian *imaginarium*, the “year without a name,”¹ is—or at least, should be—the rule for philosophy, an irreducible component of the philosophical gambit. Philosophy is anonymous *a priori*, and the proper name operates within it as a mask.

A second point would be this: proper names like “speculative realism” present a hook for more than just philosophically curious readers. Indeed, the increasing speed of the circulation of information—which, to be clear, does not warrant any necessary moral response in particular; we need not all follow Virilio into a dogmatic slumber the colour of an imaginary rural past—has led to the increasingly quick uptake of thinking in an entrepreneurial fashion. The temporal gap between utterance and banalisation in which the practice of philosophy

lives is at present extremely short: the owl of Minerva now flies seconds after the saving of a PDF. If there is a backlash in the academy in response to this hydra-headed beast speculative realism—and of course there is—it would be foolish to say that this is *entirely* motivated by stupidity or various forms of theoretical nostalgia. For there is a real conjunction between the *popularity* of certain modes of discourse (though not necessarily those modes themselves) and the deeply buffoonish and horrifying forms of undead self-reflection at play in contemporary life. No effort in philosophical transmission is *a priori* innocent of this creeping taint. I think that there has been a particularly poor attempt to reflect on a kind of speedy entrepreneurialism that flavours the mode of discourse of some partisans of speculative realism.

Third: the fact that what we are concerned with in this issue of *Speculations* is ultimately anything and everything that is presumed to belong to the name “speculative realism” means that praise as much as blame will always be provisional and partial. Consequentially, the praise and blame (mostly blame) that follows here will seem warranted to the extent that the points made come to bear on particular cases. There may be those—and there always are—who are well and truly interpolated, who turn around quickly every time the word “object” or “correlation” is uttered, and who will as a consequence find what follows to be patently false. Again: such a subject-position, motivated by a fideism as fierce as any other, is of zero philosophical interest.

The more interesting way of putting the matter, fourth, is that in publishing a divergent range *pro* and *contra* positions, this issue of *Speculations* is itself fabricating a definition that will retroactively give shape to what has already been written. This is a philosophical project, this retroactive character of definition; it is of eminent philosophical interest. Every new concept refracts the fabric of concepts littered behind it, somewhat in the fashion of the Leibnizian monad. Everything which follows here, moreover, adopts this task—to fabricate a definition (here, in negative outline), in order to constitute conceptual features of its referent.

There are, that is to say, two kinds of illusions that arise on the basis of this definitional project. The first kind are methodological illusions of a founding moment, an essential claim, the instantiation of a new and absolute law of thought. Speculative realism is particularly prey to this form of illusion, in part due to the tenor of the times (the entrepreneurialism of which I have already spoken) and in part because its speculative character exposes it to dogmatism. The

¹ Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” trans. Alan Sheridan, in *Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1997), 321.

second are creative acts that have and always will appear as mirages or hallucinations on the scene of contemporary thought. A new concept (the *cogito*), a new framework (transcendental philosophy), a new mode of philosophical utterance (the aphorism) each appeared in the first instance to be chimerical, an *imaginarium figmentum* strictly speaking.

It is easy to see that the first kind of illusion arises insofar as the second fabulous moment is bedded down into an existing intellectual stratum. That is, the ruse of the absolute methodological foundation appears only after the second moment, which institutes a new creative index only to be indexed in turn to a patent set of references (ie., the first foundation is always third to a second; or, the second is always a necessarily misrecognized first).

It would seem then that the very effort to define speculative realism, while predicated on genuine moments of creation in thought, tends to fall into a simplifying, reifying motion that repeats, ever more emptily, the gesture which gave rise to it—as if Escher’s hands were not drawing each the other, *ex nihilo*, but erasing, rubbing each other out. This situation, as it turns out, was first conceptualised by that *bête noire* of speculative realism, Immanuel Kant, under the heading of transcendental illusion.



One of the ironies of the reception of Kant’s transcendental philosophy in speculative realist thought is its seemingly unwitting repetition of the Kantian treatment of his own cursed precursor, David Hume. For Kant, the latter’s entire philosophy boils down to a single problem concerning the status of the relation of cause and effect, what he calls Hume’s “problematic concept (this, his *crux metaphysicorum*).”² Meillassoux’s approach in *After Finitude* is thus—amusingly—Kantian to the letter.³

² Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, trans. L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), 65 (§29).

³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008). I am referring of course to the fourth chapter, entitled “Hume’s Problem.” I would add that Levi Bryant, while engaging with it in more depth, also offers what seems to me a deeply incorrect reading of Humean empiricism in his *Democracy of Objects*, when he writes that, “For Kant, the realm of empirical intuition (sensation) is a sort of confused chaos and therefore cannot, contra Hume, provide us with any ordered or structured experience.” Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press), 80. But Hume’s foundational claim—marked by Bryant himself a couple of pages later—is precisely that sensible impressions are in no way intrinsically ordered, but are provided with order by (in different ways) the

In turn, what appears to be underway is a wholesale reduction of Kant’s transcendental philosophy to the single banal—though (of course, of course) entirely catastrophic for the Kantian system—opposition between phenomenon and noumenon; an immense body of work is in essence reduced down to the three pages of the “Refutation of Idealism.”⁴ I say this not because Kant’s philosophy is necessarily superior in any sense, only because it constitutes a primary source and resource for contemporary thought and—though I will not argue for this here—remains a subsistent horizon for us today, having well and truly seeped into the ground water, to the extent that a simple exhortation not to drink from the tap (ie., “don’t be a correlationist!”) is insufficient.

If I can put it this way, a radical undermining of the critical heritage is underway in speculative realism. In what follows, I will consider two aspects of the Kantian position elaborated in the first *Critique* that seem, to my mind, to bear directly and critically on speculative realism today.

The first of these is Kant’s renovation in the philosophy of time, whose impact reverberates through post-Kantian thought through the Romantics and up to the middle period of Deleuze’s work (notably *Difference and Repetition*). In a nutshell, Kant’s discovery—one whose radicality is only partially grasped by Kant himself—is that time is the primordial ground of all experience. Being the form of inner sense, no object of thought is exempt from its passive mode of structuration.

In contrast to this rich tradition, however problematic it may be, we find in speculative realism a deeply impoverished view of time. A first case here is Meillassoux, and the way in which time is accounted for in *After Finitude*.⁵ Following the deductive path that leads to the principle of unreason, Meillassoux is also led to depose time from its fundamental position. This is because time, as a foundational informing structure, would be necessary in precisely the way that the principle of unreason rules out. In other

principles of association and the passions. What Bryant calls “confused chaos” is what Hume had already given the name of *fancy*. As Deleuze puts it, “The depth of the mind is indeed delirium, or—what is the same thing from another point of view—change and indifference.” Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, trans. Constantin Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 23.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B274-9.

⁵ I make this argument in a little more depth in the context of a fairly hackneyed and already very out of date summary of *After Finitude* in “Time and Ground: A Critique of Meillassoux’s Speculative Realism,” *Anglaki* 17.1 (2012): 57-67.

words, there cannot be any ground (not even time) that escapes the absolute contingency exposed by the principle of unreason. It is peculiar, nonetheless, that when it comes to characterizing the hyper-chaos that follows from the principle, Meillassoux reaches for an analogy with time. According to this already well-known passage,

If we look through the aperture which we have opened up onto the absolute, what we see there is a rather menacing power [...] We see something akin to Time, but a Time that is inconceivable for physics, since it is capable of destroying, without cause or reason, every physical law, just as it is inconceivable for metaphysics, since it is capable of destroying every determinate entity, even a god, even God. This is not a Heraclitean time, since it is not the eternal law of becoming, but rather the eternal and lawless possible becoming of every law. It is a time capable of destroying even becoming itself by bringing forth, perhaps forever, fixity, stasis, and death.⁶

Here, though, Kant, or at least the way that the Kantian heritage manifests itself in a thinker like Deleuze, has its revenge. We need only consider the fact that, in order to even speculate about the possible outcomes of this chaotic *analogon* of time, Meillassoux makes use of the temporal category of *forever*. More important again is the fact that both stasis and fixity on the one hand, and change on the other, presuppose a more primordial sense of time and its passage—in other words, time as a formal series is necessarily implied. Both identity and its rupture need a time *in which* to take place. But the problem with Meillassoux's position vis-à-vis time is most potently at play in the category of possibility so crucial to his entire project. For possibility is always necessarily a possibility *in a future*. There is a temporal register implied every time Meillassoux invokes the advent of an otherwise-than. In a nutshell, we may be able to disagree about what the concept of futurity means, but we cannot rigorously dispense with reference to it.

Despite their many and significant differences, here Meillassoux and Harman are on precisely the same (shaky) ground.⁷ In both *The Quadruple Object* and "Space, Time, Essence: An Object-Oriented Approach,"⁸ Harman explicitly sets out to displace

⁶ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 64.

⁷ As is, interestingly, Alain Badiou, whose attitude towards time could hardly be more dismissive. This is most manifest in his texts on Deleuze, for example in his muddled discussion of time and truth in *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 55–65.

⁸ This latter is collected in Graham Harman, *Towards*

the primacy of the temporal register. This is not undertaken, pace Meillassoux, by positing something more fundamental, but by insisting on the equiprimordiality of not just space with time, but also essence and eidos. Together these four terms make up the full set of possible relations between objects and qualities; time, in this set-up, is the name Harman gives to the relation, or rather *tension*, that holds between sensual (ie., what Husserl called intentional) objects and their sensual qualities. Consider the following text:

We find that the tree [we thought we were looking at] was in fact a gallows, so that its surface qualities now shift into a far more sinister key. Or perhaps we shift our attention from a sensual object to its neighbours: from a strawberry to its seeds, or perhaps to the strawberry patch as a whole. When this happens there is a momentary breakdown in the former balance between sensual objects and their qualities; the object is briefly exposed as a unified kernel dangling its qualities like marionettes.⁹

This passage already introduces the same kinds of issues that are evinced by Meillassoux. We can see this by considering whether time can genuinely be considered *secondary* to the regime of objects. Harman, obviously, considers the answer to be yes, but in attempting to demonstrate this, he shows clearly how it is not. Consider first of all the notion of "shifting" that Harman makes use of in the passage above. Time, he argues, is the tension between sensual object and sensual quality. But there is also another time in play here, the time *in which* "we shift our attention," and in which "the object is briefly exposed," the time of a "momentary breakdown." The following text, in which Harman argues for the same auxiliary conception of temporality, is even more revealing.

By definition, time is purely accidental. To speak of wishing to travel in time back to 1989 is merely to speak of wishing that we could return to the system of objects that we recall as having been in force during that year.¹⁰

We see the point Harman is making: time is, for him, a certain constitution of relations between sensual objects and their sensual qualities; consequently, the notion of time travel would involve returning, not to a *time* but to a state of relations. However, there remains a temporal level to this claim that

Speculative Realism (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 140–169.

⁹ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 103.

¹⁰ Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 163.

subtends Harman's point: we are invited to consider a "return" to 1989.

At play here is a temporal amphiboly: Harman's argument functions by confusing two senses of time. The first is time in Harman's explicit sense, a tension between sensuous object and sensuous quality, i.e., time as a kind of relation. The second is time as the ground of any passage of anything to any other state. Harman thinks that he can move past the impasses presented by the theory of time as it has been traditionally conceived by giving it a specific auxiliary role. However, he only succeeds in doing this on the condition of failing to attend to a more fundamental sense of time that nonetheless continues to undergird his claims.

In both of these cases, it is precisely the Kantian insight that has been elided: far from being a secondary characteristic of things and subjects (however these are conceived), time is their ground. Any attempt to make an end run around this point only ends up confirming it once again—it is thus the thesis of time as ground itself, and not the principle of unreason, that is anhypothetical in character.

A third interesting case is the account of time presented by Bryant in *The Democracy of Objects*. While his account is somewhat more robust than the positions elaborated by Harman and Meillassoux, it is based on the one hand on a peculiar misreading of Deleuze, for whom there is not and could not be any such thing as "virtual time,"¹¹ in part because the past does not constitute the whole of time in any of the Deleuzian accounts of temporality. This, on the other hand, is despite his (correct, in my view) rejection of the container-based approach to time in the third chapter of *The Democracy of Objects*, in the course of an (incorrect, in my view) equation of Kantian intuition with the container view itself.¹² I would say, however, that Bryant's account is the one most able to be modified in line with the Kantian thesis of time as ground without breaking with any of his more fundamental commitments—and one way to do so would be to return to the Deleuze Bryant clearly knows well, at least in certain of his humours.



Earlier, I proposed that there are two forms of illusion or fantasia attendant to the task of defining speculative realism, and that these two turn on a third dimension, which I attributed to Kant. The Kantian notion of transcendental illusion is another of the great riches of the critical tradition; modified versions of the concept mark out the

¹¹ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 102.

¹² *Ibid.*, 107.

most interesting developments in post-Kantian thought, from the Hegelian notion of alienation, through to Lacan's *méconnaissance* and Deleuze's *bêtise*. Kant's claim, let's recall, is that the activity of reason, lacking any native guardrails, tends to cross into illegitimate operation.

Now, this way of framing the matter reeks of the moralism that Kant's philosophy is lacquered in, no doubt, and there is no reason not to agree with Badiou's remark that one often feels addressed by a wearying Kantian legalism: "always asking *Quid juris?* Or 'Haven't you crossed the limit?'"¹³ However, the heirs of the notion have developed it to the extent that we can now say, to clumsily paraphrase a famous remark: tell me what your theory of illusion is, and I will tell you what your theory of thought is. That is, the manner in which thought is conceived to be internally riven—and not thought's possible contents ("natural" or otherwise), nor its means or powers—becomes the decisive question.

I bring this point up here, moreover, not just because I think that the doctrine of transcendental illusion is a decisive philosophical problematic. One of the dangers that arises when philosophy functions in a speculative tenor is that it tends to overlook the elements that condition both the thought of things and the things themselves. More simply, if we approach philosophical questions not from the position of "radical doubt, [but] from naiveté,"¹⁴ we are making the assumption that thought is radically innocent in nature, returning in a peculiar sense (ironically, given this reference to radical doubt) to the Cartesian position according to which the activity of reason is on its own terms necessarily indubitable. All that seems to have changed is the content of the purified moment itself—no longer God as in Descartes, but the real of objects for thinkers like Harman and Bryant, the principle of unreason for Meillassoux, and so on. I am reminded here of Lyotard's remark *a propos* the question of atheism: "Marx said in 1844 that socialism doesn't need atheism because the *question* of atheism is *positionally* that of religion."¹⁵

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 535.

¹⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 5. A recent blog post on cynicism by Levi Bryant makes similar claims: "what we need more than ever right now is a skepticism of skepticism, a cynicism towards cynicism." Levi Bryant, "On Cynicism," *Larval Subjects*, December 20, 2012: <http://www.larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2012/12/20/on-cynicism/>. Such an assertion invokes, at a minimum, a certain concern around what could ground this need and meta-skepticism alike, while keeping it innocent of the very problem of critique the claim is directed towards.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, "Energumen Capitalism," *Semi-*

We need not be in the pocket of correlationism or indebted to the motif of access in order to assert the significance of factors that trouble thought, which, following Kant and then the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, I would give the name *deception*. Neither should we assume that all critique necessarily arrives in the final analysis in a hall of mirrors (as Bryant does¹⁶), of which we can take negative dialectics on the one hand and deconstruction on the other as emblematic. Insofar as speculative realism is thus far irreflexive with respect to the status of thinking itself, this deception is more or less entirely unattended to. At a minimum, the possibility of this dramatically consequential combatant for thought should be taken into account.

This possibility is presented in the single strictly supernatural story found in HP Lovecraft's otherwise monotonous (at least in this regard) work, "The Outsider." Some look to crown Lovecraft the Holderlin of speculative realism—for my part, I would rather speculate what twentieth-century philosophy would look like if first year students were reading this brilliant little text rather than Camus' banalising prose. In Lovecraft's story (if I can be forgiven this once the transgression of summary and paraphrase), the protagonist, after a long and melancholy life in a twilight underground, climbs up and out into what is—unbeknownst to him—the surface world. Exploring the world that now surrounds him, the outsider comes finally to a castle, which he enters, terrifying its inhabitants who promptly flee. As they run, the outsider catches a "hint of motion beyond the golden-arched doorway leading to another and somewhat similar room." The arch is, of course, nothing but the frame of a mirror, in which the outsider sees himself: "the ghoulish shade of decay, antiquity, and dissolution [...] to my horror I saw in its eaten-away and bone-revealing outlines a leering, abhorrent travesty on the human shape." The final, magisterial passages describe what happens in the wake of the shock of recognition that follows:

But in the cosmos there is balm as well as bitterness, and that balm is nepenthe. In the supreme horror of that second I forgot what had horrified me, and

otext(e) 2.3 (1977), 11.

¹⁶ Bryant does indeed insist, at the end of this post, that "The point is not to abandon the project of critique [...] The point is that today we need to find the will to believe a little, to affirm a little, and to commit a little." The more important thing, though, is not to grant the direct opposition of critique and belief or affirmation, but to grasp the manner in which affirmation, belief, assertion, concept etc., are inflected by implicit noological factors that can only be addressed critically.

the burst of black memory vanished in a chaos of echoing images [...] although nepenthe has calmed me, I know always that I am an outsider; a stranger in this century and among those who are still men. This I have known ever since I stretched out my fingers to the abomination within that great gilded frame; stretched out my fingers and touched a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass.

Philosophy—the stranger in every time, the inhuman housed in human existence—confronts the same situation when it catches itself in the mirror. It can either, like Lovecraft's outsider flee into nepenthe, flee the mirror to "ride with the mocking and friendly ghouls on the night-wind." Or it can take this peculiar situation of reflection—thought's horrifying capacity to adopt a perspective on itself—as one (though certainly not the only one) of its faculties, and turn the mirror into a weapon.¹⁷

The looming tyranny of an entrepreneurial patronymy, a contradictory conception of temporality and an absent reflection on the nature of thought: such would be the triple spectre haunting speculative realism today.

¹⁷ In light of the first and final paragraphs here, another essential reference is Borges' "The Mirror and the Mask," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 1998), 451-454.

DANIEL SACILOTTO
REALISM AND REPRESENTATION
ON THE ONTOLOGICAL TURN

§1 - THE TWO MEANINGS OF THE "ONTOLOGICAL TURN"

The views associated with the title "speculative realism" are often coordinated with a so-called "ontological turn" that is said to have taken place in recent Continental philosophy.¹ Yet it is rather unclear what exactly such a turn is supposed to entail. If, as Meillassoux argues, it is Kant's name that sets the horizon for the anti-realist denouement that presumably characterizes both correlationism and idealism, then something like the overcoming of the critical turn in philosophy would seem to be centrally at stake.² The turn towards ontology proposed by the new realists would then be the obverse of a turning away from Kantian epistemology and its implications. And, yet again, there are at least two historical vectors which we can intuitively link to an "ontological turn," conceived as the overcoming of the critical paradigm.

We can trace one vector as proposing a *radicalization* of the critical method, in complicity with what Meillassoux calls *strong correlationism*. For this orientation of thought, the incipient problem with the critique of metaphysics is, put simply, that it is not taken far enough. The critical attempt to undertake a transcendental investigation into the conditions of possibility of metaphysics ends up, in the form of an epistemology, harboring all sorts of undetected commitments of its own. Paradigmatically, Heidegger questions whether the investigation into the problematic of the subject's representational access to the world must not already be contaminated by metaphysical prejudices, ultimately partaking in the amnesia of a tradition which he defines through the label "metaphysics of presence."³ A tradition,

¹ I would like to thank the editors of *Speculations* for the opportunity to participate alongside such distinguished authors in this issue of the journal. Also, I would like to specially thank Ray Brassier for his generosity and intellectual guidance, which has helped orient my thinking into new, exciting directions. Also, the insights in this paper would have not been possible without the dialogs I have had with Pete Wolfendale during these past couple of years; an ongoing conversation that has been nothing short of transforming in many crucial ways.

² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2006).

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquar-

that is, which unquestioningly privileges a certain temporal modality in its understanding of being. The existential analytic of Dasein carried forth by phenomenology is thereby supposed to supplant the representational account of reason advanced by critique, suspending the equation of being and substance to which Kant would have remained beholden to.⁴ This investigation is said to be *ontological* then not in overcoming the question of access or in having resolved the quandaries concerning the relation between man and the world. Rather, it purges this problematic from philosophical centrality by showing how the question about the *disclosure of being* is necessarily propaedeutic to the question about the *knowing of being*. But since Dasein's own being is defined by being the agent of this disclosure, phenomenology is nothing but *fundamental ontology*. At the end of this vector of radicalization, we see the repeated operation of a "hermeneutics of suspicion," progressively revealing further prejudices in the philosophical text, pushing critique towards the limit of self-reflexivity, e.g. Derrida's deconstruction of the phallogocentric tradition, Levinas' avowal for the primacy of ethics and infinity against totality, Foucault's archeology of knowledge, Laruelle's non-philosophical avowal of radical immanence against philosophical Decision, etc.

The second vector of thought we can trace historically does not propose a radicalization of critique as much as an *overcoming* of critique in the name of ontology. For these thinkers, the ontological turn designates a metaphysical return or, more precisely, the *return of metaphysics*. Some of the canonical names in this vector are Hegel, Bergson, Deleuze and Badiou.⁵ Indeed, rather than seeking to expunge the residual metaphysical assumptions from thought, or fatally indulge in our inevitable immersion within the contaminated waters of discourse, these thinkers aim to recover the propriety of metaphysical

rie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962).

⁴ This holds true even if, for Heidegger, Kant's business was indeed never to undertake an "epistemology." For Heidegger, the transcendental enquiry that is "laying the ground for metaphysics" cannot but be ontological, insofar as it asks how it is that being appears to, or is disclosed by, thought. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁵ One might be weary of characterizing Hegel as a metaphysician, since in identifying logic with metaphysics, one might argue that what he offers is indeed a dialectical resolution of the split between epistemology and ontology, or concepts and objects. Below I will specify why I think this operation of identification or indistinction amounts, finally, to an avowal of idealist (or subjectalist) metaphysics.

speculation, a positive and systematic account of the Real as such.

But whereas the “strong correlationist” tendency of the first vector sought to explore the necessary disclosure of being by human Dasein, the metaphysician of the second vector lays claim before the absolute in some form or other. For example, the Bergsonian vitalist or (to use Meillassoux’s term) “subjectalist” absolutizes the psyche’s power of disclosure itself, and disseminates intuition’s synthetic potency across the non-human domain, thereby avowing *panpsychism*. The Ideal synthesis of the psyche is immanently folded back onto the material, rather than serving as the transcendental condition for the representation of the material. Epistemology is once again superseded, but this time in the name of a *dissolution* of the question of access, requiring the disarming of conceptual intellection and finally of the fourfold axis of representation.⁶ Alternatively, for Badiou, philosophy assumes the meta-ontological task to suspend the inaugural identification of being with the One, a historical decision that requires the identification of ontology with mathematics, and which sets out to think for the first time being *qua* being as pure multiplicity. The formal vacuity of mathematical inscription promises to prove adequate to advance a radically anti-phenomenological and anti-subjectivist conception of being, where the latter is no longer defined in terms of its being-for-a-subject.

It is clear that, however divergent in their ultimate vision, these two vectors of thought are not without profound connections. The proposal for a new metaphysics or ontology in the second orientation is also consciously an attempt to overcome the Heideggerean diagnosis against classical metaphysics or ontotheology. And insofar as they attest to the primacy of the multiple both Deleuze and Badiou seek more than a mere return to the naive realisms of pre-Kantian thought. By the same token, it is just as clear that these thinkers are motivated by what cannot but be in their eyes a steadfast suspicion that those who radicalize critique cannot but continue to dwell in its shadow, risking the ruin of philosophy itself. Thus, for Badiou, the critique of metaphysics which begins with Kant ends in the post-modern scenario announcing the death of philosophy, which surrenders thought to the coquetry of the “new sophists.”⁷ Against the dismantling of philosophy following its relativization to subjective,

cultural or discursive conditions, these thinkers align their ontological vocation in the name of a sort of *materialism* that would in turn disarm the paralyzing drudgery of critique. At the other end, those who insist on the pertinence of a critique bloated in the form of a generalized hermeneutics of suspicion routinely cast doubt over the innocence of a return to metaphysics or ontology. A return that, they deem, short of taking at heart the lessons of critique, chiefly works to reassert the authority of philosophy and its dubious legacy.⁸ The labor of the negative is tethered to a state of perpetual vigilance, curbing the pretences of philosophical affirmation in the name of a matured historical, ethical and political consciousness.

In light of these two senses of what an “ontological turn” would imply, it is not difficult to see how the four inaugural figures associated with the label “speculative realism” would, in a self-declared gesture against post-Kantian anti-realism, be distributed disparately along this axis. In continuity with the second vector outlined above, Meillassoux readily endorses a kind of mathematical Platonism inspired by Badiou’s appropriation of the dialectical method, arguing for a materialism that would be both rationalist and “speculative” rather than (naively) metaphysical or ontotheological. The correlationist scenario that follows the radicalization of critique appears under the revived promise of an absolute accessible to thought not only as a regressive gesture, like Badiou claims, reinforcing the straightjacket of the human in a sophistic triumph of relativism. More dramatically still, the reification of the correlation ends up enacting a counter-revolutionary “Ptolemaic turn” against modern science, which brandishes an experience of the mystical beyond the saying of the word and which is recalcitrant the imperatives of reason. The saturation of being to the rational is thereby not only an affirmation of subjective creation above the ideological shackles of the sophists, but a purported reconciliation with the de-anthropomorphizing turn that modern secularism enacts over against Kant and his successors’ attempts to domesticate the discoveries of science.

On their part, Harman’s ontology of objects and Grant’s philosophy of nature likewise set out to return to the metaphysical task, in the side of a reactivation of the category of substance, or of a neo-Schellingean process-metaphysics, respectively. Finally, Brassier’s early transcendental realism sought to re-appropriate back into philosophy the

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press: 1995), Chapter I.

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 1992).

⁸ For an example of such an accusation, see Francois Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, trans. Robin McKay (London: Continuum, 2013)

non-philosophical work of Francois Laruelle, motivating a postural realism against the iterations of correlationist-idealist thought. In doing so, Brassier pursued realism in continuity with the first, radicalizing vector of thought against the propriety of metaphysics, embracing the vacuity of being in nihilist spirits.⁹ At the limits of critique, distilling the structural invariance of every correlationist philosophy, the immanence of the Real awaits, however purged of positive content, and however resistant to metaphysics.

Once this stock of positions has been shown to share nothing more than an antipathy to post-Kantian anti-realism, it might seem reasonable to simply let the apparent congruity of “speculative realism” whither in the vine, and accept that the term coins nothing but an exceedingly vague family resemblance, rather than a concept announcing the advent of a new philosophical epoch, or a reformation of Continental thought. Even more so considering that there is profound disagreement between the original proponents as to whether the other “members” would indeed in any sense be meaningfully characterized as either “speculative” or “realist,” their self-assessment notwithstanding.

§2 - REPRESENTATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Is there nothing more to this story? A misguided enthusiasm for a new savory term, “correlationism?” This is a word that has become, after all, easily deployed in the trenches to castigate the tradition and fashionably claim for philosophical radicality. Having diagnosed the antipathy to correlationism as the singular defining trait behind SR, one might be compelled to see just what exactly those proponents of the ontological turn think the original Kantian gesture did that was so wrong. From our tentative diagnosis of the two historical vectors leading to SR, what originally binds them appears first to be a rejection of transcendental philosophy understood as critical epistemology, and indeed a sustained attack on the concept of *representation*. Both sides of the story essentially agree on one thing: representation, along with its mother discipline epistemology, needs to be overcome. But what exactly is “representation,” after all? As it turns out, the meaning of this term is no less ambiguous for those who claim to reject it than “ontology” was for those who claimed to endorse it. In any case, two senses can be distilled as being of particular relevance to the debates in-

⁹ And it must be emphasized that this is only a characterization of Brassier’s early work since, as we should briefly indicate below, it is his work that opens up a “third way.”

forming the dual post-Kantian orientation that we have traced above.

In the first, narrower sense of the term, representation is understood as a distinctively *modern* concept, specifically labored to rethink the relation between reality and appearances.¹⁰ In this sense, representation sets itself against the pre-modern view that truth obtains when appearances *resemble* the Real. Resemblance is, in turn, understood in terms of how distinct items have shared properties or qualities. To give a paradigmatic example: a picture resembles *that which* it pictures if and only if they both share the same colors and shapes. Conversely, if the picture does not share these same properties with its object, that is, if it does not resemble it in the relevant aspects, it will be said to be a false appearance. Correspondence between thought and the Real entails thus the sharing of *qualitative properties*; the appearance is *like* that which it is an appearance of.¹¹

But the Copernican revolution disrupts the cogency of this model. Behind the appearance of an unmoving Earth and a circling sun, there lies an orbiting Earth and an unmoving sun. It is within the bounds of such misleading appearances that we discover truth; the relationship between reality and appearances must then be more contrived. Following Galileo’s insights, Descartes’ notion of representation worked then to explain how the distinction between appearance and reality could be mapped onto the distinction between algebra and geometry. The basic idea was that the discursive inscriptions of algebra could serve to calculate the structural features of geometrical figures, even if no resemblance could obtain between the inscriptions and the actual phenomena:

Treating something in linear, discursive form, such as “ $ax + by = c$ ” as an appearance of a Euclidean line, and “ $x^2 + y^2 = d$ ” as an appearance of a circle allows one to calculate how many points of intersection they *can* have and what points of intersection they *do* have, and lots more besides. These sequences of

¹⁰ I follow Robert Brandom’s helpful construal of these issues below. See Robert Brandom, *Conceptual Realism and the Semantic Possibility of Knowledge*, the 2011 Munich Hegel Lectures, available at <http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/downloads/KR1%20CRSPK%2011-5-29%20a.doc>. (accessed February 4th, 2013).

¹¹ Notice that resemblance is silent as to how to map the distinction between reality and appearance onto the distinction between the Ideal and the sensible. Thus, rather than asking whether the Idea conforms to the reality of the sensible, Plato inverts the stakes and claims that sensible appearances participate in the formal reality of the Idea.

symbols do not at all resemble lines and circles. Yet his mathematical results...showed that algebraic symbols present geometric facts in a form that is not only (potentially and reliably) *veridical*, but conceptually *tractable*.¹²

The crucial break with the pre-modern vision here is the shift from *resemblance* to *isomorphy*, i.e. the mathematization of nature consists in understanding how geometrical figures correspond to algebraic formulae by the *formal properties* that they share at a *structural* level, rather than by the *qualitative properties* they share at the *metaphysical* level. The concept of form at work here is no longer conceived in terms of an archetype modeled predominantly on vision as a paradigm. Rather, it defines how the axiom-governed manipulation of syntax (the algebraic symbols) can be correlated with the possibilities that define the structure of geometrical figures, quite irrespective of the material properties of the writing medium or the metaphysical status of spatio-temporal objects themselves. As Robert Brandom puts it, “[I]n the context of such an isomorphism, the particular material properties of what now become intelligible as representings and representeds become irrelevant to the semantic relation between them.”¹³ The possibility of thinking a correspondence between thought and the Real would then be amplified to be understood in terms of the isomorphy between a perspicuous formal ideography and the structural dynamics of spatio-temporal systems in the real order.

The second sense of representation that concerns us is broader, as is the scope of the critiques leveled at it. It is supposed to range over the whole of philosophical history, and would not be brought into question, at least, until Nietzsche. According to such a notion, representation amounts to the clarification of the relation(s) between two entities or domains, where one term is supposed to access in some way the being of the other. Put differently, representation would track any purported correlation between mind and world, though not only those relations said to inhere in correlationist philosophies. The distinctions between appearance and reality, mind and world, concepts and objects, statements and facts, would all partake thus of this more general concept. Accordingly, both species of correspondence, qualitative resemblance and formal isomorphism, would be characterized as species of representational relations, in virtue of still clinging to the “connection problem” at the very center of philosophical thinking, and quite irrespective of

¹² Robert Brandom, *Conceptual Realism and the Semantic Possibility of Knowledge*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

whether they claim in their particular iterations to be realist, idealist or correlationist.

Those who deploy the broader notion generally do so in order to question the very conditions under which a connection problem becomes the central philosophical concern, with the common diagnosis that, whatever representation is taken to be, it does not exhaust the possibilities open to thought. Thus, in this sense, the concept of representation does not so much work to avow a cognitive *achievement*, but works towards a diagnosis of how philosophy has privileged a particular modality of thought, since (at least) its Greek inception. So, for example, Heidegger’s construal of representation (*vor-stellung*) as the pure objectivity of presence-at-hand (*vor-handenheit*) designates not a local *theoretical break* with the pre-modern age, but merely a particular *modality of being* to which Dasein can comport existentially, and which obtains upon the *practical malfunction* of equipment (*zeug*). The world presents itself as an external object *for thought only* once it is wrested from its holistic integration, and not fundamentally or at all times, as metaphysicians surmised. Representation designates thus the perfunctory abstraction of reason, where only pure presence gives itself forth in obstinacy. And since being’s disclosure is not fundamentally *cognitive-essential*, but *pragmatic-existential*, the view that being must appear to thought in the guise of the Idea as the *represented* is thereby suspended. Similarly, for Deleuze, representation characterizes an entire configuration of thought to which philosophy has remained submitted since Greek antiquity, according to the hylomorphism articulated in fourfold axis of identity in the concept, contrariness in the predicate, resemblance in perception, and analogy in judgment.¹⁴ It constitutes a *form of thinking* whose philosophical prominence is symptomatic of a historical impasse. Or, again, for Badiou, representation merely designates the generalized conservative protocols through which the State seeks maximal equilibrium between inclusion and belonging, between the parts and elements of a situation, so as to stave off the disruptive (subjective) force of the supernumerary event and the subtractive operation of generic Truth.¹⁵

With this in mind, we are in a better position to address what exactly the proponents of the ontological turn feel is wrong with representation. With regards to the narrow conception, Brandom argues that Hegel was the first to clearly advance

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Chapter I.

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006).

a supersession of it in his attack of the so called “instrument-or-medium” conception of reason.¹⁶ In short, Hegel does not take issue with the idea that discursive structures might be isomorphic to reality, but rather disputes the possibility of knowledge once one separates strongly between ontological domains. Yet this is precisely what is said to happen when in developing the concept of representation one makes an ontological difference between *kinds* of things by distinguishing different modes of *intelligibility*. So, in order to halt a vicious regress where everything represented would need a higher-order representation to have knowledge of it, Descartes postulates a certain class of representations that are given immediately to the mind, and so which yield a kind of luminosity or introspective knowledge by acquaintance into the contents of our psychological states. Thus while physical things were said to be represented by thought’s mathematical mediation, mental contents were rather thought to be *intrinsically* intelligible, providing the fundamental strata upon which all further knowledge is mediated. Similarly, Kant’s ontological distinction between noumena and phenomena follows from his epistemological distinction between things that are knowable by being apperceived under judgment through concepts, and the represented things-in-themselves that lie beyond all cognition. Hegel’s basic point, according to Brandom, is that as long as one distinguishes ontologically between what is immanently given or internal to the mind on the one hand, and reality as beyond the mental on the other, the skeptic can refute any ambition to know of the in-itself through the aid of appearances. Thought would remain entrapped in a correlational house of mirrors, at best motivating the “bracketing” of any realist commitments, as Husserl originally deemed necessary to retain methodological rigor. But the relinquishing of the absolute from the reach of reason reveals the *cognophobia* behind the incipient epistemological accounts.¹⁷ In my estimation, this is as clear an anticipation of Meillassoux’s diagnosis against correlationism as there can be.

[The instrument-or-medium conception of reason], above all...presupposes that the absolute *stands on one side* and that *knowledge*, though it is *on the other side*, for itself and separated from the absolute, is nevertheless something real. Hence it assumes that knowledge may be true despite its presupposition that knowledge is outside the absolute and there-

¹⁶ G.W.F Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1977), 1-3.

¹⁷ Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007).

with outside the truth as well. By taking this position, what calls itself the fear of error reveals itself as a fear of the truth.¹⁸

Hegel’s solution will be, of course, to fold the transcendence of the in-itself onto the dialectical envelopment of the Concept, where even the alleged immediacy of sense-certainty reveals the mediation of the negative as its ultimate truth. Rather than explaining how thought gains traction on the in-itself, Hegel’s identification of logic and metaphysics renders the transcendence of the in-itself immanent to thought. And yet, the domain of reasons and that of causes coalescing, the attempt to escape the skeptical entrapment to appearances recovers the absolute at the price of identifying it with thought itself. In order to prevent being from slipping over into the skeptical courts of the ineffable, Hegel’s rationalism sees it to reify metaphysically the norms of thought. Absolute idealism is thereby proposed as the only alternative to the correlationist dispossession of the Real.¹⁹

As we saw in the first section, similar doubts inform both Badiou and Meillassoux’s attempts to disarm the strong correlationist reification of being’s transcendence *vis a vis* thinking, as the evacuation of the Real leads to the triumph of the sophist and the surrender to the mystic. In avowing the ontologization of mathematics so as to flatten the phenomenological divide between subject-object (or Dasein and World), both Meillassoux and Badiou, like Hegel, are led to anchor their materialism iterating the Parmenidean thesis according to which being and thinking are the same. Or more precisely, in their terms, mathematics grasps being *directly*, without subjective mediation; the primary properties of the in-itself are captured by the formal vacuity of mathematical discourse, recalcitrant to translation or to “meaning.” The kenotype’s opacity dispels the semantic illusion.

Yet what Brandom highlights, crucially, is that the early Hegelian objection against modern representation is directed specifically at the ontologization of a difference in intelligibility between that which is disclosed to the mind, and that which is in-itself. For as Kant realized—contra Descartes and in agreement with the empiricist—drawing such a sharp line

¹⁸ G.W.F Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1-3.

¹⁹ In attempting a non-dialectical alternative to the Hegelian answer, as we saw above, the Bergsonian-Deleuzian short-circuiting of hylomorphism involves absolutizing the psychic syntheses of sensible intuition directly onto the material. In spite of its anti-dialectical pretences, however, the proprieties of thought and sensation are once again transposed and ubiquitously disseminated onto being.

between the mental and the physical, the in-itself had to remain foreclosed from all conceptual grasp. The idealist identification of logic and metaphysics, the order of reasons and the order of causes, is set precisely to dissolve such a metaphysical gap, by dissolving the epistemic question of access to the reality beyond appearance. It is important to note that it does *not*, however, take issue with the claim that one can trace structural isomorphy between distinct elements or structures; it only claims that any such connection will be beyond epistemic reach for a metaphysical dualism motivated on epistemological speculation. Similarly, for Badiou and Meillassoux, the indiscernibility of mathematical inscription and real being is set to dissolve the phenomenological gap between the ontic and the ontological, and the ineffability of the latter with respect to the former. From this end, I would define a first decisive imperative against representation as follows:

(Anti-Skepticism): Overcoming the foreclosure of the in-itself for thought demands that we identify the conditions of the in-itself with the conditions of thought.

Such an imperative is broad enough to capture the basic strategy of those who pursue the overcoming of epistemology by way of a return to metaphysics, whether such a return is of rationalist bent (Badiou, Meillassoux) or empiricist bent (Bergson, Deleuze). And I would suggest it covers even the disposition of Harman's Object-Oriented-Ontology, insofar as the latter absolutizes human *finitude*, understood in terms of features associated with phenomenological-intentional mediation, inscribing the latter directly in the in-itself.²⁰ With this in mind, we note that although the attack on representation is first addressed to the narrow conception and the problematic inaugurated by Cartesian dualism, it slowly moves towards a more general notion and morphs into the problems associated with it, concerning something like the ontological conditions for the epistemic impasses confronted in principle by epistemology.

So what about the broader notion of representation? As we indicated, once the ontological conditioning

²⁰ It is of course not by itself a fault to identify features that non-human objects might share with humans. What is peculiar to Harman's account is that he models the "pantranslationism" between all objects on the intentional mediation of psychic structures; namely, the Husserlian and Heideggerian accounts of the partial givenness of a being in relation to the agent of thought (whether it be the transcendental Ego, or Dasein).

of representation becomes the focal question, the very enterprise of a theory of knowledge becomes dislodged from philosophical primacy. Whether it be understood in terms of the occlusion of *Zuhandenheit* by *Vorhandenheit*, the fourfold axis that organizes the hylomorphism of conceptual identity, or whether it be part of the irrational surrender to a mystical Otherness, representation and epistemology cannot be proper to first philosophy, since the latter cannot but run unsaid ontological commitments. A second imperative can be stated thus as setting the stage for the ontological turn:

(Ontological Priority): The enquiry into the possibility of a knowledge of being can only be made tacitly on ontological grounds; representation assumes *too much*.

This condition includes, though is not limited to, those who pursue the continuation of the metaphysical task. It is thus relatively more general in relation to the anti-skeptical imperative. With these two conditions in place, the two orientations towards "ontology" appear urgent, simultaneously as the diagnosis that representation leads to a correlationist enclosure, with its skeptical (and mystical) aftermath, and the belief that representation must carry with it unquestioned metaphysical prejudices. With this in mind, speculative realism, if it exists, becomes continuous with this dual disposition against epistemology.

§3 - THE CUNNING OF REPRESENTATION TOWARDS A RATIONALIST MATERIALISM

If speculative realism does indeed present a challenge to epistemological anti-realisms, more is needed than the disposition towards ontology according to the conditions outlined above. For just like the return to metaphysics supported by (anti-skepticism) was aligned to idealism, the priority of ontology that detects the metaphysical underpinnings of epistemology has also been predominantly configured within a strong correlationist vision, as in Heidegger's case. And although, as we saw, the contemporary return of metaphysics is sought within a materialist vision, both its rationalist and empiricist iterations proceed like its idealist predecessors by transposing features of thought or sensibility into the material, or marking the material as mediated by thought.

Either in the name of the all enveloping Concept within dialectics, or of a non-dialectical panpsychist vitalism, these "materialisms" remain far too close to the Hegelian idealist solution, in terms of which

ontological univocity requires the identification or indistinction between the structure of thought and that of being as such. With this in mind, although I believe that Meillassoux is correct in classifying the Bergsonian and Deleuzian visions as part of what he labels “subjectalism” for their absolutizing of psychic life, it is just as certain that, like Hegel before them, both Meillassoux and Badiou remain within idealist bounds, insofar as they absolutize the formal intelligibility of mathematical discourse.²¹ For any realism worthy of the name must be capable of disambiguating between *our thoughts about things* and the *things that are thought*, lest it fall prey to the anti-skeptical imperative which motivates an idealist metaphysics. Yet according to the latter, it is precisely such a distinction which leads to the perils of ontological dualism, and with it either to the skeptical aftermath (weak correlationism), or the eventual mystical reification of the Great Outdoors (strong correlationism). Again, we seem suspended between the Scylla of idealism and the Charybdis of correlationism. Is there no third way?

To conclude, I would like to suggest that indeed there is a third way, and that undertaking it requires that we reassess the assault on representation that has led to the “ontological turn.” Following the work of Wilfrid Sellars, this third way or solution evinces a possibility to resolve both the skeptical quandaries concerning dualism on epistemological grounds, as well as opening for the possibility of a naturalist metaphysics. In pursuing this task, it becomes necessary to reactivate the methodological primacy of epistemology with respect to ontology. For unless we assume a pre-established harmony between thinking and being, and if our thoughts of things can be about things that are *not* thoughts, we must explain under what conditions this is possible. To disambiguate between thinking and being it must be possible to explain this very difference, lest we fall back to naive realism at a loss for reasons. But if the explanation concerning *how* we know the Real must be propaedeutic to the account of *what* is Real, then it trivially follows that metaphysics cannot be first philosophy. We must first return thus to the connection problem, so as to see whether we can reject the choice between idealism and skepticism, i.e. how we can reject that (**anti-skepticism**) demands the ontological identification of thought and being.

Let us return then to the narrow sense of representation, first conceived by Descartes. As we saw above, the latter’s fatal flaw was to ontologically distinguish

²¹ Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign,” *Spekulative Poetik* (Freie Universität, Berlin, 20 April 2012)

between the immediacy of mental contents, and the mediated representations of physical entities in the world. Against this predicament, Sellars’s view already presents two crucial advances. First, in his critique of what he calls “The Myth of the Given,” Sellars rejects the idea that there are *epistemically independent* beliefs: foundational bits of knowledge whose having requires no other beliefs and so which are, in a sense, self-legitimizing.²² Knowledge is to be understood *holistically*, as the relaying of beliefs caught in the complicated practice of giving and asking for reasons, and every belief is liable to normative assessment. This is *not* to say that there cannot be non-inferential knowledge understood as beliefs *acquired directly* as responses to stimuli, rather than as the result of an inferential procedure. Yet Sellars makes no concession to the foundationalist, for to say that some knowledge is *non-inferential* is not to say it is *independent*; the former entails that there are beliefs that are not causally derived from other beliefs, the latter requires the stronger claim that some beliefs are possible without having any other beliefs. Schematically, we separate between:

1) *Non-Inferential Knowledge* - For any fact p , p is non-inferentially known if p is not acquired as the result of an inference from another fact(s) q .

2) *Independent Knowledge* - For any fact p , p is independently known if p can be known without knowing any other fact q .

To deny independent knowledge amounts to saying that for any belief to acquire a non-inferential reporting role it must be nevertheless liable to justification by inferential reasoning. Sellars rejects thus all variations on the foundationalist claims to knowledge by acquaintance, and denies that we have privileged access to the contents of our minds. This leads us to our second point. Through his speculative anthropological fable on the “Myth of Jones,” Sellars describes how, short of being the bedrock of our beliefs and the furnished ground of our pre-theoretical awareness, our concepts of *thoughts* and *sensations* are acquired, late theoretical constructs. We first *learn* to postulate thoughts by modeling them analogically on episodes of overt speech (as “inner-goings-on”). Similarly, we learn to postulate sensations by modeling them by analogy with the properties we first learn to attribute to extended objects. This is not to say that sensations *are* concepts, but that in what concerns our *knowledge* of

²² Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (Austin: Ridgeview, 1991).

them as sensations, conceptual mediation must be implicitly in place. The revisionary Kantian strategy at work here therefore consists of showing how the intentionality of psychological-phenomenological states is accounted for as part of an acquired development of *linguistic* competence, and specifically the capacity to use certain kinds of sophisticated vocabulary to make self-attributions. As Ray Brassier says: “The ‘aboutness’ of thoughts is derived from the ‘aboutness’ of words, as instituted in linguistic practice, not from some pre-established harmony between mind and world.”²³ And since the “aboutness” of words is fundamentally not innate, but acquired, it follows that not even our mentalistic-intentional vocabulary about thoughts and sensations as private is directly apprehended by introspection or phenomenological reduction, enjoying transparency into our mental states. With these two insights in place, I conclude that Sellars’s account is not sensitive to the (Cartesian and phenomenological) reification of mental contents as foundational instances of *immediate* knowledge.

However, as we have seen, the original Hegelian objection, which quickly paved the way for the criticism against the broader conception of representation, goes beyond the incipient Cartesian account. Even Kant, it was argued, was victim of the skeptical trap, since although he rejected the possibility of immediate knowledge, he continued to separate metaphysically between the phenomenal and noumenal domains, thought and being. Such a dualism is said to present an insurmountable difficulty for the epistemological account.

In response, Sellars’s strategy can be best summed as the attempt to reconcile *methodological dualism* with *ontological univocity*. This startling dialectical short-circuit attempts to simultaneously insist on the separation between thought and the world, without construing this difference as a *metaphysical* difference. Following Kant once more, Sellars seeks to preserve the distinction between the order of reasons and the order of causes, logic and metaphysics, whose conflation we have seen characterizes the idealist metaphysical (re)turn. Yet this difference is not, he argues, a *metaphysical* difference, crucially, because *thoughts are not things*—they have strictly speaking no metaphysical status. Thoughts are to be understood as a kind of *doing*: specifically, the kind of doings exhibited by *sapient* animals, and whose peculiarity consists in the integration of non-inferential responses to environmental inputs (*perception*), inferential moves within language

²³ Ray Brassier, *Lived Experience and the Myth of the Given* (forthcoming 2013).

(inference), and transitions from inside language to out of it (action).²⁴ The structural binding of these three levels of processing constitutes the intersubjective space of reasons within which we understand ourselves as knowing creatures.

To draw a helpful analogy: just like characterizing an object as a “pawn” in the context of chess is not describing an intrinsic *qualitative* property of the material object in question, but rather explaining the *role* that it plays in the game as defined by its relations to other pieces and the rules for organizing them purposefully, thought episodes are to be characterized in terms of the *role* that intentional vocabulary plays in the game of giving and asking for reasons. For, as we surmised above, thoughts are modeled on overt linguistic *behavior*. The following two passages help clarify this point: “In characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says;”²⁵ “Thus our concept of ‘what thoughts are’ might, like our concept of what a castling is in chess, be abstract in the sense that it does not concern itself with the *intrinsic* character of thoughts, save as items which can occur in patterns of relationships which are functionally analogous to the way in which sentences are related to one another and to the contexts in which they are used.”²⁶ And just like the rules of chess are not native or reducible to the material medium in which they are instantiated, the rules of reasoning are defined *transcendentally* with respect to the material properties of cognitive systems in which these rules become embodied. They define, in short, what any system must be capable of doing if it is to count as reasoning, quite irrespective of whatever metaphysical constraints or causal conditions obtain for such a system.

Yet even if we accept that thoughts are *logically* irreducible to the order of causes, there is no incoherence in claiming that, ontologically speaking, thoughts are *causally* reducible to the neurophysiological processes that constitute the material conditions for the instantiation of thought. Explanatory plurivocity is compatible with ontological univocity; methodological dualism is compatible with metaphysical monism. The crucial result I wish to extract from this should be evident: it is possible to reject both (anti-skepticism) and (ontological

²⁴ Wilfrid Sellars, “Some Reflections on Language Games,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

²⁵ Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*, 169.

²⁶ Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*, 34.

priority) without relapsing into correlationism, since it neither follows that to distinguish between thoughts and being requires us to embrace metaphysical dualism, nor that a theory of knowledge in an account of representation must tacitly run on metaphysical grounds, like Heidegger feared. The distinction between reasons and causes is *not* metaphysical, and reasons are not in the real order. It is ironically with Kant, and against all attempts to conflate being and thought, that in the name of materialism we can avoid idealism, or just as importantly for us, correlationism. Sellars's crucial advance is that once representations have ceased to be identified with a domain of *entities*, the order of thoughts need not be conceived of as a separate domain from the in-itself or the causal. They must be understood rather in terms of a certain kind of functional, rule-governed behavior, proper to those "clever beasts" that did not so much invent knowing as they came to develop it in the course of evolutionary history, within nature. Thus, while there is a (trivial) *epistemological priority* of concepts with respect to objects (since only sapient creatures know), there is just as importantly an *ontological priority* of objects with respect to concepts. Deflating the ontological status of thoughts, I conclude that Sellars is capable of naturalizing intentionality and epistemology, without metaphysically separating thoughts from nature. In doing so, Sellars' account of representation is not only immune to the objections leveled against the Cartesian version of representation and its avowal of immediate knowledge by acquaintance, but also deflect the general concerns inherent to the later Kantian account.

By the same token, once sensations are no longer identified with a private domain of "subjective" appearances accessible to introspection, nothing in principle forecloses an empirical investigation into the objective, inapparent structure of appearances, and their connection to the rest of the physical world. Against the vitalist-panpsychist account, we can recognize the ontological status of sensations as part of nature, without making them ubiquitously present in all physical reality. Against the mathematical Platonist, we can resist the trivialization of intuition and experience, without thereby relinquishing rationalism, by recognizing how the causal affection of sensible receptivity anchors us on the world causally as well as epistemically, as sensible inputs become integrated into the practice of reasoning, triggering reliable non-inferential perceptual reports through conditioning.²⁷ Even if sensations *by them-*

²⁷ Sellars describes the causal affectivity of sensing as "a dimension of givenness (or takenness) that is not in dispute." See Wilfrid Sellars, "The Lever of Archimedes,"

selves do not yield knowledge, they are essential in recognizing how the dialectic of scientific thought develops as involving perceptual reports, beyond the formal vacuity of pure mathematics. In other words, we can understand how the *practice* of reasoning can become reliable in tracking the structure of being through the mediation of sensation, that guarantees that when we develop and change our concepts "...we do not change that to which we are responding."²⁸ Rather than liquidating sensation in the name of the Concept, or rendering sensation ubiquitous in the name of Life, Sellars's account preserves the rationalist saturation of knowledge to the conceptual, while preserving the non-epistemic autonomy of the causal order to which sensation proper belongs. The adjudication of this difference, and an elucidation of the interconnection between these terms constitutes, I submit, a decisive advance for any realist philosophy.

At this juncture, the correlationist skeptic might insist that as long as sensibility remains recognized as the source of receptivity, and thoughts as the immanent relaying of beliefs we have not yet escaped the correlation since, after all, sensibility and judgment are ours alone. But this is to misidentify sensations and thoughts once again. Once the phenomenological vocabulary of sensings as privately given mental contents has been shown to be in truth theoretically contaminated, modeled as it is on objective discourse, there is no reason to isolate sensings from our explanatory accounts about the rest of the physical world. Similarly, once thoughts are seen to be modeled on overt speech, the privacy of thought presupposes the public space of reasons. Neither in the side of thought, nor of sensing, do we risk a dualism of the sort that Hegel deemed fatal for critique. Rather, Sellars' naturalism compels us to *integrate* our self-understanding with our understanding of nature by attesting to the physical objectivity of sensations, and to the functional determination of thought in behavioral terms.

We should notice that this allows us to preserve the explanatory purchase of modern representation without the metaphysical excesses. For as we noted above, the objections leveled against representation left it open that an isomorphism might obtain between different entities or structures, provided these were in the same ontological domain. But since for Sellars concepts are understood as *signifying*, understanding meaning in terms of the functional-role equivalence between expressions rather than between words and things, he can explain how reasoning involves

in *Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process*: <http://www.ditext.com/sellars/carus.html>, §87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

tracking an *isomorphism in the logical order*. And once we see that the coordination between thought and the world is not one between two insurmountable metaphysical domains, but integral to the activity of sapient “orientation systems,” nothing prevents us from describing how the rule-governed behavior of language using animals, and specifically the apparatus of *naming* in empirical-descriptive discourse, bears a (second order) *isomorphism in the real order* with the structure of the world and the particulars that populate it.²⁹ In this second, non-semantic sense of “correspondence,” it becomes incumbent to explain how the production of statements containing referring expressions become causally coordinated with objects in the world. Beyond the (logical) semantic proprieties that hold between expressions in the logical order, at the fundamental empirical level, language can be thus said to *picture* the environment.³⁰ This fundamentally realist insight, which integrates representational activity within the causal order, is condensed in Sellars’s so-called *norm-nature meta-principle*, which reads: “Espousal of principles is reflected in uniformities of performance.”³¹ Understanding how discourse gains traction on being requires therefore that we examine those uniformities by virtue of which we become differentially reliable when responding to the world; that is, coordinated with given environmental triggers. Having distinguished between these two braids of correspondence implicit in human behavior, and with them the necessary distinctions between the *representational* and the *causal* levels of explanation, I conclude that Sellars’s account is immune to the accusation that representation must lead to skepticism by motivating a kind of dualism, vitiating the possibility of a realist metaphysics.

To close up, we might wonder whether this vision is, in any legitimate sense, still deserving of the label “speculative realism.” In this regard, my contention is that if Meillassoux and Badiou are to be credited for recuperating the ambition for truth and the ab-

solute within Continental thought, then perhaps it is our task today to reawaken the critical purchase of thought away from its anti-realist envelopment. And if Sellars’ work can indeed serve to motivate the idea that contemporary realism demands “speculation,” it would surely be to the purposes of overcoming the residual narcissistic indulgence associated with the term. For if to “speculate” entails nothing but the exercise of thought to counterfeit a failure of explanation as a testament to man’s creative ingenuity, then we have done nothing but to reinforce the Ptolemaic gesture by reifying voluntarist caprice over the force of reasons. Needless to say, if speculation amounts to performing such a disservice to thought, then the less we have of it the better. But if realism is to be speculative in a benign sense, I submit, it is because, short of pursuing an ideological blackmail in the name of anti-anthropocentrism, the true radicalization of thought’s critical exercise requires us to take the Kantian legacy not as the obsolete, unfashionable business of “correlationism,” reducing it to a pious Ptolemaic counter-revolution. However fastidious its demands, and however necessary the purging of its incipient excesses might still be, it is critique itself that announces reason’s cunning against the anthropocentric prison, and lays the path for a realism that dares to face the blinding stasis of the distant sun.

²⁹ See Johanna Seibt, “Functions Between Reasons and Causes: On Picturing,” in *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Willem A. deVries (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁰ Needless to say, we cannot at present delve deeper into the intricacies of Sellars’ account of picturing. Let it just be said that it remains one of the most under-discussed and controversial aspects of the Sellarsian stereoscopic vision, and of the attempt to integrate the coherentist leanings of his semantics and epistemology, with his avowal of his naturalist metaphysics. See Sellars, “Being and Being Known,” and “Truth and Correspondence,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

³¹ Wilfrid Sellars, “Truth and Correspondence” in *Science, Perception and Reality*, 216.

Proposals

JEFFREY A. BELL
“THE WORLD IS AN EGG”

REALISM, MATHEMATICS, AND THE THRESHOLDS
OF DIFFERENCE

To most people, the question or problem of realism—realism taken here to mean that there is a reality independent of our awareness or consciousness of this reality—is neither a question nor a problem; it is simply taken for granted. It is one of the unquestioned assumptions of daily life. When I leave the house, there is no question my laptop remains where I left it and will be there upon my return; there is no question that there were many things in existence before my birth and that there will continue to be many things after my death; and finally, there is no question that there was a wealth of things in existence—stars, planets, dinosaurs, etc.—before the emergence of conscious, inquiring human beings. In our daily lives, therefore, to be a realist is a matter of common sense.¹ When we begin to ask what it is that is real, however, or when we seek to determine whether our judgments regarding the nature of reality are correct or not, we begin to enter a quagmire of difficulties that have beset philosophers since the beginning of philosophy itself.

One particular focus of philosophers have taken in addressing these difficulties has been to delineate what it is that restrains our judgment such that we are capable of making correct judgments about reality. Empiricists, for example, would argue that unless a claim is backed up by something given in experience, it is not to be accorded much weight.² In the twentieth century, the logical positivists, such as Carnap, and even W.V.O. Quine to a lesser extent, can be seen to be following in Hume’s footsteps.³

¹ The parallel with the initial pages of G.E. Moore’s famous essay, “In Defense of Common Sense,” is intentional, for in the end the argument here will be that it is an uncommon sense that is the proper way to situate realism. See G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier Books, 1959).

² Or as Hume famously argued in the closing lines of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, if within a metaphysics one cannot find anything traced to a sense impression or to a “matter of fact and existence,” then “Commit it then to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.” David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 211.

³ See Rudolf Carnap *The Logical Structure of the World*, trans. Rolf A. George (New York: Open Court, 2003) and *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), and Quine’s *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1964), where “occasion sentences” largely serve the same function

This view has its own detractors, many of whom draw their inspiration from Kant (not surprisingly). A more recent significant contemporary version of this critique, at least for our purposes, is that of Wilfrid Sellars. In his *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Sellars attacks what he calls the “myth of the given,” arguing that there is nothing given to experience that is not already caught up in what he calls a logical space of reasons, or a set of inferential connections whereby the given itself can be taken up within the process of giving and asking for reasons.

More recently, John McDowell has continued within the tradition begun by Sellars (as has Robert Brandom), and has grappled with the question of realism that naturally follows upon a claim that there is no given that is not already placed within a logical and conceptual space of reasons. As McDowell recognizes, the expansive spontaneity he calls for is at risk of becoming “a frictionless spinning in a void.”⁴ In other words, what is to provide the friction necessary to satisfy the realist’s “craving for rational constraint from outside the realm of thought and judgement”?⁵

In the following essay we will argue, following John MacFarlane’s line of criticism of McDowell, that McDowell’s attempt to present an account that is able to be reconciled with our common sense realism fails, and this is because the importance of accounting for the role of mathematics and its relationship to the “real” is left undiscussed. We will then turn to Deleuze’s understanding of the relationship between mathematics and nature. This discussion will build upon Deleuze’s claim that intensive difference is the sufficient reason of all phenomena. We will then bring in Deleuze’s example of the egg to clarify how intensive difference is the sufficient reason inseparable from actually determinate and identifiable phenomena. This account is further bolstered when we look at Jacob Klein’s history of algebra, and in particular the development of the modern concept of number. Along the way, we will contrast Klein’s historical account with Meillassoux’s understanding and see that, contrary to Meillassoux’s claims, mathematics is best seen as being inseparable from intensive difference (or substantive multiplicity as we will call it), and thus it will be argued that mathematics is by its very nature at odds with the type of exclusive disjunctions that are at the heart of Meillassoux’s

sense impressions did for Hume, though now caught in a holistic web of belief.

⁴ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.

⁵ McDowell, *Mind and World*, 11.

arguments for realism. The case for realism, then, hinges not upon a determinate reality that is not our consciousness or awareness of this reality, but rather it is this very difference itself between what is and is not which presupposes the real, which for us is substantive multiplicity, “the sufficient reason of all phenomena.”⁶

I

In the twentieth century, Rudolf Carnap and Kurt Gödel can be seen to exemplify two of the dominant approaches towards understanding the relationship between mathematics and reality. For Carnap, as we have already seen, empirical claims gain legitimacy by way of the evidence they bring to bear in support of their claims. Mathematical claims, by contrast, often involve assertions that cannot be empirically verified (e.g., a Riemannian manifold), and thus to avoid a mathematical “spinning in the void” it would seem that claims too will require some content that provides the support such claims need. For Carnap this content derives from the inferential relations of one mathematical claim to another and not from either abstract logical objects or objects of experience. Such a view was anathema to Gödel, who spent years working on an essay that sought to refute Carnap’s understanding of mathematical content, or what Gödel saw as Carnap’s reduction of mathematics to being nothing but a “syntax of language.”⁷ Gödel argued instead that mathematical content is derived from a reality beyond the play of mathematical symbols and it is this ideal content that provides the constraints for our mathematical claims. Gödel drew much from Husserl in this effort, and he referred to his position as “conceptual realism.”

McDowell also accepts the necessity of empirical content as an important constraint to our conceptual understandings of the world. As with Kant, McDowell argues that there is a cooperation between our conceptual capacities and our intuitions. McDowell, however, in arguing that our sense perceptions are already in a logical space of reasons will reject the need for any non-conceptual content (the myth of the given). In response to critics, such as Hubert Dreyfus,⁸ who argue that McDowell ought to have incorporated non-conceptual content in order to

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 221.

⁷ From Hao Wang, *A Logical Journey: From Gödel to Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 76.

⁸ See Hebert L. Dreyfus, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79, no. 47-65 (2005).

account for the complexities of our embodied behavior, McDowell argues that all our senses presuppose a world-disclosing experience which is categorical in form and may not be fully articulated by way of conceptual capacities, but as it does come to be articulated it is precisely the empirical content of this world that is being more fully detailed and articulated. The world, in other words, is the common sense basis for all that comes to be explicated within the logical space of reasons, and it is what keeps us from “spinning in the void.”

In his critique of McDowell, John MacFarlane argues that whereas Kant took a strong line with respect to the cooperation between concepts and intuitions in that for Kant the content of mathematics is intuition-based, whereas McDowell, and for good reason (as we saw), does not go this far. McDowell maintains what MacFarlane calls a Weak Kantian Thesis.⁹ However, if we follow McDowell and reject Kant’s stronger thesis and accept that mathematical knowledge and concepts can proceed without an object and that the content of a mathematical concept may simply be dependent upon its role in a “holistic inferential articulation,” then it would seem there is no reason not to reject the Weak Kantian Thesis as well and hold that the content of empirical concepts and knowledge might similarly be without the need for an object and be determined by its place within a “holistic inferential articulation.” In other words, without addressing mathematical content, McDowell gives us no reason not to reject the world as the object necessary to constrain our empirical claims. We are left “spinning in the void” after all.

II

Deleuze is much less reticent to discuss mathematics and its importance for Deleuze has long been recognized.¹⁰ One of Deleuze’s more important and frequently used terminological couplets, differentiation/differenciation, is drawn from the calculus. Rather than revisit the extensive literature that has

⁹ See John MacFarlane, “McDowell’s Kantianism,” *Theoria* 70 (2004): 250-265.

¹⁰ For the most detailed work on the important ties between Deleuze and mathematics, see Daniel W. Smith, “Mathematics and the Theory of Multiplicities: Badiou and Deleuze Revisited,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 41.3 (2003): 411-449; Simon Duffy “The Differential Point of View of the Infinitesimal Calculus in Spinoza, Leibniz and Deleuze,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 37.3 (2006): 286-307 and *Virtual Mathematics: The Logic of Difference* (London: Clinamen, 2006); and Manuel Delanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002).

sought to clarify the importance of mathematics for Deleuze, we shall look instead at why Deleuze believes mathematics is such a useful tool for studying nature.

There has been much discussion of the developments in mathematics in the early modern period and the profound consequences this had for the study of nature. Galileo is often earmarked as the pivotal figure in this history, though the mathematization of nature he is largely credited with initiating is not without its problems or its critics. For Deleuze, however, what is key to both mathematics and nature, and hence to the relationship between them, is that they are each equally grounded in a series of infinitely doubled differences as their principle of sufficient reason. As Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition*, every identifiable, determinate phenomenon, such as E let us say, refers “to an inequality by which it is conditioned.”¹¹ E, for example, thus refers to differential inequality $e-e'$, and the element e refers to a differential inequality $-\varepsilon-\varepsilon'$. Each determinate phenomenon is thus inseparable from a “state of infinitely doubled difference,” or what Deleuze will call “disparity...in other words, difference or intensity,” and this disparity and intensive difference (or “intensive quantum” as Deleuze puts it at one point), is, Deleuze boldly claims, “the sufficient reason of all phenomena, the condition of that which appears.”¹² The sufficient reason for all phenomena, therefore, is not another determinate being or idea, but rather it is the infinitely doubled difference that is inseparable from each determinate phenomenon, whether being or idea. Deleuze will use the term “multiplicity” to contrast the series of doubled differences from thinking in terms of unities and units, whether of the one or the multiple. Deleuze thus argues that,

“Multiplicity,” which replaces the one no less than the multiple, is the true substantive, substance itself...Everything is a multiplicity insofar as it incarnates an Idea. Even the many is a multiplicity; even the one is a multiplicity.¹³

As the sufficient reason for all phenomena, multiplicity, or what we will call substantive multiplicity, involves an infinitely doubled series of differential relations and inequalities, and as a result mathematics is particularly well suited to study and model relations. Science, however, along with its use of mathematics, is largely focused on the relationships

between determinate phenomena, and no matter how precisely these relationships may be mapped, it does not go all the way down the path of doubled difference to what Deleuze will identify as the “concrete universals” that are at the “far end of the particular.”¹⁴ To clarify, let us turn to the example of the developing fruitfly larva, elaborating upon one of Deleuze’s examples of the egg he gave in his lecture “The Method of Dramatization,”¹⁵ in order to show how the individuation of extensive properties and qualities arises from an intensive field of differential relations. Within the developing fruitfly larva there are a number of elements, including the bicoid protein, cytoplasm, and enzymes. None of these elements is to be identified or confused with the fruitfly as an identifiable species of animal nor with any of the particular parts of the fruitfly such as the thorax or head. Moreover, these elements in turn presuppose their own differential relations and substantive multiplicity, and ultimately the concrete universal or Idea that is incarnated within the determinate elements that can then become the objects of study for a biologist. The concrete universal is thus the principle of determinability in that it is the sufficient reason for the differentiated field of elements within the larva. Put differently, it is the difference that makes a difference between the elements, and differences that give rise to other differences. For Deleuze, this is simply the infinitely doubled difference inseparable from each determinate element—its sufficient reason. What is important, however, is the reciprocal determination among these elements, the intensive quantities or differences (thus, degrees of difference rather than differences of degree) which trigger (signal) at certain gradient-threshold points (what Deleuze also calls “distinctive” points or singularities) the actualization of a spatio-temporal process whereby new extensities and qualities emerge—in this case, the developing parts of the fruitfly (i.e., species), which in turn may establish intensive relations with existent elements with new gradient-thresholds that may trigger further processes, and so on. Further study, for example, may reveal that inseparable from each particular element, such as the bicoid protein, are further differential relations with their own gradient-threshold points that involve their own reciprocal determinations, and this Deleuze will refer to as “complete determination” or potentiality that enables and motivates the continued investigation of phenomena into ever finer detail. There

¹¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 222.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 43.

¹⁵ See “The Method of Dramatization,” in *Desert Islands*.

is no final resistance to keep this inquiry on track other than the differential relations themselves, the further investigation of which reveals yet further differences, and so on. This same process of inquiry can move upscale as well. The fruitfly larvae may be one of the differentiated elements, along with the larvae of other insects, other adult life forms, chemicals, minerals, etc., that is the substantive multiplicity associated with an ecosystem, and the reciprocal determination between these elements will likewise involve gradient-thresholds that could lead to the actualization of new determinate elements that can enter into new reciprocal determinations, with new gradient-thresholds, and so on.¹⁶

We can further clarify Deleuze's arguments here by turning to the history of mathematics itself, for in Jacob Klein's history of algebra we find added support for the importance of substantive multiplicities for mathematics. In his extensive and still influential *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (first published 1934-36), Klein argues that the origin of algebra and modern formal mathematics is to be linked to a new understanding of number as a pure, self-referential sign rather than as a referent to a countable entity, or to an object of intuition. From our perspective, this is important for Klein is already arguing that mathematics does not rely upon an object of intuition, whether this be a determinate, countable object or the unifying world-disclosing form of all experiences for McDowell. Moreover, by looking at the history of this development, we find in Klein's account an understanding of mathematics that is not only very much in line with the Deleuzian approach presented here, but it is also able to address the questions of realism that have been our focus. As a preparatory aside before launching into Klein's narrative, it will be helpful first to contrast the Deleuzian approach offered here with Quentin Meillassoux's. This will both return us to the theme of realism and it will allow us to clarify Deleuze's arguments.

III

The central problem facing any attempt to have set forth a theory that gives us access to a reality independent of our awareness or consciousness of this reality is that this reality is still an object of thought.

¹⁶ To use another example, climate change involves the dynamic interaction of a number of elements in relations of reciprocal determination (most notably, carbon, but methane gas and other elements as well) which involve distinctive points that are poorly understood and unlikely to be ever modeled with complete accuracy.

Can we ever think a reality that is independent of all thought? Stating this problem in Meillassoux's terminology, can we ever come to know the nature of reality as it is in-itself or are we forever condemned to know this reality only as a correlate of a thought for-us. In short, can we escape what Meillassoux calls the correlational circle? We can indeed do so, Meillassoux argues, if the correlational circle can itself be shown to be contingent—in other words, if we can conceive a world without the correlational circle itself. We do this, for instance, when we recognize that the world will continue to go on after my own death. Granted, Meillassoux admits, we cannot actually think our own abolition for, as Meillassoux recognizes, to do so is “once again, to think it as a correlate of my current thoughts, and thus to contradict myself pragmatically.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, and this point as absolutely critical for Meillassoux's argument, “nothing in it [the correlation] indicates its own necessity, even though we cannot think its being otherwise”;¹⁸ or as he also states it, “...it cannot be proved that this subjective unthinkability of non-correlation corresponds to the absolute impossibility of such a non-correlational reality existing.”¹⁹ In other words, we have a classic case of a lack of evidence is not evidence of lack argument. Since there is nothing within the correlationist circle to demonstrate its necessity, other than the fact that we simply cannot think outside the circle without pragmatic contradiction, this does not prove that there is no “non-correlational reality.” Add to this the fact that we can think the possibility of our own mortality, even if we cannot think beyond our death and annihilation, then we have enough for Meillassoux to conclude that the one thing we can know is the absolute contingency of all things insofar as all attempts to deny this ultimately presuppose the contingency of correlation itself. In a version of Descartes's cogito ergo sum argument, Meillassoux argues that “I can doubt the permanence of facts, but I cannot doubt the permanence of facticity without thereby reiterating it as an absolute.”²⁰ If one were to doubt Meillassoux's argument about the absolute nature of facticity itself, then one would then claim that it is possible for facticity itself not to be, that there may be something that is not contingent but necessary and cannot be conceived except as

¹⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign,” *Spekulative Poetik* (Freie Universität, Berlin, 20 April 2012), 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2010), 119.

existing (Spinoza’s understanding of self-caused substance for instance²¹). Once we go down this path of asserting a necessary existence, however, Meillassoux argues that we inevitably end up with a form of correlationism between that which is necessary and that which is contingent. In the case of Spinoza, for instance, we have the substance-mode correlation, and it would be no surprise to Meillassoux that Deleuze took a Spinozist path in absolutizing correlationism. But since we cannot prove there is not a reality outside correlationism, it is possible for correlationism (and hence necessity) not to be, and thus for a non-correlational reality which would leave us with an absolute facticity since we cannot doubt a permanent facticity since by doubting it we were led back to it.

The conclusion Meillassoux draws from these arguments is that “the being of every thing is its contingency—the fact that it is rather than is not.” And there is no reason, moreover, for anything to be rather than not be, and thus Meillassoux argues for the “absolute falsity of the Principle of Sufficient Reason since this principle asserts that there is a reason why something is or is not. This brings us to mathematics as well, for what is distinctive about mathematics is that unlike our ordinary attitude where we grasp certain “contingent things,” our attention focused primarily on the properties of these things, with the mathematical symbol one “grasps the eternal contingency of this or that thing.” And it is a consequence of grasping the “eternal contingency” of the mathematical sign that one immediately identifies the sign as one that is limitlessly reproducible. To clarify this point, Meillassoux offers the example of an archaeologist who finds an artifact with two lines she thinks may be a decorative motif or frieze:

§§§§§§§§§§
 ++++++++

But when the archaeologist “realizes that this frieze might in fact be two lines of signs,” the transformation that occurs is that “She now grasps the motifs as occurrences reproducible at will”:

§§§§§§§§§§, etc.
 ++++++++, etc.

The transformation is indeed an incorporeal transformation, for nothing in the corporeal marks

²¹ See Spinoza’s *Ethics*, E1d1: “By that which is self-caused I mean that whose essence involves existence; or that whose nature can be conceived only as existing.”

themselves has been changed but only the manner in which they are seen. Crucial to this transformation, as Meillassoux sees it, is precisely the fact that “the contingency of one mark is eternally the same as the contingency of another mark...” A consequence of this is the perception of a limitlessly-reproducible sign in that what one is seeing is not the sign as a sensible mark but rather the “eternal contingency” of the sign itself. Once the perception of the limitlessly-reproducible sign is established, then formal mathematics and Galilean science is off and running and able to tell us about reality as it is independent of the correlational circle.

Before evaluating Meillassoux’s account of mathematics, let us now return to Klein’s story.

IV

What is central to Klein’s narrative about the emergence of the modern concept of number is the role the “indeterminate” plays. According to the ancient view of numbers, numbers were ultimately subordinate to the objects that could be counted. Aristotle’s view of numbers, for instance, abstracted from all the qualities and properties of that which might be counted and considered the countable only as countable as such. So already with Aristotle we have a view of number that has switched away from a focus upon the contingent nature of things (as Meillassoux argued), but we are not yet with the modern conception of number for numbers are still taken to be determinate entities in their own right and hence the shift to the abstract sign (what Klein calls “symbol-generating abstraction”²²). This begins to change, Klein shows, with Diophantus. When Diophantus proposed various ways to solve indeterminate equations, Diophantus developed techniques that began to move beyond the assumption that numbers must be determinate entities in themselves. François Viète pushed Diophantus’s approach to the next step by developing the use of *logistique speciosa*, which he contrasted with *logistique numerosa*. The latter consists of calculations with determinate numbers while the former introduces the concept of a general number, and it is here, Klein argues, “As soon as ‘general number’ is conceived and represented in the medium of species as an ‘object’ in itself, that is, symbolically, the modern concept of ‘number’ is born.”²³

The next crucial development, Klein argues, occurs with Simon Stevin. For Stevin, the move beyond a

²² Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1976), 125.

²³ *Ibid.*, 163

discrete, countable entity becomes complete when rather than found number on the countable unit, Stevin founds it upon the zero. A consequence of this move is that numbers are no longer tied to an ontological entity but instead become simply the signs themselves. As Klein put it, Stevin “no longer deals with numbers of units which are determinate in each case but with the unlimited possibility of combining ciphers according to definite ‘rules of calculation.’”²⁴ John Wallis will pick up where Stevin leaves off, Klein claims, and will likewise follow Stevin in asserting that the “true ‘principle of number’ is the ‘nought.’”²⁵ Where Wallis’s innovation comes in is in identifying numbers as “indices of ratios.”²⁶ The reason for this move is to account for fractions—what were frequently called broken numbers—as well as irrational numbers such as pi. Wallis argues that not only are numbers such as pi an index for a particular ratio—the circumference to the diameter for example—but that “a ‘ratio,’ a ‘relation,’ underlies every ‘number’ as such.”²⁷ Taken as pure symbols abstracted from any determinate, countable entity, numbers have become for Wallis the indices for the ratios of the “indeterminate multitude,” or for substantive multiplicity.

What is crucial to the development of modern mathematics, therefore, is *not* the perception of the contingency of the symbol as something that is but could equally well not be. Such a perception presupposes an exclusive disjunction as an already achieved state of affairs: either something is or it is not, alive or dead, in-itself or for-us, etc. From the Deleuzian perspective we have argued for here, such exclusive disjunctions presuppose substantive multiplicity as their sufficient reason, and substantive multiplicity itself can neither be *identified* with being or non-being, in-itself or for-us—in short, it is *indeterminate*.²⁸ Thus, although the modern mathematical conception of number as pure symbol is indeed made possible by substantive multiplicity, the same is true of all phenomena, as we have seen, including the geometry of the ancients as well as their conception of numbers as determinate.

What we have been arguing, and with this we will close, is that substantive multiplicity is inseparable from every determinate, explicated entity and relation

between entities, including the exclusive disjunctions that are so crucial to Meillassoux’s arguments. As Klein’s history of mathematics has shown us, if new techniques were developed they would influence and alter the practices of subsequent mathematicians. Stated in the terms used in this essay, each of the determinate practices and techniques developed within mathematics presupposes, as does every phenomena, substantive multiplicity as its principle of sufficient reason. As a result, every determinate phenomena is inseparable from an intensive field of differential relations and gradient-thresholds that remain hidden within the explicated, determinate differences but nevertheless allow for the corporeal and explicated transformations of traditions, techniques, etc., when the intensive transformations strike a threshold point (a distinctive point or singularity), much as the threshold points in an egg signals spatial-temporal transformations. The real, then, is not a world as the categorical form and unity that guarantees, for McDowell, that all our experiences can be taken up through our conceptual capacities and placed within the logical space of reasons. The real is also not contingency itself, the fact that something is but could well not be, without reason. The real is substantive multiplicity, “it is the true substantive, substance itself.” As Deleuze also puts it, “the world is an egg.”²⁹

²⁴ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, 193.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

²⁸ For a more extended critique of Meillassoux along these lines, see my essay, “Between Realism and Anti-Realism: Deleuze and the Spinozist Tradition of Philosophy,” *Deleuze Studies* 5.1, 2001, 1-17

²⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 251.

MANUEL DELANDA ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

Any philosophy commits itself, explicitly or implicitly, to assert the existence of the entities that it intends to describe or explain. Philosophers who deny the truth of this statement—affirming for example that specifying what kinds of entities populate their world constrains their ability to think—usually assume an implicit ontology which is, for the same reason, uncritically accepted and poorly analyzed. Hence, declaring one's ontological commitments from the start should be standard procedure in philosophy. Although ontologies vary widely, and it is unwise to try to fit them into a rigid taxonomy, for the purposes of this brief essay they can be classified into three categories: idealist, empiricist, and realist. For the idealist philosopher there are no entities that exist independently of the human mind; for the empiricist entities that can be directly observed can be said to be mind-independent, but everything else (electrons, viruses, causal capacities etc.) is a mere theoretical construct that is helpful in making sense of that which can be directly observed; for the realist, finally, there are many types of entities that exist autonomously even if they are not directly given to our senses.

These three different ontological postures have many variations, so that the number of possible commitments is much larger. Idealists may believe that their mind-dependent entities are purely conventional, created as the world of experience is cut up by arbitrary signifiers, or they may believe that some of the concepts used to structure experience, such as the concepts of causality, space, and time, transcend any one particular culture. Empiricists may disagree on the role played by scientific instruments in transforming unobservable into observable entities. Some, for example, accept that telescopes are valid ontological instruments (and thus, that we can believe in the autonomous existence of saturn's rings) but that microscopes are not: while we could go to saturn on a space ship and see its rings through the window, we cannot shrink ourselves to be able to observe electrons or viruses. But it is in the third class of ontological commitments that there is the most variation, since the contents of a mind-independent world can vary in an infinite number of ways. An autonomous world can contain, for example, transcendent spaces like heaven or hell, and the variety of mythical entities that the human mind can conjure up to populate those spaces is limited only by the imagination. Thus, once a philosophy

adopts a realist ontology its first task is to delimit the kinds of entities that it considers legitimate inhabitants of the world.

In addition, a realist philosopher must carefully define what the concept of "mind-independence" implies: ecosystems, climate patterns, mountains and oceans, planets and stars, are entirely independent of the existence of the human mind—indeed, assuming their existence is necessary to understand how the human mind came to be in the first place. But what about communities, institutional organizations, and cities? None of these entities would exist without minds to interact communally, to give and obey commands, or to construct buildings and roads. So in this case, ontological autonomy must be defined not as independence from the mind but from the *contents of the mind*: communities, organizations, cities, and other social entities may have internal dynamics that are objective but poorly understood by the human mind. These complications that the realist philosopher must confront from the outset may be one reason why so many thinkers have rejected this position: it is much easier to get started when the contents of the world are just appearances (entities as they appear to the human mind) or directly observable things and events. And these same complications are the reason why the term "speculative" has been recently attached to the term "realism." There is simply no way to specify the contents of an autonomous world without speculating, since this world may contain beings that are too small or too large, and becomings that are too fast or too slow, to be directly observed.

In my own work, the need to speculate is brought about by the fact that I define the objective identity of entities not only by their properties but also by their tendencies and their capacities. Whereas properties are always actual, tendencies and capacities can be real without being actual, if they are not currently manifested or exercised. Thus, the mind-independent identity of a given body of water can be established by determining its actual properties (its volume, purity of composition, temperature, speed of flow) but that determination does not exhaust its reality. Such a body of water may exist presently in the liquid state, but it is part of its reality that at a certain temperature it can become steam or ice, that is, that it has a real tendency to boil or freeze under certain conditions. The fact that it is not in a gaseous or crystalline state at this moment does not make its tendency to become gas or crystal any less real. Similarly, the identity of a body of water is partly determined by its capacity to affect other substances, such as its capacity to dissolve them.

The exercise of this capacity demands an actual interaction with acids, alkalis, or salts, but the absence of interactions does not make the capacity any less real. Like tendencies, capacities become actual as events, but in this case the events are always double, to dissolve/to be dissolved. The reason is that a capacity to affect must always be coupled to a capacity to be affected: water is a solvent but only when interacting with substances that are soluble in it. An empiricist philosophy would be forced by its ontological commitments to assert the existence only of currently manifested tendencies (water actually freezing or melting) and currently exercised capacities (water actually dissolving another substance) but a realist philosophy has no problem committing itself to entities that are real but not actual, that is, entities that are *virtual*. Nevertheless, a great deal of careful speculative work must be done to properly conceptualize this virtuality.

Specifying the entities that legitimately populate a mind-independent world also involves speculation since the distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate is not given *a priori*. In my work, the criterion used to determine ontological validity is the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. Heaven and hell are transcendent spaces because if all the matter and energy in the universe disappeared these two spaces, and its inhabitants, would not be affected. It is easy to reject demons and angels, but other less obviously invalid entities are harder to deal with. The most influential realist philosopher of all times, Aristotle, introduced genera and species as ahistorical, unchanging essences that would also survive the disappearance of a material and energetic substratum. Since both genera and species are defined by lists of properties, and given that in my version of speculative realism properties are one of the determinants of identity, making properties non-transcendent is clearly a top priority. The concept of *emergent* property, a concept first developed by eighteenth-century chemists in an effort to make their discipline non-reducible to physics, plays an important role in this regard. A property is emergent if it is produced or synthesized from the actual interactions between the parts of a whole. In any particular case, for any given physical, chemical, biological, or social whole, a variety of interactions may give rise to an emergent property, and this redundancy in the means to synthesize a whole's properties is what ensures that it cannot be reduced to the properties of its parts. At the same time, the properties in question demand that there exist some interaction or another: they would disappear if the interactions ceased to occur. Thus, while

the properties associated with genera and species are eternal and necessary, those that are emergent are both historical (they are born the moment the right interactions occur) and contingent on the continuation of those interactions. In short, emergent properties are immanent, but not reducible, to their substratum. And a similar argument can be made for tendencies and capacities.

The ontological commitments of a philosophy have a direct effect on the way it frames the problem of knowledge: ontology may not determine epistemology but it clearly has important consequences for it. This fact is obscured in many idealist and empiricist philosophies because, as noted above, they tend to take their ontologies for granted. Idealists, for example, have no way to ground their claims to truth on evidence from the senses, since what we sense is entirely determined by conventional or transcendental concepts, so they have a tendency to privilege *a priori* knowledge. They also tend to favor deductive logic as the means to propagate truth from *a priori* general statements to particular ones. Empiricists, on the other hand, tend to assume that sensory experience can ground our knowledge of directly observable entities, providing us with evidence about their existence and properties, and to use inductive logic as a means to propagate truth from many particular statements to a few general ones. Realists have a more varied set of epistemological strategies because they differ so much on what they take to be the valid contents of the objective world. In my version of realism there are two important effects of ontology on epistemology.

First, the concept of emergent property implies that social properties cannot be reduced to psychological ones; psychological properties cannot be reduced to biological ones; biological properties cannot be reduced to chemical ones, and so on. This implies that the world is objectively stratified into semi-autonomous layers, each layer demanding a different strategy to extract knowledge from it. There is no single method that fits every stratum, and a variety of approaches are needed to produce true statements about the entities populating each layer. Second, the fact that the identity of these entities is determined not just by actual properties but by virtual tendencies and capacities implies that knowledge is produced not only by representations but by *interventions*. In other words, while actual properties can be directly represented in a model, virtual tendencies and capacities need to be actualized by causally intervening in the world. In the case of tendencies these interventions may be simple, raising or lowering the ambient temperature

to force a body of liquid water to boil or freeze, for example. But in the case of capacities the interventions become highly complex because there are many ways in which an entity may affect other entities or be affected by them. A knife, for example, may have the capacity to cut when interacting with cheese, bread, or vegetables, but it also has the capacity to kill when interacting with a large enough animal with organs that can be pierced. There is no way to specify in advance the range of combinations of affecting/being affected that entities can have, and only active experimentation can reveal their virtual complexity.

Further epistemological consequences follow from the realization that not only the entities we study have properties and capacities but so do we, the producers of knowledge. Idealist and empiricist philosophers tend to assume that all knowledge is representational, the formula for which is Knowing That _____, a formula in which the blank is filled by a declarative sentence, that is, a sentence stating a fact, *a priori* or *a posteriori*. But the need for active interventions to produce knowledge points to another formula, Knowing How _____, in which the blank is filled by an infinitive verb: knowing how to swim, to ride a bicycle, to dissect an animal, to mix two substances, to conduct a survey. Unlike know-that, which may be transmitted by books or lectures, know-how is taught by example and learned by doing: the teacher must display the appropriate actions in front of the student and the student must then practice repeatedly until the skill is acquired. The two forms of knowledge are related: we need language to speak about skills and theorize about them. But we need skills to deploy language effectively: to argue coherently, to create appropriate representations, to compare and evaluate models. Indeed, the basic foundation of a literate society is formed by skills taught by example and learned by doing: knowing how to read and how to write.

There is a related distinction of great epistemological importance. Much as knowing-that and knowing-how are two meanings of the word "knowledge," there are two meanings of the word "meaning." When in the course of a conversation a person asks "What do you mean?," he or she may be requesting a definition of a term or a disambiguation of a sentence. In both cases the word "meaning" refers to the semantic content of a word or a sentence. Let's call this "signification." But when a close friend comes for advice and says "My life has no meaning" it would be a grave mistake to infer that this is a request for something semantic. What he or she means is "My life feels insignificant or unimportant;

I feel irrelevant to my community; I do not make a difference in the life of my family." This other sense of the word "meaning" is not signification but *significance*. Whereas know-that is clearly related to signification, know-how is linked to significance. A carpenter, for example, skillfully intervening on a piece of wood may ask "Does it make a difference if I sand the wood following the grain (the direction of the wood fibers) as opposed to against the grain?" A chemist may ask "Does it make a difference if I try to dissolve gold with hydrochloric acid or nitric acid, as opposed to a mixture of the two (aqua regia)?" In both cases the answer is yes: sanding with the grain produces a smooth surface, and adding aqua regia to gold dissolves it. The interventions that produce knowledge of this kind must be significant, they must make a difference. But we need not confine these remarks to crafts or sciences. In politics the interventions of activists must be significant, important, relevant. It is true that a good speech ("I had a dream") can make a big difference, but so can interventions carried out in complete silence, like helping to rebuild a devastated area without trying to convince the locals of one's ideology.

It is, of course, conceivable that idealists or empiricists could incorporate these two distinctions (know-that/know-how, signification/significance) into their theories of knowledge. But a realist for whom the world is filled with objective tendencies and capacities waiting to be actualized by skillful interventions, tendencies and capacities that provide a myriad of opportunities and risks, is in a much better position to take advantage of these insights. This, among other things, is what makes realism a better strategy to confront the political, economical, ecological, and technological problems of our time.

MARKUS GABRIEL

THE MEANING OF “EXISTENCE” AND THE CONTINGENCY OF SENSE¹

In Western philosophy, the last century was dominated by the view that metaphysics and ontology were hopelessly doomed to failure. Many reasons have been given for different versions of this claim, most of them inspired by broadly Kantian epistemological considerations. Kant famously claimed, “the proud name of ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general [...] must give way to the more modest title of a transcendental analytic.”² However, in my view his criticism is only directed against a particular form of ontology and not against ontology as such. What he attacks is the idea of ontology as a synthetic *a priori* insight into how things generally are, that is, in all possible ways of accessing them. According to his analysis, the range of our judgments is always limited according to certain contingent forms of understanding and sensibility and this finitude cannot be transcended.³

Kantian considerations play an important role in both the analytic (from Carnap to Quine) and the hermeneutical (from Heidegger to Derrida to Gadamer) rejection of metaphysics, although the various anti-metaphysical arguments naturally differ in detail. This also holds for Habermas’ declaration of post-metaphysical thinking.⁴ Despite the differences in outlook and argument, what is common to all the traditions just cited is the idea that metaphysics and ontology are associated with an idealized trust in the capacity of human reason to penetrate the realm of “things in themselves,” “the world as it is in itself,” “the absolute,” or “reality” as is often said instead. In order to avoid outrageously unmotivated metaphysical claims about the fundamental nature of reality itself, it does indeed seem to be prudent to analyze our access conditions to what there is

¹ Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy in London, at the University of Memphis, at Temple University, and at Beijing Normal University. I thank all audiences for critical questions to which I have tried to respond in the current version of the paper.

² cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 247/B 304.

³ For a defense of the fundamental ideas of Post-Kantian ontology see my *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism* (New York/London: Continuum 2011).

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

before we claim to know how what there is really is.

The 21st century has begun with a general metaphysical and ontological, or some prefer to say, speculative turn.⁵ The call for a renewal of ontology or metaphysics in a more general sense is noticeable across the board of philosophical traditions as early as post-World War Western philosophy. Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, Stanley Cavell, David Lewis, and the nowadays booming branch of analytic metaphysics can be counted among those involved in this renewal.

My own contribution to this debate begins with the observation that some crucial and widely-used terms of the debate—such as “the world,” “the universe,” and “reality”—have not been sufficiently clarified. They are mostly used in an imprecise and suggestive way as terms referring to some ultimate or all-encompassing domain, within which everything is supposed to be the case or to take place. In a loose continuation of Wittgenstein’s early philosophy, “the world” often denotes something like the “totality of truth-makers” or “the totality of facts.” Yet, at the same time, a particular kind of fact, namely facts investigated by the natural sciences, are turned into privileged members of the world, whereas our reference to them, or “mind,” tends to be excluded from the domain. Mind is treated as worldless because it comes late in the history of the universe. But “the universe” and “the world” are different objects, as I will argue in this paper.

What is worse, the central concept of ontology, existence or being, continues to be often used without being well defined or characterized at all. In particular, the central conceptual relationship between the all-encompassing domain—“the world,” or “reality”—and existence is most often overlooked, although the tradition, in particular Kant, has offered significant contributions towards a clarification of the relation between “existence” and “the world.” Many authors confuse metaphysics and ontology and seem to believe that ontology should always be practiced in light of the aim “to uncover the ultimate structure of reality.”⁶

I distinguish *ontology* from *metaphysics*. In my view, *metaphysics* is the attempt to determine what the world is, where “the world” refers to the all-encom-

⁵ Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (ed.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011).

⁶ Jason Turner, “Ontological Nihilism,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 6, eds. Karen Bennett and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2-54, 6. This is also the framework within which Theodore Sider is operating in his *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

passing domain. This domain has been described with many different words both throughout the history of philosophy and in contemporary natural languages, ranging from “being,” “totality,” “the One,” “the absolute,” “reality,” or “the universe,” to “nature” or “cosmos.” In the following, when I use the expression, “the world,” I always intend to refer to the all-encompassing domain independently of how one might want to fill in the formal concept of the all-encompassing domain. “The world” is a formal concept in the sense that one can defend the necessity of this concept for our understanding of specific objects or events without thereby specifying a material concept of the world, for instance, a concept of the world as nature or as the totality of facts.

In the first part of the paper (I.) I will argue that we need to distinguish between the world and existence, even though Kant has interlocked the concepts. Kant argues that “existence” refers to the fact that the “field of possible experience,” his concept of the world, is not empty. For Kant, for something to exist is for this something to appear in the world. Thus, in a Kantian context, you cannot do ontology without metaphysics. I disagree with this assumption, but I agree with Kant in that I accept that we need a revisionary concept of existence. I will discuss Frege’s alternative ontology according to which to exist is to fall under a concept.

In the second part of my paper (II.) I will present some basic ideas of the ontology I have called “the ontology of fields of sense.”⁷ In particular, I will sketch a theory of the modalities contingency, necessity, actuality, and possibility according to the idea that to exist is for something to appear in a field of sense. Roughly, this means that to exist is to belong to a domain.

As I will argue towards the end of the first section of the paper, the world does not exist, which does not mean that nothing exists. The revisionary ontology I defend entails *meta-metaphysical nihilism*, the claim that the world does not exist. This means that metaphysics, the theory of unrestricted totality, does not have an object it studies. Any investigation into the nature of the world as world is doomed to failure from the outset given that its proposed object of investigation does not itself exist. This leads me to reject infinite regress as an argumentative ontological strategy in the second section of the paper. If there were an infinite regress in ontology, there would have to be a rule governing the transition from one field of existence to the next. This maximally universal rule, however, can only exist if the world

⁷ See my *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), (forthcoming).

exists given that it pretends to be applicable to *all* domains. But there is no all-encompassing domain, no “domain of all domains,”⁸ or “field of all fields” for that matter.

In the context of this paper, it is sufficient to note that the concept of a “field of sense” plays a similar role to the concept of a “domain of objects.” Even though I will not go into a detailed defense of the conceptual differences here, it is certainly helpful to clarify that I introduce the concept of a “field of sense” in contradistinction to the idea that everything that exists is either an element of a set or itself a set. “Fields of sense” are distinguished from sets. One main reason for this distinction is that not all “fields of sense” are governed by well-defined extensionality. There are vague and ambiguous fields, such as artwork. There is no straightforward answer to the question how many objects there are in an action painting by Pollock. It is not the case that in general two fields are identical if they have the same elements. French citizens, for example, might happen to completely overlap with Spanish citizens, for instance, in the (very unlikely) case that all French citizens become Spanish citizens or the other way around. Still, French citizenship and Spanish citizenship would not be the same. The set of French citizens and the set of Spanish citizens could be the same set (they could have the same extension), but the field of French citizenship and the field of Spanish citizenship could never be the same given that the relevant form of citizenship is defined by and defines different *qualitative* relations between the objects appearing in it. A novel is also a field of sense, just as Italy is. “Venice” belongs both to *Death in Venice* and to Italy. These very different forms of belonging do not both fall under the concept of set-membership. A *sense* in the ontology of fields of sense refers to a way objects appear in a field and not to rules for counting them. Consequently, I reject the identification of existence with the existential *quantifier*. The most obvious reason for this, I take it, is that the question

- (1) How many X are there?
is not identical with the question
- (2) Does X exist?

To (1) one might respond “3,” whereas “3” would be a strange answer to (2). To know that something exists is not at all to know how many Xs there are or even that there is at least one X, given that there

⁸ See Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 23, 115, 119, 121.

might also be half an X. I believe that the idea of the existential quantifier is hopelessly infected by the idea of a discrete ontology. A *discrete ontology* rests on the idea that all existing things are discrete units, which, in principle, are countable. But this only pertains to some domains.

1. THE MEANING OF "EXISTENCE"

Kant claimed that existence could not be a "real predicate"⁹ and Frege has joined him with his seemingly similar claim that it could not be a first-order predicate capturing a first-order property of objects.¹⁰ I believe that different versions of the following train of thought underlie their rejection of the idea of existence as a real or first-order predicate/property even though it does not necessitate acceptance of either Kant's or Frege's revisionary ontology. Let us call a *proper property* any property reference that puts one in a position to distinguish some object in the world from some other object or objects in the world. In this context, it is sufficient to elucidate the concept of the world as the concept of the domain in which everything exists. There is no need to commit oneself in advance to the nature of this domain. Many people identify the world with the universe. In my view, however, the term "the universe" refers to a specific domain, namely to the domain investigated by the natural sciences, arguably primarily by physics (depending on your philosophy of science). The identification of the world with the universe usually serves the function of supporting the materialist intuition that nothing exists that is not physical or material in nature. Yet, this is evidently false given that *there is a unicorn in the movie *The Last Unicorn*, but that this unicorn is not material.* An even clearer case is the content of a dream. The content of a dream, for instance, that I buy a unicorn on Mars, is not material or physical. But it is still true that there is a unicorn in my dream. To exist is not to be material (which is, of course, not to say that to exist is to be immaterial). If the world was identical with the universe (the domain of the material), nothing immaterial could exist. Given that all sorts of immaterial objects exist, the world has to be different from the universe.¹¹

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 599/ B 627.

¹⁰ Cf. Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic: A logico-mathematical enquiry into the concept of number*, trans. J. L. Austin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1980), §53.

¹¹ Let it be noted in passing that I reject the idea that the existential quantifier in philosophy should be used as a theoretical term referring to some allegedly fundamental form of existence, the form of existence latching onto the fundamental structure of reality. In my view, the distinction

Now, if existence were a proper property, it would serve a discriminating function by associating a relative complement with an object. A *relative complement* is a finite contrast class. If I assert that I see a blue cube in front of me, the predicate...*is a blue cube* might contrast with, say, red cube, blue triangle, black cube or chemically non-manipulated sugar cube. However, blue cubes usually do not contrast with ugly dolphins or police-uniform-wearing female unicorns. For this reason, predicates are informative. The range of their contrast class or the range of their contrast classes is sufficiently limited so that the attribution of the relevant property to an object contains information.

Yet, this evidently does not hold for the predicate... *exists*, for *all* objects in the world exist. Even if the contrast class of existing things were that of non-existing things, existence would still not be a proper property given that it would still not distinguish some object in the world from some other object or some other objects in the world. "Existence" would still be defined as something like "presence in the world." But once "existence" is defined as something like "presence in the world," one has already carried out a revision of the default conception of existence as a property of objects in the world.

That something exists in the world is equivalent to the world not being empty. This is a property of the world and not of its denizens. The claim that the world is not empty does not provide a predicate that allows the world to be carved up into those things this predicate applies to and those it does not.

Accordingly, we can now classify ontologies in the following way. Ontologies are either default or revisionary. Default ontologies understand existence as a proper property. This entails that some objects in the world can not exist, because proper properties do not necessarily apply to all objects in the world.¹²

between ordinary usages of existential expressions and philosophical usages is hopelessly infected by metaphysical prejudices. For a clear expression of some of these prejudices see Turner "Ontological Nihilism." Ontology is not revisionary metaphysics, it first and foremost describes what existential assertion consists in without thereby deciding on what existential assertions we would like to turn out true.

¹² It could be the case that all objects in the world have a certain proper property in common, for example the property of being red. It could just happen that all objects are red. But this would not mean that all objects are necessarily red. They would just all happen to be red, whereas it could not be that some objects in the world exist and some other objects in the world do not exist. There can be no non-existing objects in the world. It is necessary that all objects in the world exist.

The most widespread version of revisionary ontology understands “existence” as “presence in the physical world,” where “presence,” “physical,” and “world” remain vague concepts of totality. For the sake of the argument let us call this ontology “physicalism.”¹³ In particular, in the definition of “existence” as “presence in the physical world,” to be present is often characterized as “to be physical,” which amounts to the circular claim that “to exist” means “to be physical in the physical world.” If “presence” were to be understood as a form of binary relation between the world and something that belongs to it, one would already have altered the view. The reason for this is that the physical world is not itself a part of the physical world. Let us say that “the physical world” refers to all of space-time. In this case to exist would be for something to be present in space-time. But space-time is not itself present in space-time. Of course, one might say that to exist is to have the property of being spatio-temporal. Under this condition, space-time exists by being spatio-temporal. However, this would contravene the revisionary definition of “existence” as presence in the physical world. Presence in the physical world is not itself present in the physical world. But if it is not, then it cannot exist according to this ontology. Yet, if there is no such thing as presence in the physical world then nothing exists.

Kant and Frege were both more or less aware of arguments to the effect that existence is not a proper property even though they did not motivate their own revision in exactly the terms just sketched. Nevertheless, they would both have to agree first that revision is inevitable, and second that existence is at least not a proper property. If it is a property, existence must be a property of a different kind.

However, their own answers to the question of what existence is given that it is not a proper property both fail for the following reasons, as well as for arguments associated with these reasons. In short, Kant claims that “existence” is a property of the “field of possible experience”¹⁴—one of the manifold concepts he uses to elucidate the concept of the world—namely the property that something appears within it, that something is experienceable. To exist for Kant is to appear in the field of possible experience.

When Kant officially claims that existence is “position,” this in effect amounts to the idea that to exist is to be posited in the “field of possible experi-

¹³ The ontology of physicalism is evidently not identical with all claims labeled “physicalism” or “naturalism.”

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 227/B 280, see also A 248/B 304, A 610/B 638, A 642/B 670, A 697/B 725, A 702/B 730.

ence.” To exist is to be experienceable, to be part of the domain or field of possible experience, *existere est percipi posse*. Transcendental philosophy is the uncovering of the structures defining and thereby limiting this field in such a way that bounds of sense can be imposed on all possible truth-conducive discourse. For Kant, truth-apt thoughts are about things that exist and things that exist are encompassed by the world understood as the horizon of possible experience.

Apart from all the intricate problems tied to transcendental idealism, Kant generates a much more radical problem. The position that there is exactly one world can be called *ontological monism*. I distinguish between *ontic monism*, the claim that there is only one entity, and *ontological monism*, the claim that there is only one domain, which encompasses everything that exists.¹⁵ Kant is an ontological, but not an ontic monist. The problem with this is that the world itself does not exist according to Kant. It is not experienceable, it is a regulative idea, a form of concept to which no existing object corresponds. “The world” for Kant does not refer to anything in the world. But if existence is the fact that something appears in the world, that the world is not empty, then the world has to exist. Something that does not exist can be neither empty nor filled. However, if the world exists, it has to appear within the world, which is impossible given that the world is not an object among others. It is not itself experienceable. Therefore, Kant ultimately is committed to *ontic nihilism*, to the view that nothing exists. If (1) there

¹⁵ In my terminology, ontic monism corresponds to “existence monism” in Jonathan Schaffer’s classification of forms of monism, whereas his “priority monism” would be a form of “ontological monism.” See Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. David Chalmers, David Manley, Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 347–383. However, the category of ontological monism is broader than Schaffer’s of priority monism. Kant, for example, is an ontological monist, but he is not a priority monist. He does not believe that the world is a fundamental layer such that every other entity is grounded in it. Also, many of the philosophers Schaffer classifies as existence monists, for example Plotinus or Hegel, are not at all ontic monists. Plotinus, for example, extensively argues that the One does not exist, that it is beyond being, and that it has no content. Hegel, on the other hand, also does not believe that the world is a fundamental structure preexisting our thought about it. For a reconstruction of the outlines of Plotinus and Hegel in the light of these distinctions see my *Skeptizismus und Idealismus in der Antike* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009) and my *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, co-authored with Slavoj Žižek (New York/London: Continuum Press, 2009).

is a singular domain that is supposed to encompass everything such that everything only exists by being encompassed by that domain, and (2) that very domain does not itself exist, then (C) nothing exists. In that respect, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's observation that transcendental idealism is a form of nihilism turns out to be correct.¹⁶

Even though on some level Frege might be committed to a form of ontological monism too, his advantage over Kant is that he pluralizes the domains of existence. He suggests a semantic understanding of existence as a second-order predicate of concepts, a "character (*Merkmal*)" of concepts rather than a "property (*Eigenschaft*)" of objects.¹⁷ In particular in his "Dialogue with Pünjer About Existence," as well as in *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, he famously claims that existence is the property of concepts to have an extension that is larger than 0.¹⁸ For Frege, to assert that there are horses is to assert that the concept...*is a horse* is not empty, i.e. that something falls under it. Hence, to exist is to fall under a concept. We can, thus, hold on to the following two definitions of Kantian and Fregean ontology:

(Kantian Ontology) = To exist is to appear in the world, that is, in the field of possible experience.

(Fregean Ontology) = To exist is to fall under a concept.

With a few caveats in mind, one could defend Fregean ontology as follows. A long-standing rationalist tradition has thought of concepts in terms of sets of "marks" in order to understand objects in terms of sets of properties.¹⁹ According to this tradition, any object has a finite set of properties by reference to which it is distinguishable from other objects. Horses are animals, they are supposed to have legs,

¹⁶ "Truly, my dear Fichte, it should not grieve me if you, or whoever it might be, want to call chimerism what I oppose to idealism, which I reproach as nihilism" („Wahrlich, mein lieber Fichte, es soll mich nicht verdrießen, wenn Sie, oder wer es sei, Chimärismus nennen wollen, was ich dem Idealismus, den ich Nihilismus schelte, entgegense-tze") quoted in Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 65. In the original: Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Werke*, 6 vols. eds. F. Roth and F. Köppen (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980), 3:44.

¹⁷ For this distinction see, for example, Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, § 53, 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The most distinct representative of this tradition is, of course, Leibniz. See, for example, his 1684 "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," in G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew, Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 23-28.

a particular genetic code, etc. The very function of the idea of properties of objects in our epistemic economy is to make objects available to judgments in order for us to be able to refer to a world made up of different objects. Properties that do not serve this function of distinguishing an object within the world from others are, hence, not proper properties.²⁰ It remains that existence is a property, but just not of objects. For this reason, one could agree with Frege *mutatis mutandis* and say that existence is a higher-order predicate. It distinguishes concepts from each other by dividing a logical space of concepts into empty and non-empty ones. Hence, the property of existence fulfills a discriminatory function but only on the level of concepts, not on that of objects.²¹

Frege ties the notion of existence as a higher-order predicate to his notion of reference. The extension of a concept constitutes the, in principle, countable range of objects falling under it. In this way, his notion of existence squares with his attempt to build mathematics on formal semantics (in the sense of a *Begriffsschrift*), to the extent that number theory can be based on set theory and set theory is tied to formal semantics. Existence thus turns from mysterious metaphysical Being into the existential quantifier. This idea culminates in Quine's oft-quoted dictum "to be is to be the value of a bound variable."²²

²⁰ In a similar vein, Brandom argues that "object" and "singular term" are sense-dependent concepts in Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2000), Chapter 4. Brandom's argument there is remarkable for various reasons, but particularly relevant for the argumentation in the text because it emphasizes the necessary connection between our concept of objects and our use of singular terms. Predicative (for Brandom: inferential) structures are constitutive of objects and of the fact that we distinguish them by their properties. Of course, Brandom himself draws different consequences from this.

²¹ The question of whether Frege is an ontological monist hinges on the question whether there is a concept of concepts such that all concepts fall under this concept. If there is, then the all-encompassing domain would be this very universal concept. Frege himself avoids addressing this problem with his strict distinction between concepts and objects. On many levels it is a problem for Frege to accept that concepts exist, because this would turn them into objects in his sense. However, this is a problem only for Frege, which need not concern us here. For an elaboration of the problem of the concept of concepts in Frege in this context see my *Die Erkenntnis der Welt. Eine Einführung in die Erkenntnistheorie* (Freiburg: Alber, 2012).

²² In the original: "To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable," in W.V.O. Quine, *From A Logical Point Of View: Nine Logical-Philosophical Essays*, 2nd edn, revised (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard

Prima facie there seems to be nothing wrong with this move. However, it ultimately neglects the dimension of sense, which is constitutive for the distinction between sense and reference. As Frege himself points out, we have no way to access reference (and hence to assert existence) without sense. Yet, his disregard of sense in his theory of existence, that is, in his ontology, leads him to identify existence with quantifiability.

Frege explicitly points out that we have no way to access reference (and hence to assert existence) without sense. His famous example of “morning star” and “evening star” as senses of a common reference, namely Venus, thus has an obvious shortcoming. According to Frege, the proper names “evening star” and “morning star” refer to the same thing, i.e. Venus. However, “Venus” is also a proper name and proper names have a sense even if, in philosophy, we sometimes use them to denote the referent of a plurality of senses.

The sense of a proper name is grasped by everybody who is sufficiently familiar with the language or totality of designations to which it belongs; but this serves to illuminate only a single aspect of the reference, supposing it to have one. Comprehensive knowledge of the reference would require us to be able to say immediately whether any given sense belongs to it. To such knowledge we never attain.²³

Even though Frege conceives of sense as of an objective dimension, a property of thoughts we grasp rather than produce, his theory of sense is part of a theory of knowledge-acquisition and, thus, falls short of a proper ontology of sense.²⁴ Hence, it is not surprising that he subtracts sense from existence. To exist is to fall under a concept and he isolates the extension of a concept from its intension in order to tie existence to isolated extension. Yet, the relation of something falling under a concept is only individuated in each case in terms of the sense or senses which constitute the concept, its specific mode of orientation, as it were.

Univ. Press, 1980), 13.

²³ Gottlob Frege, “On Sinn and Bedeutung,” in *The Frege Reader*, eds. Michael Beaney (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 154, cf. 151-171. See also Gottlob Frege, “The Thought: A Logical Inquiry,” in *Mind* (1956), 65: 259, 289-311. “Accordingly, with a proper name, it depends on how whatever it refers to is presented. This can happen in different ways and every such way corresponds with a particular sense of a sentence containing a proper name” (ibid., 298).

²⁴ For a defense of this reading see famously Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

In addition to the semantic and epistemological intricacies of the distinction between sense and reference, Frege is committed to the view that nothing would have existed had there been no concepts. If to exist is to fall under a concept, then in general nothing exists unless there are concepts. Of course, Frege could defend a very thorough form of “rampant Platonism,” to borrow McDowell’s term.²⁵ He could simply claim that there are modally robust concepts, that some concepts are there anyway. The concept of the Big Bang would have existed had no one ever grasped it and for this reason the Big Bang could have existed without anyone ever noticing. Yet, in this case Frege would have to elaborate on the concept of existence with respect to concepts, something he tries to resist. He would have to tell us what it means for concepts to exist as modally robust.

I take it that Frege’s most valuable contribution to ontology is that he introduced a plurality of domains, a plurality of concepts. There is not just one domain of existence, the world, but many domains. So, even if the world does not exist, *prima facie* everything else could still exist. Frege, therefore, introduces the option of *ontological pluralism*, which in my view is the claim that there is a plurality of domains.²⁶ Unfortunately he overhastily identifies the domains with concepts and then neglects the fact that falling under a concept is impossible without the senses of a concept.

The problem is that Frege neither elaborates on his basic ontology nor on the relevance of a principle of individuation for the plurality of domains. For what individuates a domain and turns it into this-rather-than-that-domain is its sense. A concept is this rather than that concept because of its sense. To fall under a concept is to fall under a particular concept with a particular sense. For this reason I suggest replacing the idea of a domain-ontology premised on set-theoretic conceptions of existence with an ontology of fields of sense.

In order to briefly specify the relevant notion of sense, let me introduce what I have elsewhere called *the allegory of the cubes*, an allegory inspired

²⁵ John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 88.

²⁶ Contemporary metaphysicians sometimes associate ontological pluralism with the claim that there are modes of being. See Kristopher McDaniel, “Ways of Being,” in *Metametaphysics*, eds. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 290-319. However, this neglects the possibility of a plurality of domains (not of modes or ways) of existence, which is a different theory from the adverbial theory of modes or ways of being.

by Putnam's argument for conceptual relativity.²⁷ Imagine that there are three cubes on a table, a blue, a white, and a red cube. If you ask yourself the question: how many objects are there on the table, a spontaneous and true answer states that there are three. In this case, the rule of the count, the sense holding the situation together, might consist in the rule to count the cubes or the colors. If you were to count atoms instead of colors or cubes, the number of objects on the "table" would be much larger than three. You might also just count the three cubes as one artifact, say, as a particular work of art, or as a representation of the French flag. In my view, the rules that determine how many objects there are are senses, and for each sense there is a field of sense, the objects that appear in its range. It is important to think of those rules not generally as something projected onto the cubes or raw subtractive material à la thing in itself. The rules are as objective as the cubes, the atoms, and the French flag. Senses are as "real" or as much "out there" as the cubes.

Without going into detail at this juncture, let me just mention a distinction that is crucial for my way of understanding the allegory of the cubes. By "object" I mean anything that can become the content of a truth-apt thought. By "fact" I mean something that is true of an object. It is true of the three cubes that they have colors, that there might be a procedure to break them down into atoms or some other gunk. It is, thus, a fact that the cubes have colors, and this fact can in turn become an object if we think about it. In this case it is true of the fact that we think about it, which turns the fact into an object of thought and thought into a fact. Incidentally, this facticity of thought itself alone suffices to integrate thought into what there is. Sense cannot be made from the outside, as it were.²⁸ When we make sense of something, the sense we make is part of what there is. This is why we can make sense of someone making sense. Thoughts are just more facts.

Through the contrasts I have set up in this section, I hope it is sufficiently clear what I mean when I elucidate the meaning of "existence" as appearing

²⁷ See Hilary Putnam on the Polish logician, in *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 40ff. See also "Sosa on Internal Realism and Conceptual Relativity," in *Ernest Sosa and His Critics*, ed. John Greco (Malden, MA.: Blackwell, 2004), 233-248, 240.

²⁸ I have dealt with this idea under the heading of "transcendental ontology" in my *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism* (London: Continuum, 2011). I thoroughly agree with almost everything in Mark Johnston's "Objective Mind and the Objectivity of Our Minds," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2007), LXXV/2, 233-268.

in a field of sense. To exist is to appear in a domain constituted by the sense that determines things as being thus-and-so. Things being thus-and-so, that is, facts, are mostly independent of our particular modes of engaging with things being thus-and-so. The fact that I have a nose and two ears is neither created nor altered by my reference to my nose and my two ears as to a nose and two ears. My nose and my ears appear in a particular field of sense, for example in the field of sense of my body or, currently, in the field of sense of this sentence. We can therefore add another definition:

(Ontology of fields of sense) = To exist is to appear in a field of sense.

This view differs from Kant in that it allows for an actual (and not just epistemically possible) plurality of fields (and not just for one field of possible experience) and it differs from Frege in its emphasis on the role sense plays in the constitution of existence. In addition, not all fields are concepts, even though some fields are. The field of sense of the Big Bang is not a concept, but within it a lot of things appear.

Before I can sketch my revision of the modalities in light of the arguments so far given, I would like to emphasize my commitment to *meta-metaphysical nihilism*: I believe that the world does not exist. This does not make me an ontological nihilist. *Ontological nihilism* would be the position that there is no field within which anything appears. I clearly reject that. I only claim that there is no all-encompassing field within which everything appears.

To exist is to appear in a field of sense. Appearing is my term for belonging. To belong to a field of sense is neither generally to be member of a set nor to be an object of a domain we can quantify over. Both set-membership and the existential quantifier are too narrow for ontology. They are provincial forms of sense, at the very best, describing mathematics or some regions of mathematics and some sciences capable of a suitable degree of formalization. I will elaborate on the manifold meaning of appearing and, thus of belonging, in the second part of my paper. For the following argument it is sufficient to conceive appearing in terms of being encompassed. Existence and, thus appearing, is always local, which is nicely captured by the fact that many expressions in different natural languages use a locative expression for existence such as "there is," "il y'a," "c'è," "Dasein" and "existence" itself. To "exist" literally means "to stand out." To appear is to be encompassed by a field of sense. Without much ado this entails that there can be no all-encompassing field of sense. If there

were an all-encompassing field of sense, it would have to appear in a field of sense. In order for it to appear in a field of sense it has to be within the range of its sense and, thus, to be encompassed by the field it appears in. Therefore, the field within which it appears is more encompassing than the alleged all-encompassing field of sense. If by “the world” we refer to the all-encompassing field of sense, the field of all fields, we have to conclude that the world does not exist. Thus, any position in ontology that entails or presupposes the existence of an all-encompassing field has to be rejected.

2. THE CONTINGENCY OF SENSE

In his review of my contribution to the book *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, Espen Hammer has objected against an earlier version of the ontology of fields of sense that it triggers an infinite regress.²⁹ He goes on to establish a relation between the regress and contingency and argues that I ultimately presuppose the availability of a transcendent, “god’s eye point of view” and an “absolute standard” “against which we always fall short.”³⁰ As an alternative, he proposes a Wittgensteinian position according to which we cannot (and do not have to) transcend forms of life, which generate their own standards in such a way that we cannot judge them to be optional and, hence, contingent.

In order to address the issues raised by Hammer, let me list my definitions of the modalities in advance. *Contingency* is the fact that something could be otherwise. In particular, I believe that it only holds as a relationship between objects in a given field. It could be otherwise in the field of a philosophy lecture than that I raise my left hand. *Necessity*, by contrast, is the fact that something could not be otherwise. As necessity, it is field-immanent. It could not be otherwise in basic arithmetic than that $2+2=4$. *Actuality* is the same as existence. To be actual is to appear in a field of sense. It is the property of a field not to be empty. *Actuality* is a *field-property*, which is different from a *field-immanent property* such as necessity. *Possibility* is the fact that there is

²⁹ Espen Hammer, *Review of Markus Gabriel, Slavoj Žižek, Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism*, in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews. An electronic journal* 2010 (8): <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24463/?id=21028>: “One might think that such a view generates an infinite regress in which the ontological levels will go on forever, and it is not clear (at least not to this reader) whether Gabriel sees Schelling as being committed to some sort of foundationalism or whether his Schelling accepts the potential regress.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*

a sense constituting a field independently of the question what exactly if anything appears within it. It is possible that Peter is a French Citizen because there is a sense constituting the field of French citizenship in such a way that any person named Peter is eligible as an element appearing in the field.

The question to be answered is whether the ontology of fields of sense triggers an infinite regress of fields such that there only is an object if it exists in a field if this field exists in a field and this field in turn exists in a field, and so on. Hammer thinks that this is the case for my account and that this is the result of my position that every field is contingent insofar as its sense could be otherwise in some other field encompassing the field in question.

Let me begin with the problem of the regress. In a famous passage Richard Dedekind sets out to prove that there are infinite systems. In his *What Are Numbers and What Should They Be?* he writes:

Theorem: There exist infinite systems.

Proof: My own realm of thoughts, i.e. the totality S of all things, which can be objects of my thought, is infinite. For, if S signifies an element of S , then is the thought S' , that S can be an object of my thought, itself an element of S . If we regard this as transform $f(s)$ of the element s , then has the transformation f of S , thus determined, the property that the transform S' is a part of S ; and S' is certainly a proper part of S , because there are elements in S (e.g. my own ego) which are different from every such thought s' and therefore are not contained in S' . Finally it is clear that, if s_1 and s_2 are different elements of S , their transforms s_1' and s_2' are also different, that therefore the transformation f is a distinct (similar) transformation. Hence S is infinite, which was to be proved.³¹

The standard reconstruction of the argument contained in this famous passage misses a crucial point Dedekind adds to the nesting of thoughts he deems an adequate illustration of the infinite. The first part of the argument is familiar to philosophers. If S is the totality of thoughts then there is a thought that some thought s belongs to the totality of thought. This thought which states that s belongs to S , can be called s^* . Now this triggers an infinite regress, as, for any thought s^* , ..., s^{*n+1} there is a thought about this thought putting it in the range of the totality of thoughts. At this point Dedekind adds—and this addition usually goes unnoticed—that the set of all thoughts stating that thoughts s , t , u , v etc. belong

³¹ Richard Dedekind, *Essays on The Theory of Numbers* (New York: Dover Publication, 2003), 64.

to S, i.e. the set S^* , is a proper subset of S. And his argument consists in the observation that the I think, the ego accompanying all thoughts S^* , is not identical with any thought s^* , t^* and so on. The act of thinking putting any thought into the totality of thoughts thought of as thoughts (that is into S^*) is not identical with any particular thought thought of as thought. Hence, S^* is a proper subset of S precisely because it is not identical with the I think or, as Dedekind puts it, with “my own ego.” The thinker is not identical with any of its thoughts about her thoughts. It would go too far in a different direction to make explicit how Dedekind’s argument is a mathematical exploration of the *Transcendental Deduction’s* distinction between the analytic and synthetic unity of consciousness.³² Suffice it to say, Dedekind needs to draw a categorical distinction between *thoughts* and the *thinking of thoughts* such that no thought ever exhausts the thinking of thoughts, what he calls “my own ego.” Thinking and being thought of are categorically distinct.

Hence, it is not quite correct to read Dedekind here as embarking on an infinite regress of meta-thoughts.³³ The argument does not say that for any thought there is the meta-thought that I think this thought and then the meta-meta-thought that I think that I think this thought and so forth. Dedekind avoids this regress and I think the best reason for his decision, a reason probably not registered by Dedekind himself, consists in the recognition that there is no rule for such an infinite regress.

To see where I am heading, let me pin down the fairly obscure notion of an infinite regress. An *infinite regress* is the never-ending reapplication of a rule triggered by its forced activation for a particular mode of information processing. An infinite regress comes with an algorithm that determines a mode of information processing as being this rather than that. For example, “add 1 to any natural number bigger than 0” triggers an infinite regress. Following the rule at all, that is, the rule’s very activation, forces one to its never-ending reapplication. Going meta, for example, in the order of thoughts could thus only amount to an infinite regress if we could specify a rule for going meta. However, there is no such rule! The three thoughts:

T1: It is raining.

T2: I think that it is raining.

T3: I think that I think that it is raining.

are too different in order for there to be an algorithm

governing the transition from T1 to T3. Grasping the fact that it is raining is only similar to grasping the fact that I think that it is raining in that both are thoughts that grasp facts. Hence, the similarity between the two operations of thought carried out in T1 and T2 does not consist in a nesting of contents within always higher-order levels of thinking. All three thoughts are similar in having propositional content and in that respect they are all thoughts that p and, thus, they exist on the same level. To go meta is to do something different from just adding a thought to a thought. It is not at all like addition, where the content of the original position remains preserved. The content itself is changed by the transition into another content. The content:

C1: that it is raining

significantly differs from

C2: that I think that it is raining

because the proposition “that it is raining” in C2 is optional or contingent in the following sense. If I think C1, I am committed to there being rain. If someone grasps C2 and thinks that I think that it is raining, then she is not committed to there being rain. To think that it is raining is to be in a fallible position. It might not be raining. To think that one thinks that it is raining, however, is not falsified by there not being rain but by the fact that one does not think that it is raining. The difference in content is so huge that going meta in the order of thoughts cannot be assimilated into an infinite regress in the technical sense.

At this point it is easier to grasp the logic behind the following phenomenologically available example. You and your friends meet in a pub for a few beers. This determines the field of sense as that of going with friends to a pub for a few beers. In this field of sense, things come in the form of affordances: The beer affords thirst-quenching, the friends afford friendship, gossip etc. Now there are many ways of observing the manifold contingencies of the scene. You could get into trouble with the waiter because you believe that his particular way of serving you outrageously falls short of any acceptable standards. You might start wondering why anyone would give tips at all or you might discover that it is actually really odd why these people are your friends given that you have close to nothing in common. You might even get into a thoroughly existentialist mood and wonder why you are this one rather than that one and think that you could radically change your life. Sometimes you maybe even have an attack of metaphysics and wonder why there is something rather than nothing or, more down to earth, why there is such a strange life-form in the universe as

³² For this, see my *Die Erkenntnis der Welt*.

³³ The following is a response to Shaomeng Li’s objection raised in his response during my visit at Beijing Normal University.

that of human beings who pretend to be rational, sophisticated, almost transcendent creatures while they are really just beer-mongering meat-machines with metaphysical pretensions they only harbor in order to repress their petty fear of death.

All these options present you with the contingency of sense of the very situation. The situation could be otherwise in many senses. It could be an illusion, it could be altered, it could simply be seen “in another light” and so forth. What all these options have in common is that they afford the contingency of the field of sense with which we started.

What determines the range of contingency in a given field is the sense constitutive of the field in question. It is contingent that I now raise my left hand, because the field of sense of writing a philosophy paper does not regulate my raising my left hand. It leaves it open. On the contrary, it is necessary that $2+2=4$ in the field of sense of our basic arithmetic. However, $2+2=4$ is even false in the field of sense of water drops, as a child discovers in Antonioni’s *Deserto Rosso*: If I add 2 drops of water to two drops of water, I will not get 4 drops of water, and it is an important truth about human beings that you do not get half a human being if you cut one in two halves, but that you are left with no human being at all after such a procedure.

As a matter of fact, every field of sense appears within other fields of sense in order for it to exist. The sense of the field of sense in which a given field is nested determines the modality of the very sense determining the modality of the relationships within the original field. Hence, even though $2+2$ is necessarily 4, the rules of basic arithmetic might not be necessary, or, at least, not necessary in the same sense. We can always adopt a different arithmetical system.

There is no over-arching rule of nesting one field of sense in another and, therefore, no infinite regress, even though it is true that no field exists that does not appear in another field. But appearance in a field of sense (existence) is an almost empty concept. It acquires a particular meaning in the context of a field. For numbers to exist is for them to fall under the laws discovered by number theories, for unicorns to exist is for them to appear in movies or story-telling, for emperors to exist is for them to become an emperor, etc. The point is that there is no all-encompassing rule because the world does not exist. And this entails that there is no infinite regress, as an infinite regress in ontology presupposes the availability of such a rule.

Despite his reluctance to call this outcome “on-

tology,” in *Ethics without Ontology*, Putnam comes to the following remarkable conclusion:

How can the question whether something exists be a matter of convention? The answer, I suggest, is this: what logicians call “the existential quantifier,” the symbol “ $(\exists x)$,” and its ordinary language counterparts, the expressions “there are,” “there exist” and “there exists a,” “some,” etc., do not have a single absolutely precise use but a whole family of uses.³⁴

Yet, existence is not a matter of convention. Putnam restricts the plurality of usages of the predicate of existence wrongly to the fact there is no single use of ontological expressions. In my view, however, the very multiplicity underlying Putnam’s claims is the multiplicity of senses constituting different fields of sense. Yet, the number of those regions is not as limited as classical metaphysics has believed. We are not talking of, say, culture, mind, nature or even heaven, earth, netherworld, but we need to acknowledge that everything is a field of sense and that everything appears in a field of sense. An itch in my left toe is as much a field of sense as Antonioni’s *Deserto Rosso* or a volcano exploding in ancestral times in a galaxy astronomically far away from ours. But where does all of this leave us?

III. CONCLUSION: METAPHYSICAL ANARCHY

I would like to conclude with an image, a picture which holds me captive, and I add that philosophy always comes with a picture, a system of images, emotions and experiences we conceptualize in order to turn them into a communal and communicative element. Philosophy, after all, is part of the social practices constitutive of civilization as we know it. We are located in a more than infinite proliferation of fields of sense with no beginning and no end. There is no over-arching structure, no *arché* governing the whole thing. For one thing, there is no whole thing, no world, but only the frayed plurality of manifold appearing. The world does not exist precisely because everything exists. By not taking place it gives place to everything. And it is even better that the world does not exist, because, things being this way, it is always up to us to negotiate our various decisions as to how to compensate the lack of world—as long as the evanescent flickering of semantic fields within nothingness endures. Sense is made even though we will sooner or later cease participating in this proliferation. I sometimes bemoan it and I sometimes don’t.

³⁴ Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 37.

PETER GRATTON
POST-DECONSTRUCTIVE REALISM
IT'S ABOUT TIME

Speculative realism began in part as a reaction formation against structuralist and post-structuralist approaches in Continental philosophy. Foucaultian archaeologies, Derridean deconstruction, and Irigaray's decentering of patriarchal discourses, for example, are said to focus so thoroughly on texts as to have given up on the real altogether. As Graham Harman puts it, "Derrida and Foucault would rather die than call themselves realists."¹ Locked in the prison house of language, Derrida's work in particular—Foucault and Irigaray at least could be said to investigate very real regimes of power—was said to be a "textual idealism" that could see nothing beyond any given text. Thus, Harman and Quentin Meillassoux seek means of driving straight past the "linguistic turn" that had side-tracked, they believe, a previous era of philosophers.² As such, for them, to discuss a "deconstructive" or a "post-deconstructive realism" would be, for them, an oxymoron, or worse, a rear-guard action defending Derrida et al. as realists *avant la lettre*.³ But my argument is that this is a dodge: at the heart of this speculative work is a pre-modern (not even just pre-Critical) consideration of time, where time is epiphenomenal when thought against the eternal (for Meillassoux, the mathematics of set theory; for Harman the objects in themselves "forever in the present"). And until a certain realism of time opens onto their thought, their interventions will be anything but timely.

The *locus classicus* for the charge of Derrida's textual idealism comes just near the midpoint of his great early work, *Of Grammatology* (1967), where he declares "there is no outside text [*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]." Here, reading Rousseau's texts to demonstrate an implacable logic of "supplementarity" intrinsic to them, Derrida pauses to consider whether someone disputing his reading of Rousseau could not simply point to the "reality" of Rousseau's life beyond any given text. If everything is a "text"

for Derrida, then does he not deny the reality of the world as such? Moreover, doesn't his text risk just producing a "commentary" that would look to stand in for the text itself, to state a truth it does not itself announce? He writes:

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward *something other than it* [my emphasis], toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place *outside of language* [my emphasis], that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above, as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]. And that is neither because Jean-Jacques' life, or the existence of Mamma or Therese *themselves*, is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have access to their so-called "real" existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation.... [I]n what one calls the real life of these existences "of flesh and bone," beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau's text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the *absolute present* [my emphasis], Nature, that which words like "real mother" name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.⁴

No doubt, this long citation risks your patience. But the points here are crucial for what follows, even as I charge headlong right into Derrida's supposedly most "anti-realist" text. Derrida's take is incisive, even if it risks an anti-realism, or at least according to the supposed "realisms" on offer by his latter day critics. Derrida, like Heidegger before him, set out to critique the "metaphysics of presence," though the terminology Derrida tends to use in

¹ Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 171.

² See, for example, *ibid.*, 93.

³ See, for example, Graham Harman's comments at <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2011/11/26/more-on-derridas-realism/>. Last accessed December 15, 2012. What is notable is that Harman argues that Derrida's supposed realism fails not because it denies an external reality, but because he does not accede to the principle of identity, which would also rule out speculative realisms such as by Whitehead, and also Deleuze's ontology of difference.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 158.

Of Grammatology is “transcendental signified.”⁵ In any set of texts, there are, of course, a whole slew of signifiers (words). To keep things as simple as possible, what Derrida argued in *Of Grammatology* is that his structuralist forbearers, such as Saussure, recognized the play of language in writing—that its meaning shifts in different contexts—but sought some pivot point that transcended this “play.” For Rousseau, this was the self-speaking subject, something that he could indeed write about, but had a fixed “reality” in the world beyond the texts he was writing. Saussure argued the same for consciousness. But, Derrida notes, all such argumentation is taking place within language itself; it cannot transcend all signifiers and language, since all such terms are *within* language and thus are given over to the very structures Saussure and Rousseau discuss, and these structures are “founded,” if you can use such a word, on the time-spacing of *différance* (difference/deferral). In other words, Saussure says that no term has a “positive” meaning: a tree is only knowable in terms of what it is not: not a chair, not a blade of grass, etc., etc. But when it comes to “consciousness,” Saussure argues that somehow this *term* is outside the structure of language, despite the fact that, of course, it is a word, and thus its meaning will shift in a given context. And, in the citation above, in Rousseau this is “Nature,” something uncorruptable and “real” beyond culture and language and the changing ways in which “Nature” differs in given contexts. Derrida’s crucial insight is that “Man,” or “Nature,” or “God,” or the self-present subject both *grounds* and are *put out of play* in metaphysical discourses, a point to keep in mind when thinking the non-play, absolute, ever-present identity beyond the sensuous of Harman’s objects in themselves.

Derrida’s argument is not simply that “aha, when you depict writing, you are in fact writing your point,” but rather that in Western metaphysics, time and again, there is a naïve assertion of some X transcending the play of differences, something not given over to the vagaries of time, an eternal essence beyond historicity. Thus, where Heidegger critiqued the metaphysics of presence for its reductiveness, that is, reducing Being to one kind of being (be it God or matter), Derrida in his earlier

⁵ No doubt all discussions of time in Derrida would have to circle around his “*Ousia and Grammê*,” but the space here only allows me to take for granted a much longer discussion of Derrida’s relation to Heidegger over Western conceptions of time. Perhaps for the sake of quickness, the point can be made that, for Derrida, the point is not to think a concept of time, that is, an eternalized abstraction that is the Platonist move par excellence—thus the eternal abstraction of the present, etc.

work seeks to find the “transcendental signified” that centers a given philosophical discourse. If he can show that, on Rousseau or Saussure’s own terms, this transcendental signified indeed does not have a *fixed* (i.e., eternal) set of meanings, then he can demonstrate that there is no pre-given meaning to a philosopher’s text, that is, we can see *from within its own discourses* that there is no “transcendental signified” outside the play of the text before us. In this way, Derrida can be said to trap us forever in “readings” of texts, forming a new scholasticism creating different interpretations of philosophical works without ever discussing the real. There is, it would seem, “no outside-text.” As Lee Braver puts it,

There is nothing outside the text because our experience is always linguistically mediated; this makes both subject and object *effects* of language, rather than entities that precede it from the outside to master or anchor it. Language impersonally structures our selves and our world, and our actions depend on passively taking on these structures.⁶

Nevertheless, “realist” critics of Derrida face three problems, *at least*:

1. They cannot, as Harman and Meillassoux often do, simply deride Derrida as anthropocentric given his early emphasis on texts, since Derrida’s early work was specifically to deny an extra-textual notion of the human, or consciousness, and thus any “*anthropos*” in anthropocentrism. This is what Derrida’s earliest critics feared as his annihilation of the subject, and thus there’s an historic irony in his realist critics later chastising him for an utter subjectivism. Otherwise put, Derrida’s emphasis on texts meets the test of realism as affirming an independence of given structures beyond human sovereignty, and no amount of stammering that “texts are created by human beings” obviates this point, not least since Derrida is clear about what he means by texts and institutions, etc.

2. Nevertheless, inasmuch as Derrida is given to putting the very word “reality” in quotation marks, he can be said to note its shifting meaning in different contexts. But who would deny this to be case? Moreover, the speculative realists claim to bypass naïve realism, about which they are equally scathing, and claim in Harman’s case utter mediation to the objects in themselves. Is not Derrida’s emphasis on

⁶ Lee Braver, *A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 495.

textuality and *différance* simply a reference to the implausibility of any naïve realism—the naïve realisms of unmediated presence, of consciousness, of “man,” of nature? The whole problem is contained in Braver’s formulation: Derrida is not suggesting objects are the “effect” of some “cause” known as linguistic structures. That, certainly, would be a linguistic idealism, if such a thing even exists. The point is more crucial: *textuality* is part and parcel of *différance*, as Derrida’s essay of that name makes clear: there is no textuality without difference/deferral, and thus a whole thinking of time as other than simply presence.⁷

3. But—and this will be the most difficult part of our discussion ahead of us—neither is Derrida formulating a linguistic update of Kant’s concepts of the understanding, where linguistic structures merely filter an *an sich* forever inaccessible to us on this side of the language barrier. This, at least, is Braver’s contention, and meets up with Christopher Norris’s prominent claim that Derrida’s work amounted to a new “transcendental deduction” of the conditions of possibility for knowledge.⁸ This would make Derrida’s entire project an *epistemological* adventure, obviating his proximity (and distance) to Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of the history of ontology.

No doubt, many of Derrida’s earliest exponents presented his work in terms of his textualism, but he is less an heir to the linguistic turn than continuing a line of thought from Husserl and Heidegger regarding the importance of temporality to deconstructing the history of the metaphysics of presence. Derrida’s speculative move is to look to the specific temporality of texts as a pivot to a real time; it is *différance* as difference/deferral that is the ontological condition of possibility for all of Derrida’s claims about deconstruction.

The concept of text or of context which guides me embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history. Once again (and this probably makes a thousand times I have had to repeat this, but when will it finally be heard, and why this resistance?): as I understand it (and I have explained why), the text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself confined to the library. It does not suspend

⁷ For an excellent discussion of a similar (though in many ways different) move in Deleuze, see Dan Smith’s “Pre- and Post-Kantianism: Logic and Existence: Deleuze on the Conditions of the Real,” in *Essays on Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 72–88.

⁸ See Braver’s discussion in *Thing of This World*, 464–466.

reference—to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other, since to say of history, of the world, of reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible.⁹

Though we should not simply accept Derrida’s own defense on the matter, his later work, which privileges the “to come” of a future worthy of the name rather than his early emphasis on writing, only brings home this point. That is, where Meillassoux uses the contingency of the correlation of human and world as the key to the reality of the in-itself, Derrida looks to the temporality of any difference that marks any such correlations as his own “speculative” move. For Harman, Derrida cannot be a realist since he denies the principle of identity, which is a strange, if all-too-well known, *a priori* investigation of things as they are—a presumption of identity that is then circled back to. But that reverses it: Derrida’s “realism” precisely relates to his demonstration of *différance* as that which, over time, makes any self-identity impossible in the first place.¹⁰

The deconstruction of logocentrism, of linguisticism, of economism (of the proper, of the at-home [*chez-soi*], *oikos*, of the same), etc., as well as the affirmation of the impossible are always put forward in *the name of the real*, of the irreducible reality of the real—not of the real as the attribute of the objective, present, perceptible or intelligible thing (*res*), but of the real as the coming or event of the other, where the other resists all appropriation....The real is this non-negative impossible, this impossible coming or invention of the event the thinking of which is not an onto-phenomenology. It is a thinking of the event (singularity of the other, in its unanticipatable coming, *hic et nunc*) that resists reappropriation.

⁹ Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 137.

¹⁰ Again, I would signal the reader to Dan Smith’s recent excellent collection on Deleuze’s work. For Harman, Deleuze “undermines” objects through Hericlitean flows (see, e.g., <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2011/01/11/who-wrote-this/>). This misses the place of assemblages and breaks in Deleuze’s works, but more importantly, this is not an argument but an assertion—an assertion of the non-assertable: a reality of the objects forever in the present that can’t be asserted given that they are non-relatable, a rabbit forever hidden away in the hat, never to be revealed to those of us “undermining” them. In short: a magical realism.

tion by an ontology or phenomenology of presence as such....Nothing is more “realist,” in this sense, than a deconstruction.¹¹

Harman’s work must deny the reality of time in order to make his own claims for a certain realism—a problem that only serves to highlight the import of a certain form of deconstruction today, that is, a thinking of the meaning of the day and the future to come tomorrow. We are getting a repetition of what happened earlier in analytic philosophy, where Derrida was deemed to be the worst of the anti-realists, yet what was crucially ignored was precisely the ways in which his rethinking of time would upend any notions of anti-realism, since, as he noted, there is no writing of the concept without the difference and deferral of time, a time that is real, even as it marks texts. The speculative realists thus far don’t heed this lesson, finding the real in the set theory of Meillassoux or the “hidden objects” “forever in the present,” as Harman puts it about his own object oriented ontology.

Meillassoux, for example, argues that the problem with the correlationist is that she cannot provide “any sure means of access to an *eternal* reality independent of our specific point of view.”¹² His principle of factuality is well known to *Speculations*’ readers, so I won’t revisit it here. But the upshot is that if one wants to look to where a discourse begins to unwork itself, to unwarrantedly abstract a Platonic point outside the play of contingencies it itself announces (that is, to use Derrida’s clunky language, “transcendental signified”), then one could do no better than looking to its thinking of time, and especially to Meillassoux’s hope for a future “World” of justice beyond the vicissitudes of mortality.¹³ Let’s begin with *After Finitude*:

In other words, if we can discover an ontological truth *hidden beneath facticity* [my emphasis]; if we can succeed in grasping why the very source which lends its power to the strategy of de-absolutization through fact also furnishes the means of access to an absolute being; then we will have gained access

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, “As If It Were Possible, ‘Within Such Limits’...” in *Negotiations: Interviews and Interviews*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). See also Derrida, *Séminaire: La bête et le souverain: Vol. 1 (2001-2002)* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2008), 113.

¹² Quentin Meillassoux, “Time without Becoming,” 7. (http://speculativeheresy.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/3729-time_without_becoming.pdf/) The title of Meillassoux’s essay is itself telling.

¹³ See my “Meillassoux’s Speculative Politics: Time and the Divinity to Come” in *Analecta Hermeneutica Vol. 4* (2012).

to a truth that is invulnerable to correlationist scepticism.... We must grasp in facticity not the inaccessibility of the absolute but the unveiling of the in-itself and the *eternal property of what is* [my emphasis], as opposed to the mark of the perennial deficiency in the thought of what is.¹⁴

Recall that for Meillassoux this eternal property is what is the ascertainable, “eternal” time beyond time “without becoming” of which our reality—that is the becoming of worlds, such as the movement from the worlds of matter to life to thought to perhaps a future of justice—is but the eternal *image* of this very eternity. And what he never explains—and this becomes the whole problem of Platonism and Neo-Platonism, as is well known by scholars in the area—is the derivation or emanation from this “eternal property of what is” to the realm of becoming (thus the problems of *mimêsis*, and later the analogical conceptions of being). Let’s follow his logic here:

This point [here he is discussing the factual] becomes readily understandable if we relate this capacity-to-be-other-without-reason to the idea of a *time* that would be capable of bringing forth or abolishing everything. This is a time that cannot be conceived as having emerged or as being abolished except in time, which is to say, in itself. No doubt, this is a banal argument on the face of it: “it is impossible to think the disappearance of time unless this disappearance occurs in time; consequently, the latter must be conceived to be eternal.” But what people fail to notice is that this banal argument can only work by presupposing a time that is not banal—not just a time whose capacity for destroying everything is a function of laws, but a time which is capable of the lawless destruction of every physical law. It is perfectly possible to conceive of a time determined by the governance of fixed laws disappearing in something other than itself—it would disappear in another time governed by alternative laws. But only the time that harbours the capacity to destroy every determinate reality, while obeying no determinate law—the time capable of destroying, without reason or law, both worlds and things—can be thought as an absolute. *Only unreason can be thought as eternal*, because only unreason can be thought as at once hypothetical and absolute. Accordingly, we can say that it is possible to demonstrate the absolute necessity of everything’s

¹⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 52.

non-necessity. In other words, it is possible to establish, through indirect demonstration, the absolute necessity of the contingency of everything.¹⁵

Thus he would give us a “time without becoming” in a lecture of that title, teaching us “we know two things that the sceptic did not: first, that contingency is necessary, and hence eternal; second, that contingency alone is necessary.”¹⁶ But like turning on a magnet that then pulls all the objects of a certain kind along with it, Meillassoux can’t help but bring along all the neo-Platonic tropes about the absolute, namely that there is a heterogeneous relation between the eternal (“time without becoming”) and the chronological (that which the eternal can always interrupt via the creation *ex nihilo* of matter, life, thought, and perhaps a world of justice); the “anhypothetical” that cannot be hypothesized in itself, just as in the Plotinian One; and the non-necessity of that which is, namely Becoming itself, which is precisely that which is axiomatic in Platonism from Plato to Augustine. And this “anhypothetical” is precisely an “intelligible substance” beyond becoming through participation in which we discern that which will “last for ever [*ton aidion*],” and its relation to “that of becoming [*ginomenon*] and of the whole of existence [*to pan*].”¹⁷ Paul Ennis has come closest to this point, noting, “Meillassoux’s rationalism is a pure form of rationalism—arguably he is even a nomological thinker. His principle does not make sense unless one accepts that, *contra* strong correlationism (phenomenology in particular), it does not deal with appearances.”¹⁸ This is why Meillassoux leaves any discussion of the ontic behind for the mathematical “intuition” into the real. What Meillassoux doesn’t yet describe is this: the physical world is not a set as in set theory, which are *unchanging* (and thus sets). But the physical world has things that come and go; such is the stuff that makes history and the world go round. This is not to say that the world is a configurable Whole, a point at the heart of Heidegger’s critique

¹⁵ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 61-62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65. One could of course argue that there is a thinking of the “eternal” different than the neo-Platonic, but one lives in a tradition and words have meaning. Either Meillassoux is being facile with a tradition he doesn’t understand (highly unlikely), or he’s relying on that tradition while claiming a new *arché* whose trajectory nevertheless started long ago in thought. After all, the pure *dynamis* of the Good beyond Being in Plato, which is the shared axiom of all Platonism, makes no sense except as the necessary power subtending the world of becoming.

¹⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.7.1.1-3, my translation.

¹⁸ Paul Ennis, *Continental Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 27.

of ontotheology, but one can’t just, as in Badiou, leap from order of ontology (set theory) to the order of appearing (stable), and expect that true existence is simply the Set of all sets in the mathematical meaning of the term. More than this, it assumes that the world is reducible to *points* (the base units of set theory), and thus also abstract points *qua* now. This falls victim to Whitehead’s fallacy of misplaced concreteness, while also failing to amount to a robust mathematical theory of the cosmos.¹⁹ While Badiou has attempted to correct this in *Logic of Worlds* with the use of *category theory*, he still seemingly fails to account for the dynamics of reality in the way that Zalamea’s use of sheaf logic does.²⁰ It is thus ironic that Derrida’s first published text—which attempted to hash out the importance of the relation between the transcendent/immanent in Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*, that is, how does mathematics remain iterable but also written into history?—wrestles with just the questions that befuddle the mathematics of a later generation who think they can trump him with their use of a Platonist set theory. After all, what is this eternal set theory forever creating the world if not an updated version of the interlocking triangles in the Platonic receptacle in the *Timaeus* out of which the realm of becoming appears?

All of which is to say that 20th-century Continental philosophy after Husserl sought to answer Heidegger’s question at the beginning of his 1925 lecture on the concept of time: What does it mean to think time not as *fallen* from a time beyond time or the eternal?²¹ Surely there have been temporal correlationisms after Heidegger,²² but one cannot read such figures as Deleuze and Derrida without thinking through quasi-transcendental structure of time in the latter and the immanent processes of becoming and creativity in the former. Now, it might

¹⁹ Cf. Fernando Zalamea, “Sheaf Logic & Philosophical Synthesis,” presented at the Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht.

²⁰ I owe these excellent last two points to Michael Austin.

²¹ In “*Ousia and Grammé*,” Derrida argues that Heidegger repeats this gesture in his discussion of the *Verfallen* from primordial time (*Zeitlichkeit*) to vulgar clock time in *Being and Time*. But one wonders what to make of the “fall” in Meillassoux’s own work on the possible world of justice, where the world without the eternal rule of justice (to come) is without meaning—that is, senseless and cruel. I cannot treat this here, but one must note at every turn that the true telos of Meillassoux’s work is a thinking of eternal sameness in a world to come, wedding the metaphysics of presence to a religious conception that repeats trope by trope a tradition he believes he suspends.

²² “Time is not a real process, an effective succession that I should limit myself to recording. It is born of my relation with things.” Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 432.

be true, as I would argue, that the diagnosis of the metaphysics of presence (where time is essentially an eternal now, without past or future,²³ given the need for the identity of concepts that cannot have change in order for them to have truth in the first place²⁴) is really aimed at Platonism and its thinking of eternity (*aei* or *aion*). Thus this *Destruction* of metaphysical ontology can't think the shift to theological conceptions of time related to the infinite, which differ in many important ways, despite the conflation of the "eternity" and "infinity" in the recent philosophical tradition.²⁵ Nevertheless, this thinking of the "eternal," in the end, via the critique of correlationisms, has made the speculative realists not just pre-Critical in the Kantian sense, but fully pre-Scholastic. Let us show this thinking of the eternal in Plotinus, which becomes axiomatic for a long history of philosophy. For Plotinus, one finds eternity in what is the "selfsame without extension or interval," which "abides in the same and always has the always present to it...all things at once...a partless completion, as if there were all together in a point and had not yet begun to go out and flow into lines."²⁶ Thus it is that which "is always in the present [*tô poronti aei*]" and it is always what it is "now" (*nun*).²⁷ Whatever differences theologically, this will become the *nunc stans* of *aeternitas* of the later Scholastics.

Many years later, we can see as naïve Husserl's striking claims to go beyond metaphysics by returning to the things themselves, as he claimed often in the years leading up to *Ideas I*. But does

²³ "That, then, which was not, and will not be, but is only [interpreting here Plato's *Timaeus*, 37e6-38a2], which has being that is static by not changing to the 'will be' nor ever having changed, this is eternity [*estin ho aiôn*]" (III.7.3. 34-37).

²⁴ Hence when Harman declares, as I noted above, that any true realism must evince a principle of identity, he joins a tradition that thought the real (*ousias, substantia, or realitas*) as that which is self-identical and thus outside of time. We will come to this. These are, in the end, *inseparable* concepts, and Harman's work has become a demonstration of this implacable structure.

²⁵ Most strikingly this is found in Levinas, where he argues that the two conceptions of non-onto-theological forms of alterity are found in the tradition are Plato's good beyond being (*epekeina tês ousias*) in the *Republic* (509b) and Descartes depiction of infinity in the 3rd Meditation. It's true the Greeks had a conception of the *apeiron* (without boundary) that adhered to the one, but all arguments about time—whether in the *Timaeus*, the *Enneads*, in Augustine's *Confessions*—literally begin with a thinking of eternity from which time must be derived. Levinas's own thinking of time as the relation to the infinite (not the eternal) drives home this crucial distinction.

²⁶ *Enneads*, III.7.3.17-20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, III.7.25-32.

not speculative realism, by pretending to sidestep or overstep recent philosophical history, prove equally naïve? I ask this with great love for those writers operating under this heading. In any case, we come to Harman's conception of time. For, if time is but the sensuous, as Harman and Platonism before him held it, then it cannot touch the reality of the thing itself, as Harman himself notes there is *no correspondence* between the thing itself and its sensuous objecthood and/or qualities. Time would be, in the strictest sense for him, "illusory:"

According to the object-oriented model *only the present exists*: only objects with their qualities, *locked into* whatever their duels of the moment might be. In that sense, time seems to be illusory, though not for the usual reason that time is just a fourth spatial dimension always already present from the start. *Instead time does not exist simply because only the present ever exists*. Nonetheless, time as a lived experience [i.e., within the sensuous—here he follows Husserl to the letter, as he does with a tradition of equating the sensuous with the temporal] cannot be denied. We do not encounter a static frame of reality, but *seem to feel* a passage of time. It is not pure chaos shifting wildly from one second to the next, since there is chance with *apparent* endurance. Sensual objects endure despite swirling oscillations in their surface adumbrations, and this is precisely what is meant by the experience of *time*. Time can be defined as the tension between *sensual* objects and their *sensual* qualities.²⁸

This is axiomatic for Harman's metaphysics: there is no time and the object is forever in the present. This should be recalled by anyone attempting to wed his accounts to dynamic new materialisms, or even deconstruction. Above we find precisely what Heidegger and Derrida diagnose as the "metaphysics of presence": the view that there is an eternal present beyond or behind the appearance of things, whether that's the forms in Plato, the *cogito* in Descartes, the transcendental ego in Husserl, or indeed, the non-material, transcendental objects in Harman. In the eternal present, the "real" object cannot change, cannot give itself over to the passage of time, and all we get is what "seems to be" an "illusory" or "apparent" change of time never happening in the *reality* of things. Time is thus epiphenomenal.

Now, recall that for Heidegger the reality of time is implicit and prior to any correlation of Dasein and *Sein*, humans and world; it is the condition of

²⁸ Graham Harman, "The Road to Objects," *continent*. (2011), 1:3, 176, my emphases.

possibility for our “thrownness” towards the future itself. Harman, in his most polemical moments in *Quadruple Object* and elsewhere, dismisses this fundamental part of Heidegger, who “actually has nothing whatsoever to tell us about time,”²⁹ since he “merely alerts us to the ambiguities found in any given instant, and has nothing to do with time in the usual sense of the term.”³⁰ In this way, he misses that, yes, Heidegger was not interested in “time in the usual sense of the term,” which he dubbed vulgar clock time, and especially as he was critiquing Aristotle’s “exoteric” (i.e., common) description of time in the *Physics*; that it wasn’t “time in the usual sense” is the whole point of Heidegger’s analysis. His interest instead was in the aporetic but nevertheless *real time* to which we accede; this is precisely his move in his lectures after *Being and Time* from Dasein’s time (*Zeitlichkeit*) to the time of Being (*Temporalität*).³¹ Heidegger indeed still has much to teach us on this score—whether his time is usual or not. That Harman bases his thinking of objects on the first division of *Being and Time*, but ignores the second division on time entirely, is the seed from which his notion of objects grow. In this way, there is still much Heidegger and Derrida, who put the reality of time at the center of their works, have to say about the absolute. To be more precise, if the real object and its qualities do not “have” time, then how could something like music be an object, since the forever present could never give rise to such, as Husserl noted in his time lectures from 1905-1911? More to the point: Husserl realized *all* objects (not just music) require time. This was his gift to twentieth-century thought. In this way, without a thinking of “time and the other” that Levinas himself develops, there is a worry that Harman’s “alterity of things” would be unalterable. His work has tirelessly and quite importantly reminded us to pay attention to the carts and chairs, houses and mugs around us, *as they are*, not as we think or wish

²⁹ Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57. This criticism itself is bewildering. The “ambiguities of the instant” carry us through considerations of time throughout the tradition, from Aristotle’s fourth book of the *Physics* (ch. 10-14) through Augustine’s *Confessions* (where he considers the non-being of the instant, given that it passes away) through Aquinas up to Heidegger. Indeed, it is what Aristotle (the “exoteric” conception of the now) and Heidegger (“vulgar clock time”) thought was time “in common sense.” Given that he equates the “eternal” with the “present,” Harman doesn’t recognize a tradition he replicates almost literally point by present point.

³¹ Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 274.

them to be.³² He has, in a word, endeavored to shred the last vestiges of human sovereignty.³³ However, his “real objects,” ever in present, could never be something musical—recall for him “only the present ever exists”—and until time is literally *realized* in his work, it’ll be more difficult to sing its praises.

Thus in the end we find that Meillassoux and Harman mark a return to the real that is anything but, as long as they treat the time of becoming as epiphenomenal, and thus deny the reality of time—however aporetic it is, as we well know—at the beating hearts of thinkers they too quickly disparage while ignoring what were their central insights. It is only then that speculative realism will be able, as their proponents so hope, to stand the test of time. If there is to be a speculative flight, it cannot move from the eternal (object or mathematics) to the temporal, but vice-versa: to think objects of the world on the reality of time. To glimmer that reality upsets all of our discourses, as Aristotle examined in the *Physics*, telling us at each turn how time (*chronos*) is irreducible to four causes, to motion, to lines and circles, and so on. It is not a simple *something* reducible to a *res* of reality, even if it must be the starting point—the slipperiest and most anarchic of *arché*, since it’s off before the starting gun fires—for any speculative realism worthy of the name. This is my own project, though it’s enough here to note my distance from a pre-modern thinking of time and to valorize those philosophers of the 20th century that the speculative realists, literally, have no time for.

³² This is no more apparent than on his oft-updated weblog, <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com>, where Harman often graciously responds to reader questions and criticisms, as well as offer all manner of writing advice for younger scholars.

³³ A project in many ways amenable to my own. See my *The State of Sovereignty: Lessons from the Political Fictions of Modernity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).

ADRIAN JOHNSTON
POINTS OF FORCED FREEDOM
ELEVEN (MORE) THESES ON MATERIALISM

I

Any materialism worthy of the name must involve elements of both naturalism and empiricism. However, it need not be straightforwardly and entirely naturalist or empiricist in the traditional (particularly pre-Kantian) senses of these labels (and, in the case of materialisms in the wake of German idealism, including transcendental materialism, ought not to be). Following from this, any anti-naturalist rationalism, in whatever guise, cannot qualify as being simultaneously a materialism too. Although an anti-naturalist rationalism can be made consistent with (metaphysical) realism, this by no means renders it compatible with materialism strictly speaking. In still other words, there is no such thing as a purely formalist materialism; with reference to the birth of modern science, there is no Galileo without Bacon too. Both aversion to the experimental natural sciences of modernity as well as rejection of tying knowledge primarily to empirical routes of acquisition prompts thinking down paths leading to anachronistic Pythagoreanisms, ontological dualisms, spiritualist idealisms, religious mysticisms, and a unruly, proliferating swarm of confabulations, delusions, imaginings, fantasies, and ravings passing themselves off as rigorous, responsible philosophizing. Furthermore, insofar as an empirically informed, quasi-naturalist materialism is not in the least synonymous with and equivalent to rigid, mechanical determinism, an attuned materialist sensitivity to the natural sciences is not to be feared as the opening up to the immediate closing down of space for autonomous subjectivity and everything it brings with it.

II

In terms of the relationship between non-empirical philosophy (as *a priori* thinking) and empirical areas of inquiry (as *a posteriori* knowing), over two thousand years of history has shown a fundamental unevenness to hold sway in this rapport. The historical unfolding of various embodiments of thinking and knowing has revealed that the distinction between the empirical and the non-empirical is, for the most part, a distinction internal to the empirical itself (to put this in a Hegelian fashion). By general consensus at least, the passage of slightly less time

was sufficient for Kant to conclude that numerous efforts, scattered across history from ancient Greece to Enlightenment Europe, at gaining privileged metaphysical insight into transcendent ontological realities in and of themselves were always intrinsically vain. The “Transcendental Dialectic” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, revealing the precise contours of the dialectical deadlocks forever dooming in advance each and every classical metaphysics to futility, extracts its critical logics from the evidence furnished by two thousand years of philosophical history.

Likewise, two hundred more years’ worth of evidence that Kant had at his disposal reveals a pattern according to which developments at empirical levels repeatedly force the redrawing of the very boundary line distinguishing between empirical and non-empirical explanatory jurisdictions. Although a dizzying array of forces and factors have contributed to this historical process—the history of human knowledge is inseparable from the incredibly rich tapestry of human history *tout court*—the birth of modern science with Bacon and Galileo at the start of the seventeenth century added a potent new accelerant to the transformation of philosophy in and through its relations with other methods and fields of investigation. *A posteriori* experimental sciences have shown themselves more and more capable of laying legitimate claims to questions and problems which, prior to these claims, appeared to be the *a priori* theoretical issues raised and resolved by philosophers alone. Nevertheless, this is not to refuse acknowledging that many of these empirical developments are, to a large extent, branchings off from philosophy and its history (i.e., initially intra-philosophical matters subsequently becoming more-than-philosophical fields unto themselves).

Acknowledging and accepting the preceding is not tantamount to a deplorable scientific demotion of philosophy from the heights of extreme hubris, as the queen of the sciences, to the depths of equally extreme humility, as their handmaiden. A recognition of and reconciliation with the historically manifest unevenness in which the empirical has the initiative in shaping and reshaping the borders between itself and the non-empirical is not a surrendering of the rights of philosophy; this is not even a concession that such shaping and reshaping ever is, could, or should be wholly and completely decided exclusively from the side of the empirical, which itself never is purely empirical anyway. Philosophy remains called to exercise its inalienable obligations to: critically posit and evaluate the more-than-empirical presuppositions behind the sciences; facilitate and partially structure discussions between the scienc-

es; and, theoretically explore extrapolations from present states of interaction between philosophy and the sciences beyond the present to the benefit of all disciplines concerned. The multiple relations between the empirical and the non-empirical are not to be predetermined, but, rather, to be left open to ongoing negotiations informed by appropriate dialectical-speculative sensibilities (or, in Leninist terms, concrete analyses of concrete situations).

III

The “Copernican revolution” of Kant’s critical-transcendental turn in the late eighteenth century marks a point of no return, a breaking of the history of philosophy, and theoretical speculation in general, in two (to phrase this in a Nietzschean style). Anachronistic attempts to regress back behind this momentous rupture are fated from their inception to intellectual bankruptcy, amounting to sheer dogmatism condemned from the outset to self-wrought dialectical ruin through entanglement in the strangling webs of insoluble pre-critical contradictions (and this regardless of the irony here of denouncing dogmatism in the context of bluntly asserting a series of theses—these theses arguably can be defended on non-dogmatic grounds). For instance, fashionable contemporary efforts to break with Kant through reviving the sorts of substance metaphysics indulged in on the European Continent during the seventeenth century (especially Spinozism) succeed only at re-imprisoning philosophy in an enclosed arena of interminable, unproductive clashes between a limitlessly multiplying proliferation of foot-stamping, fist-banging combatants forever unable to vanquish each other. These amount merely to reactive, regressive, and impotent outbursts against Kantianism, nothing more.

This is not for the slightest moment to say that Kantian transcendental idealism is the unsurpassable pinnacle of the history of philosophy. However, it indeed is to say that the lone truly viable path beyond Kant runs through him, that one cannot pass beyond Kant simply by trying to bypass him altogether. One of the many crucial lessons of the German idealist explosion ignited by Kantian philosophy and the controversies surrounding it is that an immanent critique of transcendental idealism is the real way toward a non-dogmatic overcoming of Kant’s subjectivism and his intertwined oppositions to both materialism and a robust realism. Similarly, just as no philosophically plausible resurrection and revitalization of pre-Kantian speculation is possible, so too is no innocent return to a pre-Hegelian

Kant a palatable, compelling option either. Like the critical revolution, Hegel’s Kant critique, as inaugurating a post-Kantian trajectory in and through Kantian philosophy itself, ultimately cannot be ignored or circumvented. This critique includes demonstrations of: the dogmatic *qua* non-critical presuppositions of ostensibly critical investigations into thinking subjectivity (especially at the levels of a philosophical anthropology and psychology); the dialectically auto-deconstructing operation of the figure of the limit relied upon in distinguishing between noumena and phenomena; and, the inconsistency-ridden nullity of the infamous thing-in-itself. Not only must a realist, quasi-naturalist materialism be non-dogmatic *qua* post-, instead of pre-, critical, arrived at through immanently, rather than externally, criticizing transcendental idealism—it also has to reckon with the formidable legacy of the speculative dialectics of Hegelian “absolute idealism.”

IV

Despite the noticeable clustering of references above around the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century in the German-speaking world, transcendental materialism, like the historical and dialectical materialisms of which it is a twenty-first century extension, is decidedly anti-Romantic, anti-Pietist, and anti-Luddite (animosities gladly and gratefully inherited from the Marxist tradition). As is well known, Romanticism and Pietism, sharing with each other questionable tastes for the ineffable and the private, are convergent, overlapping influences in the intellectual milieu enveloping Kant and his idealists contemporaries and successors. Unfortunately, these religious and pseudo-secular irrationalisms continue to cast long shadows encroaching on the present, despite being so much *Sturm und Drang* signifying nothing.

Nowadays, such religiously tinged Romanticism is epitomized by various flavors of backward-looking Heideggerianism, with their reactionary fixations on and preoccupations with supposedly “spiritual” crises allegedly expressing a need for anti-scientific reenchantments and resacralizations. These are dangerously distracting misdiagnoses. However loose and indirect, the associations between (neo-) Romanticism and the Right, up to and including fascism, are no historical coincidences or accidents. Both philosophically and politically and from the eighteenth century through today, these pernicious obscurantisms tracing their roots back to the stagnant atmosphere of the Protestantism

of the Holy Roman Empire have been and will remain lamentable intellectual disasters. One of several combative slogans for any contemporary materialism indebted to Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Lacan, among others, is, “Forget Heidegger!” At a more theoretical than immediately practical level, this entails refusing to construe ontology along the lines of Heideggerian ontological difference. This insufficiently dialectical, too neat-and-clean distinction between the ontological and ontic leads straight to a fundamental(ist) obfuscation of actual material existences both natural/non-human and non-natural/human as well as obfuscating spiritualist pseudo-explanations of historical structures and dynamics on the basis of a divinely opaque Being.

Like the Romantics and Pietists before them, numerous post-idealists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries end up promoting a facile mysticism whose basic underlying logic is difficult to distinguish from that of negative theology. The unchanging skeletal template is this: There is a given “x;” This “x” cannot be rationally and discursively captured at the level of any categories, concepts, predicates, properties, etc.; Yet, nevertheless, the only true task of authentic thought is to circle endlessly around this sacred void of ineffability, repeating *ad infinitum* (and *ad nauseum*) the gesture of grasping at the purportedly ungraspable. The names of this empty “x” vary while the pattern stays constant: Will, Life, Power, Temporality, Being, Other, Flesh, Difference, Trauma, and so on (up to even certain pseudo-Lacanian versions of the Real). Not only is this boringly predictable negative theological cookie cutter an all-too-easily grasped conceptual scheme of its own—even if one were totally to concede the truth of one or more of these ineffabilities as they are held up by their numerous enthusiastic advocates, there is so much more of greater interest and urgency for thinking to do than to remain absorbed in the sedentary meditative exercise of doing nothing but fixedly staring into a dark abyss.

V

For a materialism both, one, standing on the shoulders of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Freud and, two, being neither determinist, mechanical, reductive, nor eliminative, its materialist ontology must be reverse-engineered starting from a theory of subjectivity. In the spirit of Marx’s 1845 diagnosis of the shortcomings of purely “contemplative” materialisms from the Ancients through Feuerbach in the first of the eleven “Theses on Feuerbach”—whether Marx realizes it or not, this diagnosis is a permutation

of Hegel’s injunction to render substance also as subject—more-than-material/natural subjects must be conceived of as simultaneously immanent to asubjective material/natural existences (i.e., substances, to stick to Hegel’s wording). From a post-critical perspective, subjectivity is transcendental as a condition of possibility not only for any materialism itself as a theoretical apparatus, but for philosophy and thinking in general. An escape from the mental confines of subjectively idealist variants of transcendentalism, if carried out in a philosophically defensible manner, must set off from inside these very confines (or, as Meillassoux has it, anti-realist “correlationism,” whose foundations are laid by Kant’s transcendental idealism, must be undone from within). The “inside job” of an immanent critique of subjectively idealist transcendentalism is the lone road leading to a non-dogmatic, rationally justifiable materialist and realist meta-transcendentalism delineating the substantial possibility conditions for transcendental subjectivity itself.

This results in a metaphysics (*qua* systematically integrated epistemology and ontology) of the transcendental subject interlinked with a corresponding ontology of meta-transcendental substance. The subject of transcendental materialism is, in addition to being transcendental in the standard sense, transcendent specifically as a transcendence-in-immanence in relation to the Real of material being(s). With reference to the 1796 “Earliest System-Program of German Idealism” (written in Hegel’s hand but perhaps originally penned by Hölderlin), transcendental materialism puts itself forward as the latest system-program of German idealism, namely, as a new “Spinozism of freedom” *qua* (quasi-)naturalist ontology of denaturalized autonomous subjects. This materialism is a heterodox reactivation of this Tübingen-born agenda in the aftermath of the Darwin-event and the emerging age of the anthropocene.

VI

The scientific bridge of choice for a post-Hegelian materialist account of transcendent(al) subjectivity as arising from and remaining immanent to physical substance must be biological. The transition from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature* to his *Philosophy of Mind* and the philosophical anthropology and psychology of the latter already tacitly support this privileging of biology. In Darwin’s wake (and despite Hegel’s hasty rejection of certain precursors of Darwin’s views), evolution and genetics, among other areas of biology, must be integral components of such a more-than-empirical materialism simultaneously

not without its crucial conditioning connections to things empirical.

The two main alternatives to relying on the life sciences in bridging the gap between substance and subject are differently but equally problematic. On the one hand, a purely philosophical *a priori* eschewing of the *a posteriori* natural sciences as at all relevant to such a synthesized materialist ontology and theory of irreducible subjectivity can furnish merely, at best, suggestive hypothetical guesses or, at worst, dogmatic flights of groundless imaginative fancy. On the other hand, the gesture of tethering such a materialism to scientific domains above or below the scale of biology (i.e., to sciences other than the life sciences) brings with it the imminent danger of endorsing, if only inadvertently, mechanistic, reductive, or eliminative materialist worldviews leaving no real clearing for the autonomous negativity embodied by minded human subjects. Protests that appeals to the physics of the extremely small, such as quantum mechanics or string theory, do not reintroduce classically determinist materialisms are unconvincing; two reasons for doubt are that, first, it is not evident that the weird dynamics of quantum processes, however weird, entail anything on the order of subjective autonomy and, second, the purported relevance of such tiny processes to the much larger-scale objects and occurrences of human beings and their existences is a matter of empirically unverifiable faith in the ultimate physical unity and causal cohesion of multiple strata and tiers of material beings. Related to this second reason for skepticism, a non-reductive materialism wishing to advocate a theory of strongly emergent subjectivity actually contradicts itself if it posits substantial continuities between the physics of the microcosmic and biology as dealing with significantly bigger entities. Such a materialism should not follow in Penrose's footsteps.

Moreover, speculations and explorations above and below the bandwidth of the spatial and temporal scale-thresholds of the life sciences are best left, at least as of the recent past up through the present, to such scientific disciplines as cosmology, astrophysics, quantum mechanics, string theory, and the like. That is to say, as regards both the unimaginably large and the just as unimaginably small, theoretical musings entirely disconnected from anything and everything empirical are a poor substitute for the much more careful, guided, and constrained theorizations launched from the platform provided by these disciplines (even string theory, despite debates about whether it [yet] counts as scientific strictly speaking, is extrapolated quite precisely from results,

questions, and problems in experimental physical science). In other words, when it comes to things much bigger and much smaller than human mid-sized reality, the historical time of armchair philosophical legislating is long over. Again, absolutely non-empirical musings about these realms amount to fruitless dogmatic fantasizing.

VII

For transcendental materialism, there are, so to speak, no illusions. More precisely, this variant of materialism refuses to dismiss all things subjective as epiphenomenal, namely, as purely illusory *qua* causally inefficacious. Hegel's emphasis on the need to think substance also as subject reciprocally entails the complementary obligation to conceptualize subject as substance. This reciprocity reflects his post-Spinozist (in both senses of the qualifier "post-") immanentism in which transcendent(al) subjectivity nonetheless remains immanent to substance in a dialectical-speculative relationship of an "identity of identity and difference." Thinking subject as substance, which is a move central to transcendental materialism, involves treating subjectivity and various phenomena tied up with it as "real abstractions"—a Marxian notion foreshadowed by Hegel and redeployed by the Lacan who famously rebuts a piece of popular May '68 Parisian graffiti by insisting that, "Structures indeed do march in the streets," that they "have legs" (perhaps connected to the feet of Marx's marching history). As real *qua* non-illusory, such abstractions are causally efficacious and, hence, far from epiphenomenal. In Hegelian phrasing, the thought of the concrete apart from the abstract is itself the height of abstraction.

Additionally, conceiving subjectivity as substantial, as internal in its irreducibility to the asubjective grounds of its very being, requires rejecting any strictly contemplative materialism (be it mechanical, reductive, or eliminative). Apart from the profound epistemological inadequacies of the contemplative standpoint—as per Hegel's and Schelling's Spinoza critiques and Marx's Feuerbach critique, the contemplators fails to ask and answer crucial, unavoidable questions about how or why what they contemplate itself ever gave rise to contemplation (theirs included) to begin with—it is ontologically unsatisfactory too. If subjects, including contemplative ones, are fully immanent to the ontological register of substances, then an ontology that implicitly or explicitly excludes them necessarily is incomplete. This deficiency is especially galling in that it amounts to the glaring absence of an explanation regarding the causes for

asubjective being itself generating, among many other things, any and every ontology as a reflexive subjective reflection on (and in) this very same asubjective being. Paraphrasing Marx, one might ask: Who will contemplate the contemplators?

VIII

Transcendental materialism is anything but a scientific positivism, a simplistic, narrow-minded metaphysics in which only physically present matter-in-motion in the *hic et nunc* is admitted as real. In relation to the topic of “privative causality” from Locke to Kant, Hegel, and beyond, it acknowledges the real causal efficacy of absences, conflicts, gaps, lacks, and the like. That is to say, negativities (first and foremost, those associated with the *Cogito*-like subject) are actual causal agencies immanent to the lone plane of material being(s). These privations and their palpable effects must be reckoned with even by a materialism allied to the sciences—and this despite the natural sciences’ unfortunate and problematic spontaneous positivist tendencies uncritically to abhor a void, as it were.

Although transcendental materialism affirms rather than denies the reality of negativity, this position, as a proper materialism, upholds a material as opposed to a mystical account of it. The latter tends to predominate in those philosophies likewise treating negativities as ontologically real, from the Christian Pico della Mirandola in the Renaissance to Agamben *et al* in the far from atheistic *status quo*. The obscurantism of these kinds of accounts past and present consists in appeals to the unexplained explainer of the supposed factual givenness of an always-already operative Nothing at or as the heart and soul of subjectivity (if not Being overall). In terms of its genetic origins (whether ontogenetically or phylogenetically speaking), this enigmatic, opaque Void comes from a mysterious God-knows-where. With reference to Sellars’ seminal 1956 essay “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” mysticisms of the negative might be said to rely on “the myth of the non-given,” namely, the non-givenness of the Nothing/Void as itself a purportedly elementary, rock-bottom given.

By contrast, a material account of negativity begins with the recognition of the need both, first, to ask the question of the dual, interlinked phylogenetic and ontogenetic origins of Nothing(ness)/Void(edness) as well as, second, to answer this question in a strictly materialist manner (i.e., without surreptitious spiritualist cheating through covert recourse to presuppositions and posits involving entities and

events utterly inexplicable in relation to the realities of matter and nature). In tandem with conceiving of phylogeny and ontogeny within a hybrid Darwinian, Marxian, and Freudian-Lacanian framework, transcendental materialism’s non-mystical theory of “things” negative rests on a principle of “more is less” (to invert a cliché). The “plus” of an unguided, accidental accretion of contingent material components and constituents over time has the potential to give rise to increasing degrees of complexity in the forms of systems taking shape in and through cross-resonating relations between these accumulating material components and constituents (this indeed has happened in the natural and non-natural histories behind the reality containing human beings as they actually are). Above certain thresholds, such complexity, produced by nothing magically inexplicable in natural or material terms, immanently generates out of itself, in a self-subverting, short-circuiting process, the “minus” of causally efficacious antagonisms, bugs, clashes, dysfunctions, rifts, splits, and so on (i.e., negativities) within and between the contributors to complexity. Put differently, the “more” of a surplus of positive parts yields, in a real dialectical dynamic, the “less” of a deficit of balanced, harmonious coordination in the forms of negative structures and phenomena bound up with absences, conflicts, gaps, and lacks perturbing both natural and denaturalized material realities from within. The negativity of the *Cogito*-like subject can and should be explained materially, rather than unexplained mystically, the latter being the idealist mirror image of the pre/non-dialectical materialist explaining-away peddled by mechanistic, reductive, and eliminative *Weltanschauungen*.

IX

This “latest system-program of German idealism” (i.e., transcendental materialism), in which substance is thought as subject and vice versa, requires for its satisfactory establishment both a transcendentalism of subjectivity (as the sufficient conditions for there really being autonomous subjects) and a meta-transcendentalism of substantiality (as the necessary conditions for this). Regarding meta-transcendental necessary conditions, transcendental materialism, as also a carefully qualified (quasi-)naturalism, envisions a “weak nature” alone as the ground-zero of its ontology. In combined Lacanian, Badiouian, and Žižekian vocabularies, the natural does not amount to Nature-with-a-capital-N as the One-All of another big Other, whether as a flawlessly coordinated clockwork mega-machine (as per Laplace’s demon and

mechanistic materialism) or a (w)holistic cosmic super-organism (as per Romantic-style organicisms, including the more Romantic and Spinozist sides of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie*). Instead of being a grand Totality seamlessly self-integrated and consistent with itself (i.e., “strong”), the *Grund als Ur/Un-Grund* of the Otherless expanse of the natural is “weak” *qua* fragmentary and inconsistent, shot through with irreducible negativities thwarting any totalizing synthesis of the field of innumerable material beings. In addition to the ontological insights of Lacan, Badiou, and Žižek, Hegel’s hints about the *Ohnmacht der Natur*, McDowell’s “naturalism of second nature,” and Cartwright’s “dappled world” (as per a “nomological pluralism” arrived at via an ontologization of Hume’s epistemological analyses of causality) are key ingredients of this reconceptualization of nature in which its imagined strength is subtracted from it (specifically its deterministic power presumably exerted through a network of exhaustively interconnected efficient causes as inviolable, iron-clad laws).

What is meant here by the weakness of nature can be best appreciated starting with reference to human beings. Such beings are the progeny of natural history, of evolutionary processes as temporally elongated jumbles of contingencies-without-teleologies in which the sole minimal requirement for living entities ultimately is “good enough to survive long enough to reproduce” (hardly a recipe promising the outcome of maximally optimized functionality—as a German saying has it, *Dumm kann ficken*). Of course, this history happens to have eventuated in human animals as highly complex organisms. Along the lines of a non-mystical account of negativity, the bio-material complexity of humans crosses a tipping point beyond which these organisms no longer are completely organic *qua* wholes whose parts are smoothly orchestrated and frictionlessly synchronize with each other. As per the “kludge” model of the central nervous system, discrepancies and tensions can and do arise within and between the complexes of components and sub-components of humans’ incredibly intricate anatomies and physiologies (in Lacanese, the barred corpo-Real of brains-and-bodies-in-pieces). Human beings are instances in which, just as the organic emerges from the inorganic, the “anorganic” emerges from the organic. The anorganic is not the inorganic (i.e., the physics and chemistry of the non-living), but, rather, the negativities (as discordances, glitches, etc.) generated in and by the organic’s intricacy-induced auto-disruptions. In more sweeping language, humanity is the product

of a self-denaturalizing nature (as a Hegelian-type self-sundering substance). Human creatures are the children of evolution and genetics as uncaringly indifferent and laxly underdetermining parents. These old authorities are too feeble and divided against themselves to prevent or squelch their offsprings’ phylogenetic and ontogenetic rebellions, to block or crush the runaway cultural revolutions launching denaturalized histories as internal yet irreducible transcendences-in-immanence with respect to natural history itself. Without the weakness of (in) substantial nature, as a material meta-transcendental necessary condition for more-than-material transcendental subjects, there could be no exceptions to natural heteronomy. In other words, if the natural were stronger, really existing human subjectivity in all its distinctiveness could not have arisen in the first place.

The complexity-triggered dialectical logic of “more is less” holds for the cultural as well as the natural, for the Symbolic register of the historical, linguistic, and social as well as the Real register of the evolutionary, genetic, and organic. Hence, not only is nature underdetermining by virtue of its impotence (as anorganicism, kludginess, etc.)—so too is the nurture of collective structures. According to the more-is-less principle, sufficiently elaborate systems both natural and non-natural inevitably come to harbor internally generated loopholes, namely, intra-systemically produced null zones as SNAFU extimacies (to borrow one of Lacan’s better-known neologisms). At such exceptional points of extimacy, these systems, thanks to their multifaceted intricacies, unintentionally suspend their own laws and commands, thereby creating system-immanent grey areas in which things can happen otherwise than as would be dictated by the rules and regulations of default systemic business as usual. In an inversion of Althusserian interpellation, in which a strong system as irresistibly determining heteronomously subjects its addressees, the possibility of a subjectification achieving autonomy from both nature and nurture arises from events of simultaneous encounters with two overlapping voids: the negativity of a barred Real plus that of a barred Symbolic.

X

Transcendental materialism consists not only of an ontology of meta-transcendental substance, but also a meta-physics of transcendental subjectivity. In this particular philosophical apparatus, the theory of being delineates the necessary (but not sufficient)

conditions for the theory of the subject, a subject transcendent(al)-while-immanent to this same being as a dialectical-speculative identity-in-difference. However, by contrast with certain versions of dialectical materialism, the strongly emergent subject of transcendental materialism can and does achieve, at least from time to time, full-fledged independence from its ontological-material grounds (i.e., its meta-transcendental necessary conditions). This subject introduces irreparable breaks in being resistant to any and every kind of synthesizing sublation. But, what are the sufficient conditions for such transcendent(al) subjects within this specific materialist framework?

As hinted a moment ago, a strong variant of emergentism is a key component of a transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity. If emergences of a peculiar type and of sufficient strength do happen—these would have to involve what emergence theorists, cognitive scientists, and Analytic philosophers of mind designate as the power of “downward causation” in which “higher” emergent levels and layers react back on “lower” ones—then there indeed are the sorts of subjects affirmed by this anti-reductive/eliminative materialism as an updated “Spinozism of freedom.” Two more variables are bound up with transcendental materialism’s version of emergentism: one, the epigenetics and plasticity of the human central nervous system as inextricably entangled with and suffused by extended exogenous matrices of mediation both natural and non-natural (what certain Analytic philosophers have taken to calling the “extended brain/mind”); and, two, processes through which this entanglement of human minded bodies with external networks both natural and non-natural, rather than remaining matters of heteronomous (over)determination by externalities, give rise to recursive structures and dynamics through which loci of ideational/representational reflexive self-relatedness (as the skeletal scaffoldings of subjectivity proper) establish themselves as autonomous *vis-à-vis* nature, nurture, or any combination thereof (this having to do with responses catalyzed by inverse interpellations coming from both the Real and the Symbolic as each barred). A systematic account of these multiple forces and factors arguably would amount to thinking substance as subject and vice versa.

XI

One of the great virtues of Badiou’s philosophy has to do with how he situates himself *vis-à-vis* his three

designated twentieth-century French “masters”: Sartre, Althusser, and Lacan—in particular, his interfacing of a Sartrean existentialism of autonomy with an Althusserian structuralism of heteronomy, an interfacing significantly foreshadowed by Lacanian psychoanalysis. In the language of Schelling’s 1809 *Freiheitschrift*, Badiou seeks to combine Sartre’s “freedom” (represented by Kant and Fichte for Schelling) and Althusser’s “system” (represented by Spinoza for Schelling). The very beginning of Badiou’s philosophical system reflects Sartre’s lasting influence. With reference to Badiou’s concept of a “point” (i.e., a locus or node at which, in resonance with the Sartrean “condemnation to freedom,” a choice is forced between two divergent forks: yes or no, left or right, persist or desist, etc.), philosophy gets well and truly underway, for Badiou, with the answering, in the form of system-founding axioms, of unavoidable point-like questions (such as the Parmenidean-Platonic, “Being, One or Many?”). The axiomatic, load-bearing pillars of such a systematic philosophical edifice are erected as consequences of radically free responses to certain ultimate and inevitable queries compelling groundless/self-grounding decisions constituting the grounding intuitions of a philosophy made possible on their basis. But, such a philosophy beginning thusly is no less systematic for all that: Badiou absorbs key lessons from existentialism without succumbing to its irrationalist tendencies to denounce classical system-building. The preceding ten theses of transcendental materialism as a system are precisely its point-prompted axioms.

In the same vein, the full arc of Badiou’s *Being and Event*, the 1988 book establishing the core of his mature philosophy, fairly can be depicted as constructing the virtuous circle of a self-grounding trajectory. The Sartrean-style autonomous acts that launch the first half of the book (the “being” part of its ontology) are retroactively justified, explained *après-coup*, by the second half of the book (the “event” part, involving a theory of the subject as immanent yet irreducible to “being *qua* being” [*l’être en tant qu’être*]). As per this reading of *Being and Event*, which informs the relation between the theses and the system of transcendental materialism, only a systematic ontology of freedom (as non-contemplative and implacably hostile to reductivism and epiphenomenalism) can be truly self-grounding through including within itself an account of the groundless ground of the autonomy making possible any and every philosophy’s (including even those philosophies denying such autonomy) obligatory beginnings with a philosopher-subject’s

freely decided upon axioms, intuitions, and theses.

Related to the preceding, Badiou's vision of philosophy as called to think the "compossibility" of the truths of its time produced in the domains of its four extra-philosophical "conditions" (i.e., art, love, politics, and science) also reflects certain existentialist sensibilities—ones tracing back, in this case, to Pascal (not to mention its resonances with the preface to Hegel's 1821 *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*). In fact, the above-mentioned free choices of responses to pointed, unavoidable *Ur*-questions are shaped by the philosopher's relations to these conditions and the cross-resonances between the artistic, amorous, political, and scientific events and truths he/she opts to recognize. To be more exact, philosophy à la Badiou is duty-bound to gamble on aspects of its extra-philosophical sources in conjunction with placing the bets that establish its axiomatic theses. Moreover, as with Pascal's famous wager, there are no safe, neutral, non-committal positions relative to the points of interrogation making it always-already the case for any philosophy that it asks and answers certain fundamental questions, however implicitly or explicitly. For Pascal, agnosticism, as not choosing to believe in God, is really tantamount to atheism, as choosing not to believe in God. In Pascal's wager, as in the Sartrean existentialism indebted to it, not choosing is itself a choice, not acting is itself an action. Likewise, according to Badiou's conception of the founding grounds of each and every philosophy, the philosopher is forced freely to decide, however consciously or unconsciously, on what and what not to be conditioned by in terms of what is transpiring around him/her in the more-than-philosophical realms of art, love, politics, and science. Arguably, not deciding to be conditioned by given artistic, amorous, political, and/or artistic events and truths is deciding not to be conditioned by them. Or, when it comes to laying one's philosophical foundations (as with so much else), *omnis determinatio est negatio*, to put this in a hybrid Spinozist-Hegelian phrasing.

Of Badiou's four conditions, science is especially important for the foundations of his post-1988 philosophical system insofar as it furnishes him with the skeletal scaffoldings for both his ontology and phenomenology in the forms of the mathematical sciences of set theory and category theory respectively. Well aware that he is gambling, he commits to wagering on select events in mathematics starting with Cantor's infinitization of infinity itself as irreparable ruptures in the history of thought demanding philosophical acknowledgments and reckonings. By contrast with the formalist rationalism of Badiouian metaphysics as a "materialist

dialectic," transcendental materialism, diverging from Badiou's Koyré-inspired limiting of the scientific to the (purely) mathematical, places some of its make-or-break bets on natural (rather than formal) sciences. Transcendental materialism's wagers on biology are just as essential to it as Badiou's wagers on trans-finite set theory are for his interlinked ontology and theory of subjectivity. Although differing from each other as regards their conceptions of scientificity, these two approaches share a belief in the necessity of risking philosophical engagement with and reliance upon extra-philosophical sciences (and other disciplines and practices too).

Nothing guarantees that these wagers will not be problematized in the future. But, equally, nothing guarantees that they will be either. Opting to believe in the historical impermanence of scientific propositions, in the supposed inevitability of them being overturned and surpassed sooner or later, is as much an article of dogmatic faith as the most naïve, uncritical belief in the unquestionable universal validity of whatever happens to count as present-best science. The false security of a non-committal agnosticism *vis-à-vis* the sciences refusing to place any bets whatsoever on these more-than-philosophical disciplines justifies itself on the basis of this aforementioned belief in the finitude of all purported facts and truths scientific. But, especially for ostensibly materialist philosophies, not only is such an agnosticism in actual danger of present and future inconsequence and irrelevance measured by the standard of philosophy having to be "of its time" (as per both Hegel and Badiou)—it quickly runs aground into the barren, sterile dead end of subjectively idealist skepticism. The prices to be paid for the illusory safety of this cautious, unconfident, and fatalistic *attentisme* are abandonment of a vital aspect of philosophy's vocation as well as renunciation of any legitimate claim to being materialist. In short, philosophical materialism cannot afford not to take its chances.

PAUL M. LIVINGSTON

REALISM AND THE INFINITE¹

“Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing.” —Wittgenstein

“A human is that being which prefers to represent itself within finitude, whose sign is death, rather than knowing itself to be entirely traversed and encircled by the omnipresence of infinity.” —Badiou

I

In his 1951 Gibbs lecture, drawing out some of the “philosophical consequences” of his two incompleteness theorems and related results, Kurt Gödel outlines a disjunctive alternative which, as I shall try to show, captures in a precise way the contemporary situation of reflective thought in its ongoing consideration of the relationship of formalism to the real:

Either mathematics is incompletable in [the] sense that its evident axioms can never be comprised in a finite rule, i.e. to say the human mind (even within the realm of pure mathematics) infinitely surpasses the powers of any finite machine, or else there exist absolutely unsolvable Diophantine problems of the type specified...²

A consequence of this aporetic situation of contemporary thought, as I shall try to show, is that the longstanding philosophical debate over the relative priority of thought and being that finds expression in discussions of “realism” and “anti-realism” (whether of idealist, positivist, or conventionalist forms) can only be assayed from the position of a *metaformal* reflection on the relationship of the *forms* of thought to the *real* of being. Moreover, if Gödel’s argument is correct and can be generalized beyond the epistemology of mathematics itself, it is also not neutral on this question of relative priority, but rather suggests a new kind of *realism*—what I shall call “metaformal” realism—that differs markedly both from “metaphysical realism” and from the newer varieties of “speculative realism” on offer today.

¹ I would like to thank Reuben Hersh and John Bova for discussions of the issues in this paper. A longer and more comprehensive version is available at: <http://www.unm.edu/~pmliving/>

² Kurt Gödel, “Some basic theorems on the foundations of mathematics and their philosophical implications” in *Unpublished Philosophical Essays*, ed. Francisco A. Rodriguez-Consiguera (Basel/Boston/Berlin: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1995), 134.

The type of realism I shall defend here is not primarily a realism *about* any particular class or type of objects or entities. Thus it is not, *a fortiori*, an *empirical* realism or a naturalism (although I also do not think it is *inconsistent* with positions that march under these banners).³ Its primary source is not any empirical experience but rather the experience of formalization, both insofar as this experience points to the real-impossible point of the *actual relation* of thinkable forms to being and insofar as it schematizes, in results such as Gödel’s, the intrinsic capacity of formalization problematically to capture and decompose its *own* limits. In *The Politics of Logic*, I systematically interrogated the consequences of formalism and formalization in this sense for contemporary political, social, and intersubjective life according to the various orientations possible today for thought in its total relation to being, seeking to locate, in each case, the actual point and limits of the effective formal capture of the real in thought. In particular, I suggested there that both of the orientations I presented as “post-Cantorian” demand a *realist* attitude grounded in this experience of the transit of forms, and capable of acknowledging their inherent difference from anything simply *created* or *produced* by finite human thought. Accordingly, I believe the metaformal realism I shall develop more fully here might be formulated precisely, referring in passing to the Lacanian motto according to which “the Real is the impasse of formalization,” as a realism *of* the “Real” in something like Lacan’s sense—that is, in the sense in which it represents both an inherent limit-point and an obscurely constitutive underside for both of the other two “registers” of the Imaginary and the Symbolic.⁴

To arrive at the disjunctive conclusion he draws in the lecture, Gödel draws on a concept central to twentieth-century inquiry into the foundations of mathematics, that of a “finite procedure.” Such a

³ I return to the issue of the relationship of realism to materialism in section IV, below.

⁴ Of course, Lacan’s concept of the “Real” is complex and undergoes many changes of specification and inflection over the course of his career. I do not take a view here about how precisely to define it or which formulation is most important, but seek only to preserve the link that is constitutive for Lacan between the Real and formalization at the latter’s point of inherent impasse. For a very exhaustive and illuminating treatment of Lacan’s concept, see Tom Eyers, *Lacan and the Concept of the “Real”* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). I also discuss Lacan’s motto and Badiou’s reversal of it into his own claim for a “theory of the pass of the real, in the breach opened up by formalization...” in Paul Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 188-192.

procedure is one that can be carried out in a finite number of steps by a system governed by well-defined and finitely stateable rules, a so-called “formal system.” The significance of the investigation of formal systems for research into the structure of mathematical cognition and reality lies in the possibility it presents of rigorously posing general questions about the capacities of such systems to solve mathematical problems or prove mathematical truths. For instance, one can pose as rigorous questions i) the question whether such a system is capable of proving *all* arithmetic truths about whole numbers; and ii) whether such a system is capable of proving a statement of its own consistency. Notoriously, Gödel’s first and second incompleteness theorems, respectively, answer these two questions, for *any* consistent formal system capable of expressing the truths of arithmetic, in the negative: given any such system, it is possible to formulate an arithmetic sentence which can (intuitively) be seen to be true but cannot be proven by the system, and it is impossible for the system to prove a statement of its own consistency (unless it is in fact *inconsistent*).

Gödel’s argument from these results to his “disjunctive conclusion” in the lecture is relatively straightforward. The first incompleteness theorem shows that, for any formal system of the specified sort, it is possible to generate a particular sentence which we can “see” to be true (on the assumption of the system’s consistency) but which the system itself cannot prove.⁵ Mathematics is thus, from the perspective of any specific formal system, “inexhaustible” in the sense that no such formal system will ever capture *all* the actual mathematical truths. Of course, given any such system and its unprovable truth, it is possible to specify a *new* system in which that truth is provable; but then the new system will have its own unprovable Gödel sentence, and so on. The question now arises whether or not there is some formal system which can prove *all* the statements that we can successively see to be true in this intuitional way. If *not*, then human mathematical cognition, in perceiving the truth of the successive Gödel sentences, essentially *exceeds* the capacities of all formal systems, and mechanism (the claim that human mathematical cognition is, or is capturable by, a formal system) is false; this is the first alternative of Gödel’s disjunction. If so, however, then there is some formal system that captures the capacities of

⁵ I here state the first theorem, roughly and intuitively, appealing to a notion of “truth” that is in some ways problematic. For discussion of the issues involved in the difference between this and other, less potentially problematic statements, see Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, chapter 6.

human mathematical thought. It remains, however, that there will be statements that are undecidable for this system, including the statement of its consistency, which is itself simply an arithmetical statement. In this case there are thus problems that cannot be solved by any formal system we can show to be consistent *or* by any application of our powers of mathematical cognition themselves; there are well-defined problems that will remain unsolvable, now and for all time.⁶

The two options left open by Gödel’s disjunctive conclusion correspond directly to the two post-Cantorian orientations of thought, or positions on the relation between thought and being, that I called in *The Politics of Logic* the “generic” and “paradoxico-critical” orientations.⁷ On the first of Gödel’s disjunctive options, the power of the human mind to grasp or otherwise comprehend truths beyond the power of any finite system effectively to demonstrate witnesses an essential *incompleteness* of any finitely determined cognition and a correlative capacity on the part of human thought, rigorously following out the consequences of the mandate of consistency, to traverse by means of a “generic” procedure the infinite consequences of truths essentially beyond the reach of any such finite determination. On the second of the options, the essential indeterminacy of any such system witnesses, rather, the necessary *indemonstrability* of the *consistency* of any procedural means available to the human subject in its pursuit of truth, and thereby to the necessary existence of mathematical problems that are absolutely unsolvable by any specifiable epistemic powers of this subject, no matter how great. Both orientations, as I argued in the book, as well as the necessity of the (possibly non-exclusive) decision between them, result directly from working through the consequences of the systematic availability of the *infinite* to mathematical thought, as accomplished most directly through Cantor’s set theory and its conception of the hierarchy of transfinite cardinals. More broadly, as I argued in the book, what is most decisive for the question of the orientations available to thought today is the consequences of the interlinked sequence of metamathematical

⁶ The result that Gödel refers to in 1951 is that the consistency statement for each particular system is equivalent to some statement of the form: $\forall x_1, \dots, x_n \exists y_1, \dots, y_m [p(x_1, \dots, x_n, y_1, \dots, y_m) = 0]$ where p is a polynomial with integer coefficients and the variables range over natural numbers; later the work of Davis, Putnam, Robinson and Matiyasevich showed that one can replace the statement with something of the form: $\forall x_1, \dots, x_n [p(x_1, \dots, x_n) \neq 0]$

⁷ For the four orientations, see Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, 51-60.

and metalogical reflection running from Cantor, through Gödel's incompleteness theorems, up to Cohen's demonstration of the independence of the Continuum Hypothesis from the axioms of ZF set theory; it is thus not surprising that Gödel's own "philosophical remarks" about the implications of his own results should replicate the general disjunction in a clear and specific form.

Gödel himself, in the lecture and elsewhere, was concerned to draw out the implications of his own result for the hypothesis of mechanism; as subsequent discussion has made clear, though, it is in fact problematic for many reasons, including the unclarity of the mechanist thesis itself, to argue directly against (or for) mechanism simply on the basis of metamathematical results.⁸ Notwithstanding this, it is possible to see the upshot of Gödel's "disjunctive conclusion" in the lecture as bearing relevance, beyond the issue of mechanism as well as the confines of "philosophy of mathematics" narrowly construed, to somewhat different philosophical issues.⁹ In particular, it points to a distinctive and non-standard, but comprehensive position of *realism*, what I shall call *metaformal realism*.¹⁰ For this realism, the decisive issue is not, primarily, that of the reality of "mathematical objects" or the possibility of understanding them as determinate independently of the routes of access to them (epistemic or otherwise) involved in the exercise of our human capacities. It is, rather, that both terms of Gödel's disjunction capture, in different ways, the

⁸ Thus, for instance, in a recent very comprehensive review of discussion about Gödel and mechanism, Stuart Shapiro concludes that "there is no plausible mechanist thesis on offer that is sufficiently precise to be undermined by the incompleteness theorems." Stuart Shapiro, "Incompleteness, mechanism, and optimism," *The Bulletin of Symbolic Logic* 4:3, September 1998: 275.

⁹ I thus follow Feferman in considering that, even if there are problems with applying Gödel's reasoning directly to the question of mechanism, "...at an informal, non-mathematical, more every-day level, there is nevertheless something to the ideas involved [in his argument for the "disjunctive conclusion"] and something to the argument that we can and should take seriously." Solomon Feferman, "Are there absolutely unsolvable problems? Gödel's dichotomy." *Philosophia Mathematica* 14:2: 11 (page # reference to on-line version at: <http://math.stanford.edu/~feferman/papers/dichotomy.pdf>).

¹⁰ In *The Politics of Logic*, I called this position simply "formal realism." I add the prefix "meta-" here, to reflect that what is concerned is not primarily an attitude (e.g. a Platonist one) about the "reality" or "actual existence" of forms, but rather the implications of the *transit* of forms in relation to what is thinkable of the real, the transit that can, in view of Cantor's framework, be carried out beyond the finite.

structural point of contact *between* these capacities and what must, on *either* horn of the distinction, be understood as an infinite *thinkable* structure determined quite independently of anything that is, in itself, finite. Thus, each term of Gödel's disjunction reflects the necessity, given Gödel's theorems, that any specification of our relevant capacities involve their relation to a structural infinity about which we must be realist, i.e. which it is not possible to see as a mere production or creation of these capacities.

On the first alternative, this is obvious. If human mathematical thought can know the truth of statements about numbers which are beyond the capacity of *any* formal system to prove, then the epistemic objects of this knowledge are "realities" (i.e. truths) that also exceed any finitely determinable capacity of knowledge. But on the second alternative, it is equally so. If there are well-specified mathematical problems that are not solvable by any means whatsoever, neither by any specifiable formal system nor by human cognition itself, then the reality of *these problems* must be thought of as a fact determined quite independently of our capacities to know it (or, indeed, to solve them).¹¹ On this alternative, we must thus acknowledge the existence of a reality of forever irremediable problems whose very issue is the inherent undecidability that results from the impossibility of founding thought by means of an internal assurance of its consistency. In this way the implications of the mathematical availability of the infinite, on either horn of the disjunction, decompose the exhaustiveness of the situation underlying the question of realism and idealism in its usual sense: that is, the question of the relationship of a presumptively finite thought to its presumptively finite object.

The metaformal realism thus indicated has several further distinctive features, which I briefly adumbrate:

1. Metaformal realism is not a "metaphysical realism." In particular, because it is grounded solely in an *internal* experience of the progress of forms to the infinite, it avoids any need to posit an empirical or transcendent referent beyond the effectiveness of

¹¹ Gödel says this about the second term of the disjunction: "... the second alternative, where there exist absolutely undecidable mathematical propositions, seems to disprove the view, that mathematics (in any sense) is only our own creation... So this alternative seems to imply that mathematical objects and facts or at least *something* in them exist objectively and independently of our mental acts and decisions, i.e. to say some form or other of Platonism or "Realism" as to the mathematical objects." Kurt Gödel: *Unpublished Philosophical Essays*, 135-136.

forms and formalization and does not ground its realism in any such referent. It is thus completely distinct from any realism of a “mind-independence” variety, which always requires a problematic doctrine of the bounding of thought in relation to its empirical objects. It also does not require, and does not encourage, the possibility of a “view from nowhere” or a “single unique description of reality.”

2. Metaformal realism is a *reflective*, not a “speculative,” realism. It develops all of its consequences internally, from internal reflection on the limitology of thought and its inherent formal features. It thus has no need to posit an object of *speculation* simply external to this limitology or to engage in the uncertain investigation of the features of such an object. If it is, as I shall try to show, engaged in an inherent dialectic of thought with being, this dialectic is thus not a *speculative* dialectic of “determinate negation.”¹²

3. Metaformal realism de-absolutizes the world as a transcendent object of thought. As I argued in *The Politics of Logic*, the twentieth-century inquiry into forms has the consequence of consigning formal thought about the totality of the world (indeed, thought about totality in general) to an unavoidable disjunction, what I called there the “metalogical duality” between consistent incompleteness and inconsistent completeness, essentially the same alternatives involved in Gödel’s “disjunctive” conclusion. This means, as well, a basic diremption of any figure of thought that countenances a (complete and consistent) Absolute, and forces a choice between acknowledging the essential incompleteness of consistent thought or countenancing the existence of the totality of the world only under the heading of the reality of the inconsistent.

II

In contemporary philosophical discourse, no project has done more to illuminate the issue of realism and its underlying formal determinants than Michael

¹² I refer here, in passing, to the distinction between “reflection” and “speculation” drawn by Hegel in the “Preface” to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §59. That I thus distinguish the post-Cantorian orientations of metaformal realism from Hegel’s pre-Cantorian speculative dialectic should not exclude that metaformal realism, particularly in its paradoxico-critical variant, nevertheless exhibits a number of important parallels to aspects of Hegel’s system, particularly in its treatment of the nature of contradiction prior to its dialectical sublation or resolution; for discussion of some of these relationships to Hegel, see *The Politics of Logic*, 253-254.

Dummett’s. Familiarly, in a series of articles and books beginning in 1963 with the article “Realism,” Dummett has suggested that the dispute between realism and anti-realism with respect to a particular class of statements may be put as a dispute about whether or not to accept the principle of *bivalence* (i.e., the principle that each statement is determinately true or false) for statements in the class concerned.¹³ Though this issue yields differing consequences in each domain considered, the acceptance of bivalence generally means the acceptance of the view that all statements in the relevant class have truth values determined in a way in principle independent of the means and methods used to verify them (or to recognize that their truth-conditions actually obtain when they, in fact, do so); the anti-realist, by contrast, generally rejects this view with respect to the relevant class. Dummett did not envisage that this comprehensive framework would or should support a single, *global* position of metaphysical “realism” or “anti-realism” with respect to all domains or the totality of the world; rather, his aim was to illuminate the different kinds of issues emerging from the traditional disputes of “realism” and “idealism” in differing domains by submitting them to a common, formal framework.¹⁴ From the current perspective, however, it is just this aspect of formal illumination which is the most salutary feature of Dummett’s approach. For by formally determining the issue of realism with respect to a given domain as one turning on the acceptance or nonacceptance of the (meta-)formal principle of bivalence with respect to *statements*, Dummett points toward a way of conceiving the issue that is, in principle, quite independent of any *ontological* conception of the “reality” or “ideality” of *objects* of the relevant sort.

Although this kind of consideration finds application quite generally, it is certainly no accident that the historical dispute which forms the basic model for Dummett’s formal framework itself is the dispute between formalists and intuitionists about the foundations of mathematics in the 1920s and early 1930s. Partisans of the two positions reached deeply opposed conclusions about the nature of reasoning about the infinite, but for both positions the idea of a *finite* (i.e., *finitely specifiable*) procedure or process of demonstration plays a central role. In particular, whereas the formalist position allows

¹³ Michael Dummett “Realism” in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978), 145-165; for some later reflections on the development of the framework and issues related to it, see Dummett’s preface to *Truth and Other Enigmas*.

¹⁴ Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, xxx-xxxii.

the axioms and rules of a formal system to be extended classically, by means of such a procedure, to arbitrarily extended reasoning about the infinite *provided* that the system can be shown to be consistent, intuitionism generally restricts the positive results of mathematics about the infinite to what can be shown by means of a finite, constructivist procedure of proof.

In the 1973 article “The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic,” Dummett considers the question of what rationale might reasonably serve as a basis for replacing classical logic with intuitionistic logic in mathematical reasoning (hence, in his framework, for replacing realism with anti-realism).¹⁵ As Dummett emphasizes here, the decision between realism and anti-realism depends ultimately on our conception of how *sense* is provided for mathematical statements, and in particular whether we can conceive of these statements as having sense quite independently of our means of recognizing a verification of them. It is thus, ultimately, general issues about the *capacities* or *practices* that we learn in learning a language and deploy in speaking one that determine, given his framework, equally general issues about whether realism or anti-realism is better justified in any given domain. As in the earlier article “Realism,” Dummett here emphasizes that this primary issue is not an epistemic or ontological, but rather a semantic one. Thus, “Any justification for adopting one logic rather than another as the logic for mathematics must turn on questions of *meaning*”; and again, “it would be impossible to construe such a justification [i.e. for adopting classical or intuitionistic logic] which took meaning for granted, and represented the question as turning on knowledge or certainty.”¹⁶

By posing the issue of realism vs. anti-realism, not only in the mathematical case but more generally, as turning on the question of the provision of sense, Dummett shows that the question of realism in a particular domain is most intimately related, not to the question of the ontological status of, or our epistemological access to, its objects, but rather to the question of the coherence and range of the procedures by means of which the *meanings* of statements about the domain are learned and manifested. But this is none other than, again, the question of the way that the infinite becomes available on the basis of a finite procedure. And it is just here, with regard to the specific question of what is involved in the learning and pursuit of a finite procedure, that the possibility of metaformal

¹⁵ Dummett, “The philosophical basis of intuitionistic logic” in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, 215-247.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

reflection of the sort that I have portrayed Gödel as engaging in proves to be decisive. For Gödel’s own incompleteness theorems, of course, result directly from a rigorous metaformal consideration of the range and capacities of formal systems (in Hilbert’s sense and related ones). In particular, Gödel’s first theorem shows that for any such system, there will be a number-theoretical sentence that is beyond its capacity to prove or refute, and the second theorem shows that no such system can prove its own consistency (assuming that it is consistent). In this way Gödel’s results render the formalist conception of finite procedures unsuitable for anyone who wishes to assert solely on its basis the realist position that all the statements of number theory have determinate truth-values, independently of our ways of verifying them; but on the other hand, in invoking under the heading of the “inexhaustibility” of mathematics an essential reference to a reality that marks the point of impasse of any given finite procedure, Gödel’s argument shows the intuitionist strictures to be untenable as well.

Just as Gödel’s theorems themselves thus overcome the debate between intuitionism and formalism, narrowly construed, by conceptually fixing and reflecting upon the contours of a central concept (that of a finite procedure) commonly appealed to by both, the metaformal realism I have discussed as suggested by Gödel’s argument provides a new basis for critically interrogating the central concept of a *rule of use*, as it figures in both “realist” and “anti-realist” conceptions of the structure of language. As I argued in more detail in *The Politics of Logic*, in particular, it is then apparently possible to draw, with respect to our actual practices and institutions of linguistic use, a conclusion directly analogous to that drawn by Gödel with respect to mathematical reasoning specifically: namely that *either* the consistency of our regular practices can only be known, and assured, by a deliverance of an essentially irregular insight that essentially cannot be subsumed within them or determined by them insofar as they can be captured by rules; *or* it cannot be known at all and thus can *only* be treated as a perpetually deferred problem. On either assumption, the claim of consistency is shown to be, from the perspective of the regular provision of sense, the point of an impossible-Real that always escapes, drawing along with it any possibility of an internal systematic confirmation of the infinite noncontradictory extensibility of the rule to ever-new cases. It is in this way, as I have argued, that the phenomenon that Gödel calls the “inexhaustibility of mathematics” points toward a metaformally justified realism of the impossible-Real, correlative to what we may describe as our essential

openness toward the infinite and based in metaformal reflection about the limits and transit of forms. In so doing, it unhinges any possible claim of the humanistically conceived “finite” subject finally to ground itself, or to secure by its own means the ultimate sense of its language and life.

III

For the thinkers and positions that have characterized themselves, over the last few years, as “speculative realist”, the work of Quentin Meillassoux has been seen as an inspiration.¹⁷ Much of the influence of Meillassoux’s work has derived from the force of his critique, in *After Finitude*, of what he calls “correlationism.”¹⁸ Correlationism is, according to Meillassoux, the position that holds that “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” and furthermore that the “correlation so defined” is “unsurpassable.”¹⁹ Meillassoux does not specify the kind of “correlation” figuring in this position as any one type of relation; but he suggests that “the subject-object correlation,” “the noetico-noematic correlation,” and the “language-referent correlation” may *all* be treated as examples of the kind of relation with which he is critically concerned.²⁰ To all of the varieties of correlationism, Meillassoux raises a single objection, that of what he calls the “ancestral.” Correlationism in any of its forms, he suggests, cannot account for the existence of a “reality anterior to the emergence of the human species.” According to Meillassoux, the correlationist cannot account for an anterior reality in this sense because, in considering it, he must insist upon a “retrojection of the past on the basis of the present” whereby “it is necessary to proceed from the present to the past, following a logical order, rather than from the past to the present, following a chronological order;” this requires him to hold that “it is not ancestry which precedes givenness, but that which is given in the present which retrojects a *seemingly* ancestral past.”²¹ To this apparent doubling of meaning in

the correlationist’s treatment of the arche-fossil, Meillassoux opposes the maxim of what he calls an “irremediable realism”: that an ancestral statement “either ...has a realist sense, and *only* a realist sense, or it has no sense at all.”²²

Meillassoux’s argument against correlationism has been aptly criticized elsewhere for the apparently “straw” character of the figure of the “correlationist” which it invokes; for example, as Peter Hallward points out, even as characteristic an idealist as Husserl in fact only considers claims about the “correlation” of thought or consciousness and objects within an attitude of *bracketing* claims about their existence in order to consider their sense (rather than, for instance, attempting to explain or derive their existence).²³ This and similar considerations about what is involved in actual idealist positions, including those of Kant himself, may lead us to conclude, with Hallward, that Meillassoux has, in constructing his critique of correlationism, essentially committed an equivocation of epistemological considerations with ontological or semantical ones. On the other hand, Meillassoux at least sometimes suggests that what is decisive for the correlationist position as he is portraying it is an order of precedence that is primarily *neither* epistemological nor ontological, but rather logical or semantic: thus, for instance, in describing the temporal “retrojection” that the correlationist must perform, he describes it as substituting a “logical” for a “chronological” order, and at least at one point he specifies the problem which the correlationist must answer as the problem of the possibility of the *meaningfulness* of scientific statements about the past.²⁴ If we take this last suggestion seriously, it might be possible to see the main concern of Meillassoux’s argument as turning not on the ontological issue of the existence of objects, or the epistemological one of the conditions for our knowledge of them, but rather on the question of the basis of the *provision of sense* for sentences about the ancestral past. In this way, Meillassoux could be construed as avoiding the equivocation between epistemology and ontology of which Hallward accuses him; and if construed this way, Meillassoux’s argument would approach more closely both Dummett’s framework for discus-

¹⁷ See, e.g., Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (ed.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 3-4. Meillassoux prefers the label “speculative materialism” for his own work.

¹⁸ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2006), 5. In the longer version of this paper, I discuss, as well, Meillassoux’s more recent article, “Iteration, reiteration, repetition: A speculative analysis of the meaningless sign.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ Peter Hallward, “Anything is possible: a reading of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*,” in *The Speculative Turn*, 137.

²⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 9. In his critical response to Hallward’s critique of Meillassoux, Nathan Brown makes this a central point of contention, charging that Hallward “...ignores Meillassoux’s critique of logical retrojection altogether.” Nathan Brown, “The speculative and the specific: On Hallward and Meillassoux,” in *The Speculative Turn*, 143.

sion of realism and anti-realism and the position of metaformal realism I am recommending here.

But even following this suggestion, it is not at all evident how to interpret Meillassoux's "correlationist" as an anti-realist in anything like Dummett's sense. For example, though Dummett has discussed within his framework the question of the reality of the past, even the anti-realist position has reason to reject the application of bivalence *only to* statements about the past *for whose truth or falsity there is presently no available conclusive evidence*; for this sort of anti-realist, there is no problem at all in admitting the straightforward truth or falsity of sentences of the sort that Meillassoux considers (for instance statements about the age of the Earth established on the evidentiary basis of radio-carbon dating). More broadly, it is not at all clear how to think about the issue of "anteriority" that forms the linchpin of Meillassoux's argument against the "correlationist" within Dummett's framework or the metaformal one; in particular, if the underlying issue is indeed that of the possibility of a "logical" order of anteriority on the basis of which the position opposed to realism (whether it be called "correlationism" or anti-realism or whatever) seeks to establish logical conditions for the sense or meaningfulness of a class of statements, it is not clear why this "anteriority" should pose any deeper problem than that posed by the "anteriority" of premises to a conclusion in a rational argument, or of a smaller number to a larger one in the sequence of natural numbers.

From the metaformal perspective suggested by Dummett, Meillassoux's "correlationist" does indeed seem, therefore, to be largely a straw man; and his argument against the correlationist, where it does not directly equivocate between ontology and epistemology (as Hallward suggests it does) appears to depend on a closely related failure to consider the implications of semantic considerations for the general realism/anti-realism issue. Does Meillassoux's positive argument for an underlying "hyper-chaos" fare any better? At decisive points in this argument, Meillassoux does appeal directly and decisively to what may seem to be implications of mathematical formalism, and specifically to the implications of the availability of the infinite and transfinite to mathematical thought. For instance, after "disqualifying" the correlationist position on which objects (or our knowledge of them or perhaps their sense) are essentially conditioned by *finite* forms of human thought, Meillassoux appeals, following Badiou, to Cantor's discovery of the transfinite hierarchy to motivate an anti-"frequentalist" position according to which it is no longer possible to hold natural

or physical laws to be (even in a relative sense) necessary.²⁵ Meillassoux's basic argument for this conclusion is that since all reasoning about probabilities "presupposes the notion of [a] numerical totality" of possibilities, Cantor's demonstration of the essentially open and non-totalizable hierarchy of infinite sets, if taken as applicable to the question of the conceivability of a total space of possibility, can "provide us with the resources for thinking that the possible is untotalizable" and hence for at least questioning the "necessitarian" assumption that reasoning about the relative probability of laws and events must be possible.²⁶

Drawing as it does upon the implications of Cantor's hierarchy of transfinite sets, this argument resembles in some ways the appeal made to formal structures of the infinite in motivating what I have called metaformal realism. However, there are several problems with the appeal as Meillassoux makes it. First, there is in fact no evident direct way to connect Cantor's open hierarchy of the transfinite with *any* kind of reasoning about probabilities and necessity. As Meillassoux in fact recognizes, it is perfectly possible to determine relative probabilities over domains that admit of infinite or even uncountably infinite ranges of possible values; thus, even if Cantor's results are taken to show that there may be infinitely or even uncountably many "possible worlds," this by itself has no tendency to show that probability measures over the totality of them are not well-defined.²⁷ More generally, the link between probability and the universe of *all* sets and quantities which Meillassoux's argument demands here is obscure, and Meillassoux does not clarify how we are to understand it.²⁸

But second, and even more problematically, as I argued in *The Politics of Logic*, the availability of

²⁵ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 100-108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁸ All he says, in fact, is that "...although we have not positively demonstrated that the possible is untotalizable, we have identified an alternative between two options—viz., the possible either does or does not constitute a totality—with regard to which we have every reason to opt for the second..." Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 107. But it cannot be said that the untotalizability of Cantor's hierarchy provides an alternative to a totalizable (or total) possibility space unless we know how to identify the space of possibilities with *all* of Cantor's hierarchy, and Meillassoux has given us no suggestion as to how to do so; indeed, if we do actually take the "universe" of sets to be untotalizable, this identification (since it calls for identifying *all* of the possibility space with *all* of the "universe," which is exactly what does not, on this telling, exist as a whole) is in fact not only unmotivated but in a certain sense impossible.

the transfinite to thought does not in fact demand the conclusion that Meillassoux follows Badiou in drawing: that of the in-existence of the All of the universe, or the untotalizability of the universe of sets and situations.²⁹ Rather—and this is the key to what I describe there as *another* possible post-Cantorian orientation of thought, distinct from and formally opposite to Badiou’s own “generic” orientation—it forces a decision on the level of totality and its thinkability. The decision is the one between, on the one hand, the combination of consistency with incompleteness (the alternative Badiou takes and in which Meillassoux apparently follows him) and, on the other, the combination of completeness (or totality) with inconsistency. That is, the implication of Cantor’s transfinite and the formal paradoxes and aporias associated with it is not simply to demonstrate or show the incompleteness or inexistence of the Whole, but rather to force the metalogical decision between the *two* orientations of the generic and the paradoxico-critical, the two orientations that correspond directly, as I have argued above, to the two alternatives of Gödel’s disjunctive conclusion.³⁰

If Meillassoux had adopted the paradoxico-critical alternative, or even considered it seriously as a possibility for thought, he could by no means have drawn the conclusions that he does about the “necessity of contingency” and the consequent need to assume, outside the “correlationist circle”, the absolute existence of an ultimate power of “chaos” by means of which “nothing is or would seem to be, impossible.”³¹ Rather, on the paradoxico-critical side, he would have had to be driven to consider

²⁹ See especially chapters 1 and 9.

³⁰ Meillassoux does recognize that his own conclusions about the bearing of the infinite on the question of chance and law will only be possible if an interpretation of the infinite in terms of inconsistency is first disqualified; thus he argues that, if we are to accept his overarching principle of the “necessity of contingency” we must also hold that “the principle of non-contradiction is absolutely true.” Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 71. His argument for this, however, is obscure and unconvincing; it proceeds by considering the status of a “contradictory entity;” but even if it is logically coherent to entertain the possibility of such an entity (it is not clear that it is), this possibility has little to do with any consideration that is relevant to establishing the necessity of the law of non-contradiction (i.e., $\neg(P \& \neg P)$ for all statements or propositions P). Again, while Meillassoux does briefly consider (77) the position of paraconsistent logic, he does not actually provide any argument against its applicability to formalize the possibility of real contradictions, or against this possibility itself. For paraconsistency, see, e.g., Graham Priest, *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 64.

the inherent and structural aporias involved in conceiving of a force of laws and rules that is, within its own sphere, always certainly capable of being complete, but nevertheless always constitutively imbricated with the paradoxes of its own foundation and recurrently involved in the quixotic attempt to prohibit or foreclose its own inherent point of contradiction. On this kind of position, there is no special problem with the coherence of judgments of relative probability or probabilistic causal laws, so long as the *general* structure of the law as such, as a *consistent* repetition of the same, can be uncritically assumed; but this structure itself always rests on the ultimately aporetic foundation of a consistency that can never be ultimately guaranteed. Since the key point here is not the fixation or absolutization of an unlimited principle of contingency according to which “nothing is...impossible” but rather the acknowledgment of the structurally constitutive possibility of real inconsistency that corresponds to the ultimate unavailability (in accordance with Gödel’s second incompleteness theorem) of any intra-systematic guarantees of consistency, this provides another, more critical and less “absolutist,” way of considering the nature of scientific (and other) laws and their determination as necessary, one which removes none of the critical force of Hume’s problem, but rather situates it within a more radical interrogation of the ultimate basis of the rationally thinkable force of laws as such.

IV

Metaformal realism, as I have discussed it here, is an essentially *disjunctive* position, split between affirming the consequences of two quite distinct and mutually incommensurable orientations of post-Cantorian thought, the generic and the paradoxico-critical. As we have seen, Gödel’s own disjunctive result witnesses just this disjunction with respect to the powers of human thought in relation to a mathematical reality which the constitutive thought of the infinite determines as the inexhaustible-real: this is, in Gödel’s terms, the essential distinction between, on one hand, the assumption of an inherent and transcendent power of human thought to bear witness to consistency by exceeding the powers of any finitely specifiable system of rules, and on the other, an inexhaustible inscription of the undecidable as such, including the undecidability of consistency itself, in the very structure of mathematical reality. Because he was a committed anti-mechanist, Gödel favored the first disjunct (on which the human mind is non-mechanical) and sometimes argued against the tenability of

the second on independent grounds, holding both that it ignores the inherent capacity of the human mind to innovate with respect to its guiding axioms and principles and that the existence of absolutely unsolvable problems is untenable since “it would mean that human reason is utterly irrational by asking questions it cannot answer, while asserting emphatically that only reason can answer them.”³²

However, once we have acknowledged the implications of the availability of the infinite to mathematical thought and made the general decision for metaformal realism at all, there are some important senses in which the second disjunct, corresponding to the orientation of paradoxico-criticism, is not only not excluded but also enjoys advantages over the choice for the first disjunct (which Gödel himself preferred). In particular, besides being more obviously compatible with materialism because not in any way at odds with mechanism, the paradoxico-critical outlook makes it possible to preserve an outlook and practice that continues the classical orientation of *criticism* with respect to the capacities and practices of the human subject, in the altered conditions post-Cantorian thought. To gain a sense of these ongoing critical implications, one might usefully juxtapose Gödel’s remark about reason asking questions that it cannot answer with the infamous opening lines of Kant’s first *Critique*:

Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.³³

Kant, of course, was a transcendental idealist; and within the fourfold framework of orientations of thought I developed in *The Politics of Logic*, Kant’s thought remains a paradigm of the pre-Cantorian constructivist (or criteriological) orientation, which is defined by its attempt to assay the boundaries of knowledge from the exterior position of a limit-drawing project committed to saving jointly the ideas of completeness and consistency. In the post-Cantorian context, it is no longer possible to save these ideas jointly, and so the constructivist orientation and

³² Hao Wang, *From Mathematics to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1974), 324, discussed in Feferman “Are there absolutely unsolvable problems? Gödel’s dichotomy,” 12. The former point, about the non-static nature of the mind, is made against Turing’s own position in Kurt Gödel “Some remarks on the undecidability results” in Solomon Feferman, et al., eds., *Collected Works, Volume II: Publications 1938-1974*, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 306.

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s, 1965), A vii.

its associated kind of idealism are both rendered untenable. But by making the paradoxico-critical decision for the combination of a rigorous inquiry into totality with the implication of irreducible paradox at the boundaries, it is possible to maintain the properly critical register of Kant’s thought of reflective reason in its ongoing dialectic with itself, and to situate this thought within, as I have argued, a rigorously *realist* position with respect to the relation of thought and being itself. To do so is to transpose the ultimate ground for the development of such a dialectic (now thought more in a properly Platonic rather than a Kantian or Hegelian sense) decisively away from the (pre-Cantorian) Kantian oppositional figure of opposition between the finitude of sensory affection and the absolute-infinite divine intellect capable of intellectual intuition, and to reinvent the possibilities of critique on the ontological real ground of the objective undecidability of problems that are problems for (finite or infinite) thought *in itself*, given to it at the point of its very contact with the real of being as such.

What, finally, are some of the concrete effects of this transposition for contemporary reflective and critical thought? As I argued in *The Politics of Logic*, most generally, the necessity, in a post-Cantorian context, of the forced choice between inconsistent completeness and incomplete consistency indicates, as is confirmed by Gödel’s development of the philosophical consequences of his own results, that it is impossible by finite, procedural means to confirm rigorously the *consistency* and *completeness* of the finitely specifiable procedures of our social-political, practical, and technological worlds. This suggests, as I argued at more length in the book, that it is impossible by finite means to ensure the *effectivity* of our practices, or procedurally to found whatever faith we may maintain in their ongoing extensibility and capability of continuation. This faith, if it is to be founded at all, must be founded in an essentially infinite capacity of insight and fidelity, bordering on the mystical, to a Real matter of consistency with respect to our own practices that can itself never be guaranteed by any replicable or mechanical procedure; or it must be ceaselessly decomposed and deconstructed at the point of the inherent realism of the problematic and undecidable that is necessarily introduced if this faith cannot be assured at all. Such are the consequences, as I have argued in *The Politics of Logic*, of the transformative event of the development of formalization in the light of the accessibility of the mathematical infinite that characterizes our time; and such are the stakes, as I have tried to confirm here, of the metaformal realism that this event rigorously motivates and demands.

JOHN MULLARKEY
HOW TO BEHAVE LIKE A
NON-PHILOSOPHER
OR, SPECULATIVE VERSUS REVISIONARY
METAPHYSICS

“Philosophy is an affair of movements and becomings, of lines and vectors, of reversals and displacements—it mostly uses transcendence, which comes (in a circular although broken manner) from experience toward the ground, from being toward Being, from Being toward the Affair of thought.”¹

“My problem is that of the re-orientation of thought.”²

A SHORT NON-INTRODUCTION

François Laruelle’s message for philosophy is, *prima facie*, simple: not everything is “philosophisable.”³ As soon as we gloss this message a little further, however, things become somewhat more complicated: not everything is reducible to “standard philosophy.” Or, even further, what counts as philosophy must mutate in order for *some things* to be philosophisable at all. The mutation, here, is of both the so-called subject (standard philosophy) and its object (purportedly non-philosophical materials), being both “object-oriented” and “subject-oriented” at once within a mutation that re-orientates thought-as-an-orientation. As we will see, for Laruelle, this mutation is also a re-direction: thought that was directed from philosophy to the Real reverses to being directed from the Real to philosophy. This short essay will concern itself with the meaning of this re-direction, both in terms of its significance for speculative thought as well as its connection to a type of philosophical behavior (though without any consequent *behaviourism*—the philosophy that reduces behaviour to one or two over-determined variables, such as “conditioning” or “disposition”). To *précis* our two opening epigraphs from Laruelle: in thought, there are only lines, vectors, and, perhaps, re-orientations.

The “non-” in non-philosophy, of course, is not a negation, an anti-philosophy, but an extension, an inclusive amplification as to what counts as

¹ François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 301.

² Cited in Robin Mackay, “Introduction: Laruelle Undivided,” in *Francois Laruelle, From Decision to Heresy: Experiments in Non-Standard Thought*, ed. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2012), 23.

³ François Laruelle, *En Tant Qu’Un* (Paris: Aubier, 1991), 246.

philosophy. This non-philosophy, or non-standard philosophy, also claims to be a “radical inversion” of philosophy’s relationship with reality (or the Real) in as much as it does not merely reverse the relationship between the two but inverts it fundamentally: if it is a reversal, then it is a “reverse mutation” that suffers no possible re-inversion (to use an image from biology whereby the wild-type phenotype is spontaneously restored and undoes the genetic alterations of the laboratory). In this biological model, what happens in the philosophy lab (all the various mediations and distortions of the Real wrought by philosophy’s decisive quest for mastery, for ultimate, sole authority over truth, knowledge, wisdom, dialectics, essential thinking, wonder, or whatever else) mutates—or is re-viewed—to be seen, no longer as the best picture of reality, but as a product or effect of the Real. The relationship is inverted (radically): from the direction of philosophy to the Real towards the direction of the Real to philosophy. And this is all done in the name of a consistency, or radicality, as regards immanence—that everything is in-One, or belongs to the Real, and that includes the practice or performances of thought—including Laruelle’s, or any introduction to Laruelle as well: nothing is withdrawn from or outside the Real, not even the thought of being withdrawn from it. It is all a matter of behaviour or orientation.

In this essay, then, I outline one way in which Laruelle’s non-standard philosophy might be introduced—through philosophical behavior, the behavior of philosophers.⁴ Images of “posture” are common throughout Laruelle’s work, with the seemingly literalised use of “orientation,” “stance,” “gesture,” and “comportment” being prevalent in his writings. Such allusions might bring to mind ideas from Gilbert Ryle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Daniel Dennett, and even the early Maurice Merleau-Ponty whereby (extrapolating to a non-standard approach) the intentions of philosophers are rendered in terms of a shared behaviour. If the maxim of philosophical or logical behaviorism was that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul,” then Laruelle’s “behavior-without-behaviourism” would tell us that the human stance is the Vision-in-one of human philosophy.⁵ Of course, until we know a little more about what such things as “humans” and “vision” (or “in-oneness”) mean for Laruelle, our enlightenment is only ever going to be incomplete; and, indeed,

⁴ Four other ways, through animality, cinema, paraconsistency, and performance, will be introduced in John Mullarkey, *Reverse Mutations: Laruelle and Non-Human Philosophy* (forthcoming).

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 178.

the meaning of “human” for Laruelle is not at all clear-cut precisely because he refuses to define it.⁶ What we can say now, in brief, is that his stance is resistant to any humanism or philosophical anthropology in as much as either would necessitate one or more definition of the human: in other words, it re-orientates thought away from what it is to *be* human and towards what it is to behave and be treated as human.⁷ Given such a non-standard approach to philosophical behavior, when we then look at the behaviour of philosophers, what kind of picture of the philosophical body are we offered and how do we arrive at it? In terms of crude methodology, instead of bracketing consciousness, we begin by bracketing the *authority* of philosophical representation—its *attempted capture of the Real in one image*.⁸ Indeed, speaking about his more “experimental texts” in a recent interview, Laruelle recounted his ambition to “treat philosophy as a material, and thus also as a materiality—without preoccupying oneself with the aims of philosophy, of its dignity, of its quasi-theological ends, of philosophical virtues, wisdom etc.” He then added: “what interests me is philosophy as the material for an art, at the limit, an art.”⁹ Yet what is true of his “experimental texts” (that aim for art) is also true of all Laruelle’s works in as much as they partake in this experiment: to demonstrate a new “behaviour,” “stance,” or “posture” as regards what philosophy is—both as a material and how it can be reviewed using other practices, such as photography (as outlined in his *The Concept of Non-Photography and Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*).¹⁰ What

⁶ For a discussion of animality, or the non-human, in Laruelle, see John Mullarkey, “The Animal Line: On the Possibility of a ‘Laruellean’ Non-Human Philosophy,” in *Angelaki* special issue: *The Immanence of Transcendence: Ethics, Gnosticism, and Messianism*, ed. Anthony Paul Smith, forthcoming 2014.

⁷ See François Laruelle, *Théorie des Etrangers* (Paris: Kimé, 1995).

⁸ Laruelle’s methodology, like Derrida’s, can be likened to a phenomenological reduction (of its referent and/or cause in “reality” as part of the natural “philosopher’s” attitude). All that is left are phenomena (philosophers texts and utterances). Here, in quite the reverse move, we are making a parallel with the behaviorist’s bracketing of consciousness, or what Laruelle regards as the worlds or realities constructed by philosophy, in favour of the Real. All that is left are lived, bodily, behaviors. One could say that in each case it is the same residue only looked at from either the subject-side or the object-side.

⁹ Laruelle, *From Decision to Heresy*, 29.

¹⁰ See François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, A Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. Drew S. Burke and Anthony Paul Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2012); François Laruelle, *Le Concept de non-photographie/The Concept of Non-Photography* (Bilingual Edition), trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth/New

counts most in this review, moreover, is that there are a plurality of such accounts. *There is no “one best picture” (or photograph) of the Real*—nor indeed “one best picture” of non-standard philosophy (hence, the numerous introductions to it, including this short one). Nor, actually, is there one best picture of (standard) philosophy—despite an appearance to the contrary in what is known as the “philosophical decision”—the purported “structural invariant” in Laruelle’s work.¹¹

In part, our aim is to divest the apparent “decisionism” in Laruelle’s thought of all associations with intellectualism, voluntarism, or reflexivity (at least in terms of how these terms might be usually comprehended) in order to render it behavioural. By expanding the notion of behaviour beyond these limits—that is, making it non-standard—it can be seen that the concept of philosophical “decision” is neither conscious nor representational, but a matter of orientation or posture as regards the Real. Just as “courage,” according to Ryle, is not a state of mind, not an immaterial private interiority—the “ghost in the machine”—but is rendered as an aggregate of different, though related, exterior, public adverbial properties (she runs *courageously*, she speaks *courageously*, etc.), so the philosophical decision would not be a occurrent state or moment within one philosophical mind or subject but rather a global descriptor of behaviour, different in each case, yet containing “family resemblances” or *likenesses*. Hence, we ask: “how to behave like a philosopher?” Occurrence would become behavioural disposition, though following a non-reductive model of what “disposition” entails—one that opens it up to the concepts of “tendency” and “vector.” And that behaviour, *qua* stance or posture, also has something to do with “withdrawal” or “cut-off”—the meaning of “decision” (from *decaedere*—*de-* “off” + *caedere* “cut”)—a withdrawal from the Real. As Laruelle puts it in another recent interview: “to philosophise on X is to withdraw from X; to take an essential distance from the term for which we will posit other terms.”¹² Hence, Laruelle’s approach can be seen, or *reviewed as*, a philosophical behaviour (though without “behaviourism”). That said, what

York: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2011).

¹¹ The decision is the “*principal and formalized invariant or structure of philosophy*.” It is what “homogenizes, idealizes, quantifies, and qualifies Reality and the foreclosed” (see François Laruelle et al, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins et al. and compiled by Nick Srnicek and Ben Woodard, 2009, 56, 57).

¹² François Laruelle, “Is Thinking Democratic? Or, How to Introduce Theory into Democracy” in John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith, eds., *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 229.

non-standard philosophy may teach us—its “message”—is not a new thought *about* the Real, or even only about philosophy, but a different category of behaviour as regards other behaviours—a re-orientation that renders behaviour indefinite (as “tendency” or “vector”). The message is just such a re-orientation. Other names for it are “democracy of thought,” or “flat thought.” Yet this democracy is *non-representational* (in every sense of that phrase) and its flatness is not proffered in the name of any particular ontology (Deleuze’s “flat ontology”—as Manuel De Landa calls it—for example), but in virtue of a certain consistency, a material consistency (like that of *flatness*) that treats all ontologies (and philosophies) equally, as equals with each other, and as equally part of the Real (rather than singular, exclusionary representations of the Real).

LARUELLE AND SPECULATION

So, what Laruelle forwards is not an improved theory *qua* any putative correspondence with the facts of the matter—ontological commitments to “what there is”—but a more inclusive theorizing whose only inimical moment is targeted solely at the exclusionary aspects of any *one* material theory *qua* theory; that is, he only rejects that aspect or behaviour of theory that mounts unique and exclusive truth-claims for itself—that leaves no elbow room for others but aims to occupy all “logical space” (the space of the *most* proper logic) *totally*. By contrast, Laruelle aims to superpose all theories in one *Real* space, so to speak, where all think “alongside” or “according” to the Real, are on the same, one, side (“uni-lateral”)—rather than each pointing *at* the Real (the “arrow” of representational intentionality that also points at any interlopers) in a competitive market of mutually exclusive “isms.”

The turn to immanence is often linked to a rejection or overturning of the subject-oriented thought of Immanuel Kant and its Copernican Turn (be it through Deleuze or a host of other non-Kantian thinkers, beginning with Bergson). What is different about Laruelle’s approach, however, is that he connects any reversal (or “radical inversion”) of Kant to *the mode of expression of philosophy*: this too must also mutate, or rather, be expanded beyond what we understand as the traditional virtues of philosophical thought (clarity, rigour, analysis, speculation, description, argument, paradox, and so on) once we realize that these epistemic (methodological) values are not neutral either (transcendent) but are materials to be re-thought or reviewed *within a new stance*: they too become immanent and objectile (rather than

transcendent and objective). That is, it is not just the legacy of Kantian thought that needs to be re-oriented, but that of all standard philosophical approaches. Yet, again, this is a re-orientation, or “revisioning” (as I will call it below), rather than a displacement: Laruelle is not offering a new theory of reality to displace others, but a practice for reviewing all theories as things, for treating philosophical thought, and its own thought, as material.

Here is one analogy, or model, that I have previously used to explain this revisioning as orientation or behaviour. In *Philosophie et non-philosophie* Laruelle connects non-philosophy to the act of ventriloquism. One might read this in terms of its performative stance that “plays the dummy”—so that it can re-enact the speech of philosophy—and as another way of understanding what Laruelle means when he says that non-philosophy “clones” philosophy. However, the game of charades—a mime that, optimally, attempts to embody a concept “in-One” gesture—might be an even more suitable analogue for this cloning.¹³ If it is a mime, though, it is what Laura Cull describes as “immanent mimesis,” rather than a species of representation.¹⁴ The mime is not a picture of a philosophy (and certainly not the “best picture”), but a continuation that re-orientes philosophy’s sense of direction (its line stemming now from the Real to philosophy rather than vice versa). As an immanent mime, it apes, parrots, or copy-cats philosophy—rendering it *behavioural*, though without any of the reductive simplification that might imply: “science is not a question of *decision* (= the philosophical); it is a question of “posture,” which is to say of “behaviour” or of “being seated” in oneself, realised solely by the means of immanence.”¹⁵ Behaviour as posture, stance, or “style” (this last term also being so important to Merleau-Ponty, author of *The Structure of Behaviour*). It is a philosophical behaviourism in *this* materialist and immanent sense, then, because it animalises philosophical thought by replacing any of its self-styled authority of reference with an animal mimicry.

Now behaviorism, in both philosophy (Ryle, Wittgenstein) and psychology (J. B. Watson, B.F. Skinner) has mostly been in low-standing since its drubbing at the hands of Chomsky and the cognitivist turn:

¹³ See François Laruelle *Philosophie et non-philosophie* (Liège-Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga, 1989), 264. See also Mullarkey and Smith, *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, 5-6.

¹⁴ See Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), 122.

¹⁵ Laruelle, *En Tant Qu’Un*, 50.

there's more to mind than external behavior, for parts of the interior are ineliminable, at least as some kind of generative *and* material mechanism. Yet there has been a resurgence of a more sophisticated use of behaviourism (in Dennett's theory of "stances" in the philosophy of mind, and in "Relation Frame Theory" in psychology, for example). Part of this rehabilitation in psychology concerns the idea of context (or Frames) that can help to externalize mind (mental descriptors) again, in highly nuanced extensions. Part of it also resides in a re-conception of just what (Skinner's) "radical behaviourism" could have meant, which, as we see in what psychologist Niklas Torneke writes, concerns the behaviour of the practitioner and not only of his or her object:

Being radical can be taken as being extreme. [But here] "radical" implies not "extreme" but "consistent." Radical behaviourism entails not a departure from fundamental behaviouristic principles but the application of them in an all-inclusive way. [...] As a scientist, I do not hold an objective or exclusive position. I am not outside or above the principles I study. If this understanding is applied consistently, all claims to representing the ontological truth have to be dropped. Based on this position, we cannot maintain that "this is the way it really is." [...] ... the scientist's attempt to study something is a behaviour as well.¹⁶

This, I propose, is also what Laruelle means by the term "radical," as in the "radical inversion" of philosophy in relation to the Real (or the Copernican Turn): *consistency*. Indeed, Laruelle himself is very fond of using the word "radical": "radically immanent thought," "radical liveds," "radically immanent phenomenology," "radical subjectivities," "radical atheist," "radical fiction," "radical experience," the "radically immanent structure [of thought]," and so on.¹⁷ But it is especially significant that "radical" is also described by Laruelle as "self-immanent," because the etymological root of "radical" is "*forming*

the root," from the Latin *radix*, *radic*- "root."¹⁸ Indeed, the radical concepts of non-philosophy are such because they are *consistently* used, both towards itself (its root, its source) and others: its concepts are amplified ones, that is, they are applied generically, beginning with themselves, their own root. If there is an object-orientation here, it is also a self-orientation.

I will not linger over any of the other contested meanings of the term "radical." The quotation from Torneke above, however, is significant in the manner that it went out of its way to contrast "radical" with "extreme"—a useful tactic if we wish to avoid turning the discussion into one of "limits"—how far is too far? what is fanaticism? what is the true minority view? etc. Coming from the Latin "*extremus*," meaning "outermost," the extreme would connote that aspect of the radical that entails going beyond or outside a certain threshold—*withdrawal*. Yet thresholds and limits can be *either* logical or psychological, categories that are difficult to conflate such that one could define an *absolute* limit or "condition of possibility" (unless one remains dedicated to the Kantian view, of course). Indeed, throughout his own work, Laruelle continually contrasts the immanent "radical" with any notion of the "absolute" (which remains transcendent). That said, the radical can explain the absolute: as he writes, "the radical, for its part, does not eliminate the absolute, but allows for a genealogy of the absolute as immanent appearance."¹⁹ (We will see later that this "genealogy of the absolute" could allow for a discussion of the appearance of hierarchy within immanent equality, wherein all things do *not* appear equal.)

So the real difference between Laruelle and "object-oriented realism," I would contend, is that, in Laruelle's version of radical immanence, it is the *practice itself of thinking* this immanence that, to be consistent, must be part of the thought-process—because nothing is outside of the Real. Radicalism as consistency (or uni-versality—aiming towards the One): it involves the self, as root-source of method, and so the practice or behaviour of philosophy—its concepts, methods, or "decisions" too. One might even describe non-standard philosophy as the necessary bedfellow of the new realisms, being the one that *re-orient*s realism towards the objectivity, the materiality, of its own methods, that is, *towards philosophical thought itself* as a realist orientation, stance, or attitude.

¹⁸ Laruelle et al, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, 61.

¹⁹ François Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou: On the Introduction of Maoism into Philosophy*, trans. Robin MacKay (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6.

¹⁶ Niklas Torneke, *Learning RFT: An Introduction to Relational Frame Theory and Its Clinical Application* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2010), 11-12.

¹⁷ See Laruelle, *Théorie des Étrangers*, 57, 68, 166; François Laruelle, *Future Christ: A Lesson in Heresy*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 25; Laruelle, *Philosophie et non-philosophie*, 92; François Laruelle, "Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy," in François Laruelle, *The Non-Philosophy Project*, Gabriel Alkon and Boris Gunjevic, eds. (New York: Telos Press, 2011), 75-93, 92; and François Laruelle, *Théorie des Identités* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris, 1992), 76.

For some, this will appear as a regress to the subject, when in fact it is undertaken as the only way of radically understanding the Real. For this is neither a return to an assumed “subject” (be it larvel, evental, or substantial), nor a meta-theoreticism (because non-philosophy is not a heightened reflexivity or higher-order representation). We must remember: not everything is philosophisable, or at least, some things require a *new way of seeing what philosophy is* in order to be “philosophised.” This does not entail replacing philosophy per se, then, but rather rendering its various devices material following certain (non-reductive) scientific models (especially from biology and physics). There is *no new philosophy to see here*. As Laruelle himself puts it “I absolutely do not overturn philosophy; were I claiming to overthrow it, it would be a pointless gesture, a zero-sum game. The entire enterprise would then be contradictory.”²⁰

WHAT IS A REVISIONARY METAPHYSICS?

What might consequently appear to some commentators as Laruelle’s sub-Derridean recycling of the recent history of philosophy (and its aporias) is, in fact, only one example of a materialising or real-ising of these aporias in order to make philosophy Real again (rather than simply disavow all philosophy in a gesture of disappointed representationalism or failed epistemology in favour of literature or theology). Indeed, if the new realisms have allowed us to return to certain classical positions in philosophy, at least speculatively (the “Great Outdoors” of physics and mathematics), then non-standard philosophy is only an amplification of that renewal. However, rather than ignore the fact that much of this classical tradition—ostensibly reaching its head in the work of Husserl—was, *indeed*, deconstructed (often through forms of performative contradiction or “double reading”), Laruelle takes the fact of these deconstructions into his account in order to realize them, that is, in order to de-relativise their post-Kantian co-ordinates: aporias do not indicate the performative failure of epistemology so much as the material resistance of the Real to one part of itself (*one philosophy*) attempting to capture the whole through withdrawal. As such, one can envisage entire research programmes, be they within the philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of time, etc. whereby these naïve sciences, *together with their “failures,”* are re-rendered within a non-standard philosophical stance.

Nonetheless, the sum total of what has been argued above vis-à-vis this materialization or realisation of

²⁰ Laruelle, *The Non-Philosophy Project*, 83.

philosophical practice—understood consistently as actual performance—must, of course, have implications for the meaning of thought understood as “speculative,” as in “speculative realism” or “speculative philosophy,” the latter following A.N. Whitehead’s famous account of “the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”²¹ This clearly sets up a contrast with Laruelle’s approach to thought which does not see itself as “speculative” in that current sense of a system of ideas that can interpret “every element of our experience.” Rather, I wish to test an hypothesis that his approach actually comes closer to the path that Peter Strawson outlines (but does not himself take) in his opposition between “descriptive” and “revisionary” metaphysics (in his work, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics*).²² A *descriptive* metaphysics, such as Strawson himself does undertake, will “lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure”—its “actual structure;” whereas a *revisionary* metaphysics (such as Leibniz’s or Berkeley’s), aims to create a “better structure.” Admittedly, this “laying bare” is a kind of analysis or deep description, the subterranean workings of which belie its claim to semantic innocence. Perhaps, though, the opposed poles of revision and description is artificial: we hold that one way (possibly the only way) to create a better *description* is through *revision* or looking back again from a new posture. The analysis of what is (the “actual”), lies in the eye of the beholder.

Revisionism, as understood here, then, is neither speculative in a transcendental “inferential-role,” nor in a deductive fashion that might involve a “coherence,” “logic,” “necessity,” or “system,” as though these terms are not always and already immanent to any “argument” in a circular fashion (that is, one that can only escape to transcendental signification by fiat, by dogmatic—so-called “axiomatic”—assertion). What counts as “coherent,” “logical,” “necessary,” or “systematic” is not *given* (it would be a myth that it were) but always remains open to non-standard variations. And these variations are forms of both review and re-orientation—*observable descriptions of behavior*. But *whose* observation, *which* public (which actual humans) remains moot: the “better structure” is itself also the “closer” part of the Real, a democracy of *all* observers (a Vision-in-One) that allows all eyes their own structure of regard and disregard. The strong descriptivism that Wittgenstein says actually

²¹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, revised edition (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 3.

²² P.F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay on Descriptive Metaphysics* (York: Methuen, 1952), 9.

does “leave everything as it is,”²³ is neither as passive as that, nor as anthropomorphically phenomenological: a revisionist looks with a new orientation, looks back or in reverse, and therewith creates a new description. It is one that is both subject-centred and reversed “back” towards the object (in what Thomas Nagel first posited as an “objective phenomenology” in 1974—an object-oriented view of “what it is like to be *x*”).²⁴ This is a reverse orientation, therefore, that is also physical. To speculate really is to see behaviour, anew.

Finally, this leads us to the question, that we can only mention here, of how to orient oneself toward objects as subjects as well as those subjects that appear to us as objects—to the problems of panpsychism, and to the purported anthropomorphism attendant to that stance. If there really is a “flat ontology” of objects—a “democracy of things”—how is it that only some objects appears to other objects as subjects. What use is there for this chauvinism (both as a material chauvinism *contra* some objects, and as a “spiritual” chauvinism *pro* some others)? How can we create, immanently, a “genealogy of the absolute,” of absolutism, of hierarchy, a structure of *disregard*.²⁵ One could simply discount such hierarchies as mere chauvinism, that is, as only prejudicial error or illusion. However, as I hope to show in a later work, for a non-standard approach to philosophy, this option is not open: everything is included within Laruelle’s “radical immanence” and nobody is left behind, including the idiots (indeed, especially the idiots, or at least the “transcendental Idiot”—a persona that Laruelle much prefers to that of the “clever” philosopher).²⁶ So, if nothing is outside of the Real (a kind of monism of flat *thought* rather than a flat *ontology* that begs the question), this includes these dualities (chauvinisms) as moments within immanence itself—the “immanental” as Laruelle also calls it. This is not merely to *tolerate* intolerance in some kind of Latour-meets-Levinas thought experiment; nor is it to *deconstruct* tolerance (as one might deconstruct “hospitality,” say, through aporetic reasoning): it is the attempt to explain or realize intolerance within the Real as a kind or behaviour or orientation.²⁷

²³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §124.

²⁴ See Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 165–180.

²⁵ See John Mullarkey, *The Structures of Regard: Cosmogonies, Alterities, and the Fabulation of Destruction*, forthcoming.

²⁶ See Laruelle, *Théorie des Etrangers*, 78, 110, 96, 160.

²⁷ Incidentally, understood as specimens of conceptual intolerance, it is also to attempt the genesis of philosophies within non-philosophy.

DYLAN TRIGG “THE HORROR OF DARKNESS”

TOWARD AN UNHUMAN PHENOMENOLOGY

“Night takes me always to that place of horror. I have tried not moving, with the coming of nightfall, but I must walk in my slumber, for always I awaken with the thing of dread howling before me in the pale moonlight, and I turn and flee madly.” —H.P. Lovecraft, “The Thing in the Moonlight”

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND BEING AND WORLD

“Life,” so Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* on a note of steadfast optimism, “begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.”¹ To the critic, Bachelard’s remarks might be seen as emblematic of a kind of failure in phenomenology to think outside an anthropomorphised cosmos, in which the endless void of dark space is nothing less than the warm enclosure of the primal breast. To this end, the critic would have a point. After all, it is hard not to agree that much of phenomenology has indeed failed to move beyond the human realm and instead has emphasized the validity of lived experience as the guarantor of truth.

We see this tendency of aligning “being” and “world” time and again in phenomenology. Indeed, the focus on the inescapability of the human relation to the world is evident in the very formulation that phenomenology advances as its groundwork: *being-in-the-world*. With this innocuous phrase, inherited in large from Heidegger by way of Brentano, phenomenology commits itself to a view of the subject as being constituted by the world and the world being constituted by the subject. Neither idealism nor realism, phenomenology merges the two via the concept of perceptual intentionality, where we—living subjects—are at all times in a relationship with the world.

A couple of examples can briefly demonstrate this *always already* interdependent account of being and world. The first figures in Heidegger’s account of mood, the second focuses on Merleau-Ponty’s usage of the body.

For Heidegger, the circularity between world and being is taken up in the idea of mood. According to him, mood is the prereflective way in which the world is given its specific experiential significance. In this respect, mood structures our relation with the world: it attunes us to the world, acting hermeneutically to give the world the meaning it has for a living subject. We are *always already*—a phrase that

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 7.

haunts phenomenology—in a mood insofar as our relationship with the world is laden with meaning and never entirely neutral. That we are unable to not be in a mood means that the world can never have a phenomenal status without already being interpreted in a specific way.

This interdependent structure between being and world emerges again in the work of Merleau-Ponty. This time around, the structure of being-in-the-world is provided not by the hermeneutics of mood, but by the hermeneutics of the body. As with Heidegger's mood, the role of the body for Merleau-Ponty serves to place us in a meaningful and intentional relation with the world. Far from the mere vessel of the self, our bodies, according to Merleau-Ponty, are the expressive organ of our attachment to the world.

Body and world are equivalent terms insofar as each expresses the other. The world, for him, is not the backdrop against which our actions take place. Rather, the world is defined in a corporeal way in that it is discovered through the body. What this means is that body and world come together in a symbiotic or dialogical structure, both being co-constitutive of the other. In turn, this co-dependent relationship between being and world is mirrored in our relationships with others. Again, it is the body that provides the grounding for our structural and thematic relationship with the other. At all times, our experience of others is mediated via a prepersonal bodily intentionality, which provides a hermeneutic structure of experience.²

Mood and body are two ways in which subjectivity is inextricably and pre-thematically tied to the world. Other philosophical structures provide analogous equivalents for how our access to the world is at all times taken up from the centrality of the human subject, be it in linguistic idealism (Lacan and Derrida) or transcendental idealism (Kant and Schopenhauer). In each case, there are at least two critical consequences for post-phenomenological thinkers.

² This account of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body as a philosophy of the world is necessarily one-sided, and I employ it merely to demonstrate a certain leaning in classical phenomenology. As is well known, in time, Merleau-Ponty will depart from this model of the living subject as the guarantor of truth with his concept of the "flesh" (Marice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, [Northwestern: Northwestern University Press, 1968]). The later Merleau-Ponty marks a challenge not only for speculative realism but also for phenomenology itself. (For more on Merleau-Ponty as a critic of anthropomorphism together with his account of the prehistoric body as a nonhuman fossil, see my forthcoming, *The Thing: Xenophenomenology and the Origins of Life* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

The first consequence is epistemological. Epistemologically, the apparent limitation of phenomenology is that it fails to contend with the problem of things in themselves, and instead remains constricted to access to the world from the circumscribed perspective of human experience. The implication being that thinking cannot get outside of its determinations, and, in the words of Quentin Meillassoux, "compare the world as it is 'in itself' to the world as it is 'for us', and thereby distinguish what is a function of our relation to the world from what belongs to the world alone."³ Indeed, it is, above all else, in the polemical writings of Meillassoux that phenomenology is faced with its clearest and most challenging critique. Readers of this journal will be all too familiar with the context for Meillassoux's critique of phenomenology, and there's little need for me to wade through each stage of his argument here.⁴

Nevertheless, for the sake of providing a context for the present paper, it is worth mentioning that for Meillassoux, phenomenology is illustrative of what he has termed "correlationism." According to his thesis, correlationism is the "idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other."⁵ Although the origins of this thought can be found in Kant, on first glance, it looks as though phenomenology is the exemplary culprit of correlationism. After all, the idea that we can speak for things outside of our experience of how they appear "for us" is a kind of phenomenological contradiction. Phenomenology is a philosophy of relationality. It ties us to the world, and in doing so, reminds us that subjectivity is worldly and the world is subjective. At no point, so we can add with a touch of hyperbole, does phenomenology take leave of its senses and grant a reality to things independent to how they are thought or experienced. The tendency of phenomenology to commit itself to the interdependent union of being and world risks becoming a stifling impasse, in which to venture outside of this relation marks a heretical gesture.

According to Meillassoux's criticism, the problem the correlationist faces is not only that the world is unthinkable without the subject; the problem is also that the subject itself is inconceivable without the world. Terming this onus on the relational quality of phenomenology "the correlationist two-step"

³ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: an Essay on the Necessity on Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum Press, 2008), 3-4.

⁴ cf. Paul Ennis, *Continental Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).

⁵ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

argument, he goes on to single out the term “co” as a “veritable ‘chemical formula’” marking modern philosophy.⁶ This primary focus on the co-constitutive relation between subject and world has, for Meillassoux, lead philosophy away from the problem of substance to an epistemological impasse, in which the leading question is “no longer ‘which is the proper substrate?’ but ‘which is the proper correlate?’”⁷

For modern philosophy, the notion of an outside has become a sort of duplicitous mirror, forever on the verge of a claustrophobic anxiety. It is, so he writes, “a cloistered outside, an outside in which one many legitimately feel incarcerated, this is because in actuality such an outside is entirely relative, since it is—and this is precisely the point—relative to us.”⁸ This vision of narcissistic outside, in which the greatest exteriority is merely the interiority of a familiar face, marks a failure in modern philosophy. Enclosed within its own boundaries, what has been fundamentally lost in this history is what Meillassoux terms the “great outdoors” (*grand dehors*)—an

[O]utside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere.⁹

If his appeal to the *great outdoors* suffers from a sense of conceptual exaggeration, then it is nonetheless powerful because he captures the urge to escape the suffocating legacy of relational philosophy. Not only this, but his inclusion of a genuine alterity—a genuine *alienage* even—within philosophy aligns the great outdoors with an original trajectory in phenomenology that has almost certainly suffered from the preoccupation with inquiring into the “proper correlate,” which Meillassoux speaks of:¹⁰

⁶ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ To be sure, it is unlikely that the future of phenomenology will depend on how it responds to Meillassoux’s work, let alone the surrounding horizon of secondary thought that has followed in his wake. In each case, phenomenology will persist. Just in what form it will persist is a different and more pressing question. For these reasons, the present paper does not set out to “refute” Meillassoux. Whatever the merits of such a project, its scope exceeds the limits of the present contribution. Instead, I call upon Meillassoux in order to advance phenomenology in a specific direction, a direction, which, if essential to the method, has nevertheless been lost along the way.

Alongside the epistemic worries, there is another problem phenomenology faces in the form of its relation with ethics. Ethically, this emphasis on human experience as the centre of philosophy has meant that phenomenology has tended to lean toward a restricted notion of what it is to be human. Characterised above all by an emphasis on plenitude and unity, this employment of a covert *ethics of finitude* infects phenomenology from the outset, masking it with a particular end long before the work has begun in earnest. This is evident in manifold forms. In terms of environmental ethics, phenomenology is often deployed as a means to somehow reinforce our relation to the world, as though the method were here to remind us of this relation in the first instance.¹¹

Meanwhile, the phenomenological onus on the body as the bearer of intersubjective relations has resulted in a homogenised account of the body, divested of a fundamental alterity. Likewise other phenomenon is attended to only insofar as it marks the site of affirmation for the subject. In this reading, death, time, anxiety, and spatiality are taken as irreducibly human concepts. More than this, these same concepts are regarded as having an ethical value, in that they provide a fortuitous opportunity for a subject to (re)define themselves or their values.

The general outcome of this ethical phenomenology is that the method has been diluted to the point of effacing its receptivity to the nonhuman realm. In this suppression, the method has become aligned with a kind of uncritical affirmation of “lived experience” as a guarantor of truth, and a truth, moreover, which carries with it a teleological orientation toward the ethical function of philosophy. Whether or not phenomenology can aid in the human need to feel “at home,” both on this planet and in relation to others, is wholly contingent to its methodology. That it has become concerned with the production of a specific relation to the world—characterised by the preservation of a self-identifying union—needs to be critically addressed. This is not to suggest that the ethical tendencies of phenomenology can be overthrown with an appeal to disharmony and alterity, and that alone. The current philosophies of nihilism bear little relevance here. Instead, it means articulating a phenomenology, in which the ethical realm is one horizon of experience among many rather than a privileged centre around which thought revolves. Only in this way can phenomenology fulfil its mission in letting things *speak for themselves*.

¹¹ cf. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

How will phenomenology respond to the criticism that for too long it's been insulated in a suffocating relation to the "proper correlate," to style this question in Meillassoux's terms? Let us put the question another way: If phenomenology remains committed to being-in-the-world, then can we also propose a phenomenology that can contend with a *world without beings*? Put still another way: Can this supposedly human-centric philosophy incorporate into its methodology an inhuman or nonhuman realm, and if so, what would that look like?

Far from being the vehicle of a solely human voice, I believe that phenomenology can attend to the inhuman realm, and in this paper, I seek to defend a model of phenomenology that is not only capable of speaking on behalf of nonhuman realms, but is especially suited to this study of foreign entities. I will term phenomenology's specific mode of account for the nonhuman realm the *unhuman*. Why this terminology? My reasons are twofold.

First, the inclusion of the "un" in unhuman aligns the concept with the notion of the uncanny. Like the uncanny, my account of the unhuman accents the gesture of repression that is synonymous with the uncanny, especially in its Freudian guise. With the unhuman, something comes back to haunt the human without it being fully integrated into humanity—a point I will expand upon in what follows. In this respect, the unhuman is tied up with notions of alienage and the anonymous.

Second, the distinction of the unhuman is that it does not negate humanity even though, in experiential terms, it may be felt as a force of opposition. As I will argue, it is precisely through the inclusion of the human that the "great outdoors" becomes visible. This does not mean falling back into anthropomorphism: it means letting the unhumanity of the human speak for itself. This, too, relates to the theme of the uncanny insofar as it brings together a strange union between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

My account of the unhuman is inextricably bound with the materiality of the body, such that without the body what is traditionally conceived of as the nonhuman realm would be impossible. Part of the problem inherent in the phenomenological impasse is that it has become overly comfortable with the idea that the bodily subject under investigation is a distinctly *human* body. The human body, as it figures in phenomenology, tends to be characterised by a sense of ownership, unity, and self-identity. It is a body that carries with it a rich multiplicity of moods,

each of which anchors it to the world. While there is no doubt that such a body exists—it is reasonable to assume each of us has a relation to one—this body is not exhaustive, nor does it account for the material conditions under which life emerges. Being a bodily subject—to phrase it in phenomenological terms—does not necessarily mean being a *human* subject. Another body needs to be accounted for in phenomenology. A creature that invades and encroaches upon the humanity of this thing we term "the body," while at the same time retaining the centrality of the human body as its native host. This other body is the topic of investigation for an unhuman phenomenology.

An initial foray into this alien materiality is required. We would like to propose an unethical body, wholly indifferent to the foreign matter—call it, "life"—that the body finds itself attached to. And it is important to note: how a living body finds itself attached to a life is wholly contingent. The particular configuration of the human body is not an end point in history, but part of a mutating process, which may or may not devolve into another form. The body to be posited in this project is not only anterior to humanity but in some sense opposed to human existence insofar as it destabilises the experience of being a subject by establishing an "entirely elsewhere" within the heart of familiar existence.

For this reason, the affective response of *horror*—far from an aestheticising of alien existence—is the necessary symptom of experiencing oneself as other. The point being that the involvement of horror in this phenomenology of the unhumanity is not for the sake of merely countering a tendency in phenomenology to exhibit the human within the scope of light and unity. Rather, horror concerns as much the structure of the human becoming unhuman as it does the thematic experience of this transformation. Indeed, without horror, alien materiality and the unhuman would resist conceptualization altogether.

If phenomenology finds itself in an apparent impasse, then it is precisely for this reason that its rebirth is not only urgently needed but also especially timely. In what follows, I want to reinforce the vitality and dynamism of this method, with a reach that extends beyond the human body and crawls into another body altogether. The task, such as it presents itself, is to excavate aspects of phenomenology that can help us chart the emergence of a future phenomenology from within the history of the tradition. To achieve this end, the first port of call will be the early phenomenology of Levinas.

In the early Levinas, we find a metaphysics that provides a key—or perhaps a *symptom*—for how phenomenology can think beyond the hold of human experience. Far from the image of Levinas as a philosopher of the face, these early works reveal another side to his philosophy that is characterised less by the face-to-face encounter and more by the facelessness of appearances. In these early works, his project is to describe the origins of the subject—an existent—as it appears against the impersonal horizon of existence. Indeed, the whole task of his first book, *Existence and Existents*, is to attempt a phenomenology of the “instant” when the subject appears.

At first glance, it looks as though he is following a traditionally phenomenological line of thought, stating that “A being has already made a contract with Being; it cannot be isolated from it.”¹² He thus seems to lock us into a kind of phenomenological prison, in which the inseparability of being and world is reinforced. Indeed, the inseparability of existence and existent is preserved in Levinas. Yet it is precisely for this reason that the rupture of the two terms is possible.

For what Levinas wants to argue in his early metaphysics is that the “adherence of beings in Being” is not “given in an instant...[but]...rather accomplished by the very *stance* of an instant.”¹³ It is with this elevation of the fractured, indeterminate emergence of the instant that Levinas’s philosophy will itself emerge.

The reason for this ontological elevation of the instant is primarily because the idea of an instant engenders itself to an account of becoming that permits alterity. That the relation of being in Beings is not “given in an instant...[but]...rather accomplished by the very *stance* of an instant” means that Levinas’s ontology is fundamentally concerned with the otherness of duration. An instant, for him, is an event, a becoming with its own emergence, which carries with it the arc of an origin, as Levinas puts it: “Beginning, origin, and birth present a dialectic in which this event in the heart of an instant becomes visible.”¹⁴ Put another way: if something comes into existence—be it a maggot, a crab, or a dragonfly—then it does so from the backdrop of a generalised and pre-existing plane of Being. Things are born into *something*, Levinas remarks: “New life figures

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

as the prototype of the relationship between an existent and existence.”¹⁵ But a phenomenology of birth alone would not grant us an understanding of the pre-thematic existence. Instead, “We must then try to grasp that event of birth in the phenomena which are prior to reflection.”¹⁶

This something that things are born into, is neither the spatiality of our cultural and social world nor the temporality of a history. The general existence transcends the specificity of a manifest thing, as Levinas has it: “Being cannot be specified, and does not specify anything.”¹⁷ The question for Levinas is how we can account for this generalised Being without tying it down to the specificity of things.

The danger here is rendering Being local, and of conferring a “personal form” upon it.¹⁸ The task is to think outside the personal, while at the same time recognising that only from within the personal can the anonymity of existence be thought. This attempt to conceive an anonymous existence is our first point of departure for developing an unhuman phenomenology.

THE THERE IS

Levinas begins by considering the phrase “a world in pieces.”¹⁹ Such a phrase is privileged so far as it marks a rupture with our relation to things. In this rupture, any anxiety experienced is not simply underscored with the knowledge that one day we will die. More than this, it is the “anonymous state of being” that marks a constant threat against the contingency of being a subject.²⁰ In an important passage, he writes: “Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to the world. In the situation of an end of the world the primary relationship which binds us to Being becomes palpable.”²¹ In this passage, Levinas is assigning a reality to existence that is not dependent on there being a world in the first place. Rather, existence precedes the birth of the world, marking a constant presence that is at once immersed in the world of things but at the same resistant to being identified with those things. For this reason, “Being is essentially alien and strikes against us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us.”²² At the same time, this

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

pre-human existence also emerges in “the twilight of the world” whereupon the appearance of the subject folds back upon its disappearance.

Given this non-relational account of existence in Levinas, the question emerges of how we can enter into a relationship with the world without existents. In fact, Levinas tells us from the outset that “the relationship with Being is... [an] analogy,” meaning that any attempt to reduce this anonymous world to a localised thing would be all but impossible.²³ Moreover, the world without beings is, in his words, “not a person or a thing, or the sum total of persons and things; it is the fact that one is, the fact that *there is* (*il y a*).”²⁴ This notion of the *there is* will become critical for Levinas. With it, he will try to account for the indeterminacy of existence, which undercuts the anthropomorphism of classical phenomenology.

The *il y a* cannot be explained, nor can it be represented, save as an indirect analogy. It belongs to the shadows and can only be approached in the shadows. Thus Levinas asks us to envision a scenario: “Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness. One cannot put this relation to nothingness outside of all events. What of this nothingness itself?”²⁵ For Levinas, something remains in the nothingness, an excess that underpins the personal realm of silence with an anonymity that is anterior to a subject, he writes: “This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*.”²⁶ At ground zero, therefore, the ontology of Levinas gestures toward an anonymous realm that cannot be identified with nor can it be deduced from a particular being, i.e., an “inner world.”²⁷ Beyond the realm of subject and object, interior and exterior, the *il y a* invades these facets of existence without being imprisoned by them.

Nevertheless, the phenomenal realm—the realm of mysterious forests, sunken ghost ships, and craggy mountains—is the site in which the *there is* manifests itself. Above all else, though, it is the night which becomes synonymous with the “very experience of the *there is*” for Levinas.²⁸ In his reading, the night assumes a thematic and structurally analogous role to the insidious quality of the *il y a*, remarking that:

When the form of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object

²³ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence. In the night, where we are riveted to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness... [T]his universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence.²⁹

Far from the mere disappearance of things, the Levinasian *il y a* retains a presence, which cannot be tied down to appearances despite having an indirect relation to those appearances. Nothing is given in this night except “the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not...”³⁰ This sense of the subject as being implicated by the anonymity of this nocturnal ontology sets in place a vertiginous relationship to the *il y a*. More than an invasion of anonymity, the *there is* marks a “menace of pure and simple presence,” in which the finite being is divested of their singularity and subsumed by a “swarming of points,” each of which constitutes an eventual “horror of darkness.”³¹

LEVINAS’S WEIRD REALISM

In the twilight, there is horror. This horror marks a threshold, a zone of difference, through which the disordering of light and darkness converge. Light recedes from the world, and a shadowline is created. In that shadowline, the play of light and dark confuses the boundaries masking everyday world. What is revealed is an abomination masquerading as an appearance. Levinas:

One can also speak of different forms of night that occur right in the daytime. Illuminated objects can appear to us as though in twilight shapes. Like the unreal, inverted city we find after an exhausting trip, things and beings strike us as though they no longer composed a world, and were swimming in the chaos of their existence.³²

The vision is uncanny. Levinas shows us that the horror of darkness is a space, in which things not only die but are also born. Born into the twilight, we catch sight of formless shapes, unbound from their categorisation into “things.” The city is inverted. Now, the moon punctuates the daylight creating an insomnia that is no longer localised to the dark but instead becomes constitutive of perception as a whole. Night, hitherto coexistent with an absence

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 54 my emphasis.

³² *Ibid.*, 52.

of light, seeps into the day, rendering the realm of light and reason a murmuring apparition: “The rustling of the *there* is...is horror.”³³

Enough of romancing the night: we need to address the place of the subject within this nocturnal topography. If Levinas is able to offer us a way into an unhuman phenomenology, then how can we account for experiences of horror, experiences which are all too human? In fact, just because there is a human with an affective experience does not mean that we are bound by the limits of human finitude. Rather, it is precisely because the human remains intact that the thinking of the unhuman becomes possible.

A critical thesis can be formulated: *Only in the disjunction between the experience of oneself as human and the realization that this same entity is fundamentally beyond humanity is the possibility of an unhuman phenomenology conceivable.*

We see this paradoxical tension as being central to Levinas’s thought. It is evident most clearly in his account of the subject as “depersonalized” and “stifled” by this confrontation with this pre-human reality.³⁴ “Horror,” so Levinas writes, “is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very ‘subjectivity.’”³⁵ At the same as it is stripped of its subjectivity, the subject remains present, occupying an event horizon where the materiality of the physical body outlasts the dissolution of the personal subject.

Insomnia gives us a sense of this strange unhuman subjectivity that persists through the twilight. Insomnia, for him, is not simply an inability of refusal to sleep. It cannot be understood in terms of a negation of sleep, nor as the result of a contingent event in the world, such as stress. Rather, Levinasian insomnia is marked by a liminality of boundaries. The sleeper is not entirely present as subject but nor is he entirely beyond subjectivity. Existence and existents merge in the space that refuses to give itself over to the dawn. In the later *Time and the Other*, he formulates an account of insomnia that accents this impossible structure, remarking that: “Insomnia is constituted by the consciousness that it will never finish—that is, that there is no longer any way of withdrawing from the vigilance to which one is held.”³⁶ This constant vigilance is unwavering and yet without purpose. Its correlating object is nothingness, an “impersonal existence.”³⁷

³³ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

Similarly, in a series of interviews collected under the title *Ethics and Infinity*, the formal structure of insomnia is given a thematic content that aligns it explicitly with the horror of becoming unhuman. He writes:

In insomnia one can and one cannot say that there is an “I” which cannot manage to fall asleep. The impossibility of escaping wakefulness is something “objective,” independent of my initiative. This impersonality absorbs my consciousness; consciousness is depersonalized. *I do not stay awake: “it” stays awake.*³⁸

Here, Levinas as a precursor to “weird realism” comes to the foreground. Materialism—in this case, the materiality of the subject—is not annihilated by the irruption of the *il y a* but instead pushed to the surface in its strange facticity. *Materialism survives the twilight.* The result is a partly formed subject, which is both present to itself while also being simultaneously conscious of its own effacement: in a word, *unhuman*.

Levinas’s claim that “I do not stay awake: ‘it’ stays awake” captures this double bind between identity and non-identity converging in the same body. Another presence inhabits the body of the insomniac, employing that materiality as a canvas to articulate a metaphysics of anonymity. The body as it is lived—with all its desire and anxieties—is pushed to the background. In its place, the “density of the void” possesses the body of the insomniac, revealing the body as having a reality wholly independent to the experience of being a finite subject.³⁹

In the experience of the unhuman, the reality of materiality persists despite the apparent extinction of subjectivity. It is precisely because things return in the horror of darkness that their reality is accented outside of the subject. Levinas makes it clear that the subject becomes at one with the nothing, suffocated by a force that is at once anonymous and immemorial.

Seen in this way, horror is the experience of inversion, a disordering of interiority and exteriority, until nothing else remains except for materiality rendered spectral/spectrality rendered material. Levinas writes: “The haunting spectre, the phantom, constitutes the very element of horror.”⁴⁰ The reason for this close relationship between spectrality and

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 49, my emphasis.

³⁹ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 59.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

horror can be understood in the context of a weird realism. That which outlives its own corporeal extinction is transformed into an entity that is both of its self and concurrently other than itself, both human and unhuman at once.

Here, the human body is shown as having another side to it that is fundamentally independent of expression and perception. It is not the body of you and me, nor the body that cannot be approached by phenomenology less even by introspection. It is a body that is beyond appearances, a “supernatural reality” that resists the ruins of its own negation. Into this abyss, the body as a spectre comes back from the beyond, carrying with it “an anonymous and incorruptible existence.”⁴¹ This is the twilight of the spectre, the night of another metaphysics. There is *no exit* except in the illusion of the *il y a* receding into the daylight. Levinas teaches us a lesson: even in death, the dead remain as elements of the horror of the night, creatures that rise from an absence of life in order to occupy the anonymous existence that remain in the excess of being.

THE SPECTRE OF UNHUMANITY

Phenomenology, as I have described it in this paper, faces two distinct challenges. As mentioned above, these problems are epistemological and ethical in nature. Both of these problems constrain the scope of phenomenology by tying it to a predetermined structure. In the case of epistemology, phenomenology remains committed to the view that the world is shaped by the humanity of the body in its interdependent relationship to the world. Ethically, the problem phenomenology confronts is an elimination of the alterity of the body through disposing itself too keenly to instances of bodily unity.

Synthesising these two problems, phenomenology enters into a state of stagnation, an impasse that Meillassoux has described with great precision. The challenge we posed for ourselves in this paper concerns whether or not phenomenology can think outside of its tradition, and in this respect, return to a phenomenology genuinely receptive to alterity. Has Levinas enabled us to respond to this challenge? Let us examine the evidence.

The scene is both epistemological and ethical; each bound by what Meillassoux terms the correlationist circle. Ethically, it is clear that the subject characterised in the early Levinas resists being defined by the unity of lived experience. Although his focus, of course, will later on privilege ethics as a first philosophy, for the moment the picture

foregrounds less the insistence on a face-to-face relation with the world and more a recognition of the anonymous threat underpinning that eventual relation. In this focus on the pre-ethical subject, he captures the birth of the subject before it has been assigned a particular ethical role in the world. Here, the subject lacks a correlating home in which to find him or herself. And Levinas does not yet advance toward this urge to house the subject in the world. Instead, he gives space for subjectivity to exert its weirdness in a world that is not yet its own.

Epistemologically, we recall that Levinas seek to contend with a world without beings. *Prima facie*, this move positions him outside of the traditional account of phenomenology as being committed to the relation between being and world. The question is: how does Levinas get outside of this relational hold allowing the world to be thought of in-itself rather than for us?

We can formulate a speculative response in terms of the specificity of Levinas’s use of the relation between being and world, as it is articulated in the *il y a*. At stake here is not an intentional relation, less even a “substantive” relation—as that of being-in-the-world—but an *indirect relation*. This is clear in his use of the term “analogy.”⁴² Let us recall the passage: “The relationship with Being is only remotely like that; it is called a relationship only by analogy.”⁴³ The *il y a* here emerges as a void in the phenomenal realm, a cut that dissects the relational bind between being and world. Seen in this way, his metaphysics thus comes to the foreground in its indirection through establishing a withdrawal from the world *beyond experience*, as he states: “In our relationship with the world we are able to withdraw from the world.”⁴⁴ That we are able to withdraw from the world—and yet still retain an indirect relation to that world—is only possible because there is a relationship with the world structured at all times by pervasive anonymity.

Experientially speaking, nothing can be spoken of in terms of a world without beings except by way of analogy. In the case of the *il y a*, this indirect experience is of horror. Horror is not a confrontation with a world in-itself, but the marking of the intersection of the world tearing away from the subject. The horror has two faces to it. The first face is that of the subject becoming unhuman. The second face is the gap that gestures beyond appearances. With both faces, horror emerges only to disappear into the murmuring silence. It is a structural opening,

⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴¹ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 57.

whereby different realms are conjoined into the same unhuman body.

The name Levinas applies to this unhuman body is “spectre.” With this elevation of the spectral to an ontologically distinct category, Levinas moves away beyond human subjectivity as a *Dasein*—a literal *being there*—in order to develop an account of subjectivity that is both presence and absence concurrently.⁴⁵ The significance of the subject as a spectre in this unhuman phenomenology is to problematize a series of boundaries that have so far anchored phenomenology in an uncritical fashion, not least the boundary between absence and presence, experience and non-experience, and the living and the non-living. Far from siding with one boundary over another, the spectre is that which can both speak of the human while also speaking *beyond* humanity.

Spectrality is the mark of unhuman phenomenology. It bears the trace of the human as a remnant while also undoing that humanity. As fundamentally liminal, the spectral body traverses different ontological realms without succumbing to the need to unite those realms in an axis of humanity. Here, the body loses its ethical value, becoming a depersonalized assemblage of alien matter to some extent already dead before it has come to life insofar as it is constituted by a plane of anonymous existence irreducible to experience and opposed to our concept of what is “human.”

Yet spectrality is not only an invocation of the dead coming to life. Nor is spectrality limited to a refusal to die. Ghosts, revenants, and other entities that haunt our waking dreams, gesture toward an afterworld that is in some sense sealed off from human experience. After all, those who go in search of ghosts seldom find them. Only in their haunting of *us* do we stand a chance of witnessing a ghost. But the spectrality of the unhuman is of a different order. In the first instance, unhuman spectrality is constitutive of human existence rather than an abnormal departure from it to be exorcized or mourned. The spectre is there all along, present as an element to *unmask the featureless face* of a body that gravitates at all times toward the unrelenting twilight.

Does this transformation of the human to a spectre entail a negation of the subject? Quite the contrary. The weird realism of a materiality outside

⁴⁵ This is not to suggest that *Dasein* is ill at home amongst spectres, as Derrida would have it: “There is no *Dasein* of the spectre.” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), 100. Cf. Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: a Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 285.

of the scope of human experience is only possible because—paradoxically—there is a body in the first place. The body is not negated but returns as a foreign presence, as Levinas writes: “Horror is the event of being which returns in the heart of this negation, as though nothing had happened.”⁴⁶ Indeed, nothing—literally—*has* happened. The body remains in place, its materiality seemingly unaffected by this exposure to anonymous existence. And yet, ontologically it marks a different order of material existence. No-thing intercedes. For this reason, no longer can the body be said to be an element in the relation of Being and being. It returns, ontologically disfigured through its transformation into an unhuman entity.

As a concluding point, it is worth speculating on how far we can go positing the body as both human and unhuman concurrently, and thus a route both into but also beyond the scope of relational phenomenology. Can the body productively *lead us astray*, as it were, or does it remain limited by a set of finite determinations? Put a more convoluted way: to what extent is the body an organon of knowledge independent of subjectivity and not reducible to the finitude of human experience—that is to say, an unhuman body of knowledge?

The present paper merely aims at rendering this question a legitimate question to pose for phenomenology and speculative realism. To respond to it, studies of the body would be required from philosophy, the natural sciences, and not least archaeology, palaeontology, and in all likelihood, astrobiology. It is a question that reaches beyond the limits of human experience and joins ranks with the much cited question concerning knowledge of the world before it was populated by humanity. Only here, the question is directed not to the prehuman Earth but to the status of the body prior to its advent as a human entity.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 57.



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Austin, Michael; Ennis, Paul J.; Gironi, Fabio;
Gokey, Thomas; Jackson, Robert

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