

Contingency & the Absolutization of the One

By
Quentin Meillassoux

A lecture delivered at the Sorbonne for a symposium
On “Metaphysics, Ontology, Henology”, organized by *Paris-I*

The theme of my talk concerns the question of a possible reactivation of the concept of the absolute. The version of the absolute that I wish to develop here is theoretical and speculative, yet distinct from the way in which it’s traditionally understood. And the need for such an undertaking is motivated less by general concerns over the value of the speculative approach than by a more precise problem, the framing of which is not often thought of as particularly problematic, but whose importance today seems to me to have been rather underestimated. This problem constitutes what we might call a paradox. I call it (for reasons that I will explain in a minute) the paradox of ancestry.

So the objectives of my discussion are twofold: First, I want to provide an account of this paradox; secondly, I’m going to outline a potential response to it therein. And as we’ll see, this response requires that we first pass through our contemporary thinking on the absolute, followed by an examination of the concept of unity –which I understand not as the unity of the thing, but as the unity of the sign. All of these points will become clear throughout the course of the exposition.

The Paradox of Ancestrality

Let’s begin with a fact, or more specifically a fact about the kind of knowledge claimed by today’s empirical sciences. I’m thinking here of the ability of contemporary science to speak about the reconstruction of a dateable timeframe, even if as a revisable hypothesis, that includes events anterior to the emergence of life. Dating techniques were called “relative” when they solely consisted of dating fossils in relation to one another, primarily by studying the relative depths of the rock strata where they were unearthed. However, dating became “absolute” with the perfection of techniques capable of determining the actual duration of the measured objects. Generally speaking, these techniques rely on a constant rate of decay of radioactive nuclei and the laws of thermoluminescence, which then allow for the application of dating techniques to the emission of light from stars.

It seems that –setting aside any idiosyncratic technical difficulties that might arise–the kind of knowledge claimed by contemporary science now raises an important philosophical question about its own nature. I formulate this question accordingly: If we label as *ancestral events* those events whose date is supposedly anterior to the emergence of life on earth (for example, the designation of a specific point in time for the formation of earth at roughly 4.5 billion years, and so on), and if we label *ancestral time* as a time whose scientifically-established chronology includes both ancestral events, as well as those events subsequent to the arrival of

man, then we are *thinking* a materially universal time in which the emergence of human life are milestones on a timeline that simultaneously contains and exceeds it.

My question here is, under what precise philosophical conditions does one confer meaning on statements about ancestral events (for convenience, let's call them *ancestral statements*) and the time recorded by scientific dating? Or more directly, are we able to think the meaning of ancestral statements without relapsing into either a naïve realism, or hypostasis of the subject?

Let's clarify the meaning of our problem. As a preliminary approach we can simply, or so to speak *naïvely* formulate it. Science speaks to us of a time that precedes not merely the relation of consciousness to the world, but of any relation of all forms of life to the world. And yet since Hume and Kant, the philosopher regards the notion of knowledge of things in-themselves –that is to say, knowledge of things thought to exist as absolute, independent, and not relative to the subject– as a kind of dogmatic realism (a “moth-eaten dogmatism”, as Kant put it).

In modern philosophy, antirealism can consist of a number of different positions (and sometimes even adamantly opposed to one another). But they all share a common diagnosis of realism –which is, namely, that today realism is both inherently absurd, and yet signals a kind of pragmatic contradiction. A realist, from the perspective of modern philosophy, is basically someone who claims to *think that which is where there is no thought*. That is to say, a realist is someone who keeps doing the opposite of what he says he's doing: he speaks of *thinking* a world in itself and independent of thought. But in saying this, does he not precisely speak of a world to which thought is given, and thus of a world dependent on our relation-to-the-world? Hence, for modern philosophy, it's futile to believe that we could ever leave ourselves in order to observe the world –if indeed there still *is* a world– when no one's there to observe it. I label as *naïve realism* any realism forwarding this position, unaware of the simple but apparently fatal objection of a pragmatic contradiction to which it seems doomed.

Suppose we outright reject all forms of realism in light of this pragmatic contradiction? How then do we understand ancestral time, which, to the contrary claims to think events anterior to and therefore independent of our relation to the world? Moreover, suppose we forbid ourselves any absolutization of the subject, which would consist of maintaining that ancestral events are indeed given to a subject, but as some kind of eternal Subject or Ancestral Witness who makes the universe as a whole the correlate of its relation to the world? In short, let's forward the hypothesis that we only know of the subject that which is instantiated in the body, and but that we know nothing of eternal or disembodied subjects.

How then, in accordance with our double refusal –of both naïve realism and the hypostasis of the subject– do we account for something like temporal dating? And in the first place, whereof does ancestry pose a particular problem to antirealism? Certainly not insofar as ancestral events are directly or manifestly given; for every given is already inherently incomplete. An event not directly given to experience –indeed not given at all– doesn't pose a problem for antirealism. And this can be shown by use of counterfactuals: to speak of a vase that was broken while I was absent is to merely say that, had I been present, I would have seen it fall. Can we not similarly say that ancestral time indirectly exhibits these events, which would have had “such” and “such” particular aspect if an observer had been there to observe them? Can we not in this way elude our problem?

No, not when we're dealing with ancestral events, for our problem comes from the fact that we're dealing here with a time before being appears in relation to the world itself. We're not dealing with an incomplete given. We're dealing with a passage from the incompleteness of all givenness, to now a claim of the prior appearance of the given to being itself. We're confronting an utterly absurd event for antirealism: a relation to the world as instantiated by a hypothesizing body (and therefore appearing at the same time as that body) is given in ancestral time as an event appearing in the world that exceeds that body's very existence. One cannot elude our problem here, for instance if one is a Kantian, by merely saying that the given didn't appear in such a time for an empirical, conscious body –but only, for example, in the transcendental subject. That is to say, one doesn't escape this problem simply by invoking the difference between the empirical body and the transcendental subject –because again, unless it's a hypostasized subject, there is no transcendental subject other than that which is itself instantiated in an empirically-embodied consciousness. Outside the body, no subject; outside the subject, no relation to the world; but outside and preceding its relation to the world, the world –always already the world. It seems then that every antirealism risks destroying the very meaning of ancestral statements when attempting to incorporate them into its system of thought: ancestral statements appear irreducibly *realistic*, postulating an absolute reality that's given to us as independent of us. Such is the problem of the ancestral.

So I believe that we can formulate this problem as a paradox of knowledge in the form of two apparent constraints on reason, but which ultimately arrive at opposite conclusions: a) realism is impossible insofar as it's condemned to pragmatic contradiction; and yet b) antirealism is untenable because it prevents us from capturing science's ability to discourse about the ancestral. I contend that the problem of the ancestral consists of not only a refutation of antirealism itself; one could also say that this is a refutation of realism, since these two theses – realism and antirealism– find their mutual difficulty in the apparently unsurpassable nature of the alternative that each faces.

My question here is whether it's possible to resolve this paradox without either mincing words, or sufficing to “intimidate” our problem by crushing it under the weight of the preexisting claims of an elaborate philosophical tradition –as found in phenomenology, or transcendental idealism? Can we soberly and clearly resolve this problem on its own terms?

The two simplest paths that appear immediately available to us consists of merely falsifying one or the other of these propositions –either, on the one hand providing a satisfactory interpretation of ancestral statements in the terms of a some particular version of antirealism; or on the other hand constructing a non-naïve realism –what I call *speculative realism*– capable of both traversing the objection of contradiction *and* substantiating the absolute value of scientific descriptions of ancestrality, as irrelative of our relation to the world.

No doubt many contemporary philosophers would elect to take the first path. I'm indisposed here of the time required to present in more detail the ineliminable difficulties that in my view would follow from such a choice. I must therefore content myself here with simply issuing the following thesis: I believe that there is a non-naïve realist path to resolving the problem of the ancestral. This path implies the possibility of a speculative knowledge –a knowledge of the world not relative of our relation to the world; a knowledge of absolute reality that's capable of surmounting the pragmatic contradiction seemingly inherent in every naïve realism.

So it's metaphysics here that's in question –the broader meaning of speculative knowledge. But we'll also see that this question of metaphysics confronts the question of the One – and more specifically, the mathematics of the One. For if it's a question of establishing through reason a realist solution to the problem of ancestry, we'll see that this is the sole value of the mathematical descriptions of the world through which science reconstitutes events (as in temporal dating).

Now to be clear, to solve this problem, we are not required to confer absolute value on what is traditionally labeled as secondary qualities –i.e. qualitative perceptions and affectations, whose existence we would be hard-pressed to assert prior to the existence of terrestrial life. However, we are required to establish the absolute scope of mathematical descriptions of reality, through which we reconstitute, by thought, that which pre-dates us. And so we'll see that this question passes through the question of the absolutization of unity, which I believe is at the source of the discourse of mathematics itself –the unity of the sign, and in particular of the sign devoid of meaning.

I can only outline here research which is still far from complete. But I think you'll be able to see that this whole project consists of a reactivation of the Cartesian spirit against the Kantian spirit –namely, the ability to establish by reason the absolute value of mathematical reconstructions of reality as certifiable, revisable hypotheses, whose meaning is ultimately realist rather than transcendental.

Correlationism

I'll begin by outlining a general model of antirealism which, without pretending that this comprehensively captures the rich diversity of modern nonrealist philosophies, will allow us to tease-out two fundamental arguments that, to my mind, are both necessary and sufficient for the formulation of a radical antirealism.

I call this model correlationism. Correlationism serves as a basic model for the majority of contemporary approaches to the deabsolutization of thought. It encompasses two decisions: I call the first the correlationist circle; the second is the facticity of the correlation.

Let's begin by expounding the correlational circle. By "correlationism" I understand, in the first instance, any philosophy maintaining the impossibility of thought to access that which is *independent* of thought. According to such a philosophy, we never have access to an object (understood in the broadest sense) which is not always-already correlated to an act of thought. The very idea of accessing that which is independent of thought, standing in-itself as it's given to us (whether we apprehend it or not) is, for correlationism, a blatant contradiction. Whether perceived, conceived, or apprehended in some other way, the object cannot be thought outside it's relation to thought. Correlationism thus asserts the outright impossibility of any realist metaphysics –an impossibility which always reveals itself by way of the pragmatic contradiction inherent to every realist affirmation of the following statement: "We know there is a world in-itself, i.e. an existing world of the absolute, such that it exists in-itself whether we apprehend it or not." Assertions of this type can only ever result in a pragmatic contradiction, insofar as whoever claims to either discourse or think an entity as independent of thought contradicts by his own actions –by his very words, his very thought– the content of that thought. According to correlationism, one can neither discourse nor think that which is as it is –by the same act of thought and discourse– as given to our understanding.

Correlationism thus contends against every realism that thought is *never able to leave itself*—that is to say, we can never “step outside our own skin”, as Rorty put it, in order to verify our access to a world unaffected by our subjective modes of understanding. We aren’t ever able to return quickly enough to discover what things look like when we’re not there to experience them. In other words, as Hegel jokingly said, we cannot simply creep up on the thing-in-itself from behind. For this reason, it’s absurd to purport to know a world in-itself that isn’t always already a *correlate* of our relation to the world. We never have direct access to a world in-itself, a world standing as *absolute* (in the original sense of the term “absolute”) —i.e. a world *unbound*, unbound by any representation to the world. By “correlationism”, then, I simply understand the basic but seemingly ubiquitous philosophical position today that immunizes thought against every “naïve realism” (a quasi-redundant expression after Kant), by affirming that in the diversity of our knowledge of reality we never have access to autonomous things, but rather only ever to the *correlations* between the acts of thought and the objects of thought (whether acting as an object in the strict sense, or aiming for a non-objectival being-qua-being). And so by “correlationist circle” I understand the argument of the pragmatic contradiction committed by every realism. For the correlationist, realism rests on a vicious circle of a pragmatic nature, and as a result contradicts its own thesis by virtue of the very same fact that supports it.

As a way of illuminating the correlationist circle, I’ve given a preliminary definition of the absolute which today is widely rejected. The absolute, according to my preliminary definition, is independent of thought: being is posited as irrelative to thought, independent of thought, and yet accessible to thought. The absolute then, in this sense, is that which is thinkable yet not relative to thought. Let’s agree to label as “realist” such a version of the absolute, without immediately saying anything else here about the term (which undoubtedly has the inconvenience of having acquired multiple meanings in the field of philosophy).

So we’ve clarified that the realist is regarded as he who claims to think that which *is* while and where there is no thought—a definition of which, according to the correlationist, betrays the evident contradiction of the realist’s position. And yet since it’s nevertheless precisely this realist version of the absolute that I’ll undertake to defend, I must immediately make two related remarks, which will serve us accordingly:

(i) First remark: every previously-defined realism assumes that thought is *contingent*, and moreover, is understood as contingent precisely insofar as one assumes that it’s possible to think being without thought. It follows that there’s not necessarily always thought where there’s being. One may suppose, for example, that thought is not instantiated in the living, mortal body; thought which may therefore, at least in principle, perish at the same time as its bearer. From this perspective it follows, for example, that Man as both an individual and species could readily disappear (as could all life, as such)—but that this destruction would not alter the surrounding world that remains, or at least that part which we’re capable of knowing while we’re alive. A disciple of the atomist philosopher Lucretius, for instance, may hold that the thinking body is composable, and therefore in principle decomposable, while its atoms are eternal and therefore otherwise conceivable as they correlate to an act of thought.

(ii) Second remark: by realism I don’t necessarily mean the position that the entirety of the given would subsist as it’s given to us even if we ceased to exist. This claim, which approaches the type of position held by common sense, or the incomparably more elaborate first chapter of *Matter and Memory*, is but one possible version of realism. A partial realism is also possible, which would discriminate between the determinations that within givenness require our

subjectivity, and those that are endemic to a reality independent of us. One thinks here in particular of the theory of primary and secondary qualities of Locke, in large part inspired by the Cartesian theory of matter as an extended thing.

Now, we should observe here that correlationism and realism are not symmetrical positions. A correlationist neither denies that the absolute realist is right, nor proposes another type of absolute, whether divine or ideal. Realism, however, already effectively proposes the germ of an ontology when it claims that thought truly is contingent, and that being as it's given has the ability to subsist such as it's given even where there is no thought. It thus serves as a minimal ontology, and in this sense realism is already engaged in metaphysical speculation –claiming to speak of that which *is* independent of the inherent particularity of a thinking subject. Contrarily, correlationism rejects not only metaphysical speculation, but any and all ontology. Its position does not lead to being, but to a certain kind of knowledge (or at least to a kind of thought in general –in the event that one refuses the reduction of thought to knowledge). A correlationist simply regards as meaningless, and as such outdated, any discussion of that which has the ability to be there outside givenness more generally: the object, being, spirit, God, etc. –nothing is thinkable which is not either in some way mediated in its *givenness-to* (i.e. given to thought, the givenness that eventually takes the paradoxical form of the given to apperception) or is otherwise nonobjective.

The two principal “media” of correlationism throughout the 20th century were predominately the consciousness of meaning and language. Consciousness and language –in many ways relegated to a status that challenged the meaning of the very terms themselves– are thought to comprise the correlational spheres in which we are *always-already*, and therein offer to us the possibility of accessing an exteriority which may be radical, but is nevertheless essentially relative. Language, for instance, is oriented entirely around a reference which is exterior in the sense that it is not –except in particular cases– itself composed of words. Even consciousness is oriented toward a given which is in the world and yet not of it. For reference is only there *for* language; the given is only there *for* consciousness. Correlationism will thus, for example in the case of phenomenology, insist on the fact that consciousness is essentially this very movement or orientation of a subject towards the world outside itself. It follows, then, that this exteriority only has meaning as a correlate of consciousness as given, and not as an absolute, independent of its givenness, as such.

This outside, in the words Francis Wolff, is an outside *within* which one experiences the paradoxical feeling of being trapped. Everything is exterior, but it's impossible to get outside this exteriority. I label this correlational outside a *cloistered outside* –an outside in which we're trapped, and only ever find the correlates of our own acts– of consciousness and language. And I forward in opposition to this cloistered outside the notion of a Great Outdoors. For so-called dogmatic thinkers, this Outdoors is not only exterior to thought, but is given to thought as absolutely indifferent to and independent of thought. An Outdoors that is not reducible to the given, but rather capable of subsisting outside every givenness, outside every correlate of thought. This question –which is really the question of speculative realism– is that of knowing whether it's possible to access an absolute that's capable of being thought, not as a relative and cloistered outside, but as a Great Outdoors whose essence is irrelative to the thought of the knower? Can we recover the notion of the Great Outdoors without restumbling on the shortcomings of dogmatism, and committing a pragmatic contradiction therein?

One can see here that the argument for the correlation (as supported by the correlational circle) permits a radical *de-absolutization* of thought—at least if we think of the absolute in the realist sense. Beginning from this initial decision by correlationism, we can thus distinguish two basic possible types of correlational thought. Either (a) one believes that the correlation is invariant, or (b) one claims that invariants don't exist, since even the structure of the correlation submits to the invariance of a certain historicity. The first case is marked by the diverse modalities of the transcendental: here, one says that deabsolutization permits access once more to a certain form of universality, and that it exists as an invariant for thought—e.g. as forms of representation, noetico-noematic correlates, linguistic structures, etc.—which is to say as universal invariants, insofar as they're transhistorical invariants of the correlational thought/being and not, evidently, invariants of a being in itself, subsisting absolutely in-itself. By contrast, the second, historicist version of the correlation—for example, that of the postmoderns like Vattimo and Rorty—contend that all notions of universality remain as a mystic relic of the absolute. Here, one essentially doubles the transcendental *de-absolutization* of thought, doubles de-universalization, by asserting that even the structures of thought themselves depend on representations that are wholly contingent and historical.

Now I've said that I intend to defend a realist version of the absolute. And if, today, this version is regarded as having been thoroughly disqualified, I believe that this is largely because of the seemingly unbreakable strength of the correlational circle, i.e. of the pragmatic contradiction that inevitably pervades every realist statement. How is a realist effectively able to properly perform this magical act (lacking shamanic incantations), which consists of leaving the self to observe what the world looks like while yet there's no self there to apprehend it? Who can ever possibly succeed in “coming out of his own skin” in order to compare the object as it's modified by thought to that which is not modified by thought? The project itself appears contradictory, immediately futile in its very formulation.

Clearly, if correlationism was exclusively reducible to an argument for the correlation, our problem would effectively prove insurmountable, and every realism would find itself irreparably disqualified. But in fact—and I believe this is its point of weakness—correlationism cannot substantiate its own argument, at least not if it answers to the description that I've given it—which is, namely, *to have knowledge* of a project for the radical deabsolutization of thought. If the correlational circle suffices to disqualify the absolute realist, it does not suffice to disqualify every form of the absolute. For as we well-know, there's an effectively nonrealist form of the absolute—what I call “subjectivist” for reasons that I'll explain in moment—that principally consists of no longer claiming to think a non-correlational absolute, but rather posits as absolute that of the correlation itself. Now, faced with this alternative form of the absolute, the correlational circle is no longer effective, and as we'll see, is forced to mobilize against its own first argument—this is the second decision of correlationism, which is namely, that of *knowing the facticity of the correlation*.

So let's move on here to an examination of the second decision of correlationism. This second decision—the facticity of the correlation—is required by virtue of correlationism's obligation to refute the idealist version of the absolute, the latter of which maintains the *absolute necessity* of the correlation itself. Under this new defense of the absolute, one effectively reasons in the following manner: “Insofar as the very notion of an in-itself existing independently of thought is a contradiction, it must be posited that the in-itself—because it's unthinkable for us—is in-itself

impossible. If we can only ever know that which is given to thought, that which is never granted as given –i.e that which is never *given-to*– is that which lacks a correlate to the act of thought.” I’ve already mentioned Hegel’s joke that we can’t creep up on the thing in-itself from behind; but it seems that the Kantian thing in-itself, for Hegel, far from being posited as unknowable in the manner of Kant, is rather posited as a void –that is, as being nothing more than an empty knowledge established by knowledge. And of course this is really just another way of asserting that nothing is outside our relation to Spirit; there is not some sort of abstract entity standing for all of eternity outside the dynamic relation to absolute Subject. We’re inspired by the humility of just such a position when we define as subjectivist metaphysics any metaphysics that absolutizes as *necessary* the correlation of being and thought –thus giving some meaning to the subjective and objective polarity of their relation.

We should observe here that the very force of the subjectivist argument is derived from the very strength of the correlational circle by which realism is rejected. The subjectivist claims that insofar as the correlational circle demonstrates that the very notion of an in-itself existing independent of thought is a vacuous, contradictory notion, even as a possibility –i.e. the possibility of the existence of an in-itself without thought– it lacks all meaning. To even forward the basic *possibility* that the in-itself can subsist outside the correlation of being-thought, as some kind of autonomous in-itself, is equivalent to positing the possible existence of a non-circular circle, or some other such absurd postulation of the existence of a set of inconsistent and unknown entities existing outside our field of vision. “Thus,” the metaphysical subjectivist claims, “it must be the case that only the correlation is thinkable, and outside of it nothing is actual.”

Now, the subjectivist doesn’t contend that the consciousness of the individual is the sole reality, but rather that the correlational structure at work in individual consciousness is eternal and without an outside. The subjectivist argues: “Insofar as I cannot think outside the correlation, and insofar as I cannot *without contradiction* think the non-being of the correlation itself (for to think non-being is precisely to have non-being as a correlate of my thought), it must be the case that the correlation itself is that which is *eternal*.” Within metaphysical subjectivism we can thus distinguish between, for example, the mortal, contingent, individualistic consciousness, and the non-individualistic instantiation of the correlate –i.e the correlational Absolute, posited as necessary in the manner that Hegel, for instance, distinguishes mortal consciousness and absolute Spirit.

Now, why do I speak of “subjectivism” here rather than idealism to denote this brand of metaphysics? Doesn’t the term “subjectivism” have the drawback of evoking a kind of relativism –this notion that everything boils down to the arbitrary opinions of an individual subject– while to contrary, I’m using it here to identify a certain kind of absolutism? The reason I prefer the label “subjectivism” over that of “idealism” is because the metaphysics with which we’re concerned here is not exclusively that of speculative idealism (as in Hegelianism). Indeed, generally speaking, the philosophy we’re concerned with here could actually maintain a radical opposition to both idealism and metaphysics; for the absolutization of the correlation allows it to take a variety of forms, depending on the subjective relation to reality one chooses to privilege. One can privilege, for example, the perceptual correlation between subject and object, or the correlation of the intellect; but one could also choose to privilege the correlational relation to affect, or the will, or the vital, or the subject of the real. In this respect, subjectivist metaphysics is neither necessarily a philosophical idealism, nor related to some classical theory of the rational subject: it could manifest itself as a vitalism, a hylozoism, a will to thought, a will to power, and

so on. But in all respects, it will be a manner of thinking that attributes to being itself a certain subjective character –by reason, perception, affect, will, life, etc.– while maintaining that it’s meaningless to think the realism of an entirely a-subjective being, devoid of any fixed relation to life in its broader meaning. Let’s just say here, then, that the ideology common to any form of subjectivist absolutism is the rejection of any possible existence of an absolute materiality that’s unrelated to subjective experience –for example, as with the Lucretian atom.

So one can see here that in order to counter not merely the absolute realist, but now the absolute subjectivist as well, correlationism is forced to enlist a second argument capable of deabsolutizing the correlation itself, capable of preventing it from necessarily becoming a permanent or otherwise absolute structure of reality. This second argument is that of the facticity of the correlation itself.

And our usage of the term facticity here, as with so many other well-known terms, once more departs from its self-same logic. Insofar as correlationism supports a deabsolutization of thought, it must uphold the following thesis: “The correlation is not absolutely necessary, and this lack of absolute necessity is accessible to thought –i.e. it can establish itself as condition of thought without qualifying it as an act of faith.” It’s precisely this absolute non-necessity of the correlation qua thinkability that I call the facticity of the correlation. In other words, the thesis of correlational facticity says: “Thought is able to think its own proper lack of necessity, not only as a feature of individual consciousness, but of the correlational structure itself.” And only by virtue of such a condition can correlationism claim to think the basic possibility of every other correlation. It’s thus forced to issue the following claim: “The facticity of thought, its capacity to not-be, its absolute non-necessity, is effectively thinkable.”

How exactly does correlationism justify such a thesis? It does so simply by emphasizing the *absence of reason* for the correlation itself. But to what act of thought corresponds this absence of reason (what I call unreason)? If we say that the medium of the correlation is either language or consciousness, we’re saying that the determinations of the medium are describable, but certainly not *demonstrable* as necessary. For if the correlation is inescapable, it is not given to us as a necessary foundation. Nothing in the correlation indicates any kind of necessity –even if it’s the case that we’re incapable of thinking of it being otherwise, even if we’re unable of departing from it in order to access a radical elsewhere. The correlation is descriptive, and yet it’s not *that* descriptive. Its describability is unconditional and final, exhaustive of all that’s capable of being rendered through standard expression; the correlation is a thoroughly descriptive fact, but a fact whose describability is not subject to any ostensible exercise that would demonstrate or identify its necessity. Whether its language, consciousness, being-in-the world, etc., there is in every instance some originary first fact beyond which thought cannot proceed. We’re always already in the sphere of the correlational, whose existence as the beingness of all being itself is both impossible to confirm, and yet is posited as the absolute and ultimate being of all reality.

Here, we should make a number of distinctions so that things are clear. I’ll provisionally distinguish between three concepts: *contingency*, *fact*, and *arch-fact*.

(i) First, I label as “contingent” every entity that I know could effectively be, or not be, or be otherwise. Empirical reality –events such as a falling vase, or even the thingness of the vase itself– will be henceforth labeled as *contingent* insofar as they’re not regarded as inevitable: the

vase was capable of *not* having fallen; or another possibility altogether, the vase could have *not* had the same form it did; or it could have even *not* existed at all.

(ii) Secondly, I label as “fact” every type of entity that I can conceive as being otherwise, but about which I’m unable to know whether it’s actually capable of being otherwise. This is the case with the universal laws of physics: I can conceive without contradiction that our physical laws could change (such as in the Humean critique of the principle of causality); and I can testify that physical laws are necessary; but for all that, I can’t definitively *know* whether these laws are contingent, or if on the contrary, their necessity is effectively that which is inaccessible to every proof. It’s in this sense, then, that I’ll say that the laws of the universe are a fact –that they’re factual– but not that they’re contingent in the same sense as a falling or non-falling vase.

(iii) Finally, I label as “arch-fact” every fact that I cannot in any way conceive of either being-otherwise, or not-being altogether. I believe that there are principally two types of arch-facts: first, the fact itself that there is something and not nothing; and secondly, the fact that the world is logically consistent (which is to say, not comprised of logical contradictions), rather than logically inconsistent (which is to say, capable of logical contradictions). It is precisely on this notion of the arch-fact so defined that subjective absolutism and correlationism part ways.

So what would the subjectivist say here? He’d say, “I cannot think the other of the correlation. I can readily think of the given world as being otherwise, or that its laws may collapse, but I can neither think the annihilation of the correlation itself nor some other possible invariant. And so if the other of the correlation is unthinkable, it’s because it’s impossible. The correlation is therefore not a fact, but an absolute necessity.” And the correlationist will reply, “Certainly I am unable to think the other of the correlation, and so the correlation is not a fact in the manner of the universal laws of physics.” “But”, he then adds, “I can no more establish by reason the supposed necessity of the correlation; I can only describe the correlation, and its description is always related to that which is given as pure fact. The correlation is itself therefore a certain kind of fact as well –albeit a fact whose other is both unthinkable and only known insofar as it’s regarded as an absolute impossibility.” It’s in this sense that the correlation is an arch-fact. The particularity of the arch-fact is that it is not given to us by way of selecting between two alternative options to which we have equal access –itself and its negation– for I cannot conceive of its other as a fact. The arch-fact is given through an absence –namely, the absence of reason’s ability to substantiate its own permanence. This is critical to the notion of correlationism: it’s a knowledge of the precipice of its own frontier. The arch-fact is the given-to-thought of its own proper limits, of its own essential, foundational ineptitude. But this limit, this frontier, can only be given as a knowledge of an internal border to thought, insofar as thought itself is only here capable of grasping that which exceed its very limitations –namely, that which, in our terms, is capable of being otherwise, the wholly-other of the correlation. Thought can only posit that there could be a wholly-other –*not*, however what the nature of this wholly-other could be.

So correlationism culminates in the following thesis: “The unthinkable for us is not in-itself impossible.” With that being said, we should observe here that the correlationist is neither positively claiming anything as to the nature nor actuality of the in-itself. It may well be, as the subjectivist has reasoned, that there’s ultimately nothing outside of our relation to the given; but the subjectivist might also be wrong –the in-itself may ultimately consist of something that’s wholly-other to our relation to the given, or radically transcendent of our faculties. Facticity, for the correlationist, is thus no more synonymous with contingency than it is with necessity. This

point will prove essential later on, so I'll repeat it: facticity signifies a concession of ignorance as to the actual necessity or contingency of the correlation. Facticity opens us to a possibility, but it's the possibility of non-knowledge –i.e. our non-knowledge as to whether the correlation is necessary or contingent.

And so again, correlationism is an assertion about knowledge, not being. It affirms that thought solely has access to the knowledge that a frontier exists beyond which we not only lack the ability to traverse, but which may ultimately prove traversable by a kind of being about which we know nothing whatsoever –at least solely through recourse to rational thought.

Anything is possible; it's just that not everything is thinkable. Contrary to Kant, who affirmed that the thing in-itself is thinkable though unknowable –i.e. that we know there is a thing in itself, but we can only know *that* it exists– the correlationist affirms that the in-itself is not only unknowable, but perhaps unthinkable as well. Who indeed is ever outside of himself to verify that the conditions for thought are also the conditions for the in-itself? Maybe the thing in-itself is itself a contradiction? Maybe the correlation bathes in a kind of perpetual nothingness, only to one day suddenly vanish? Maybe there is an all-powerful God, capable of producing contradiction such that everything is reduced to nothingness? Correlationism concedes to all of these possibilities when it affirms our ignorance of the possible nature of the absolute.

That there *is* something, and that *that* something as thinkable is thereby an arch-fact, freely-given, yet impossible to reduce to a *raison d'être*: this is why contemporary correlationism so often manifests itself by way of a kind of operator switch, moving from a realm of strict philosophical discourse to suddenly a discourse of the Wholly-Other. And indeed, does not the latter always reveal a discourse that's wholly-other than philosophical discourse (for example, by making recourse to religion, theology, poetry, and so on)? Correlationist philosophy –or rather thought– here stands as a discourse of self-imposed-auto-limitation, whereby philosophical thought will always eventually arrive at its natural point of deficiency, and hence find itself needing to defer to an alternative discursive regime that's no longer strictly philosophical, but holds forth the promise of allowing thought to discover that which by itself it can otherwise never disclose to itself: it moves on to the disclosure of the Wholly Other to that which is, the disclosure of the source of the freely-given, as it's both in the world, as such, and in the world of thought. One finds this *operator switch point* in Heidegger, Levinas, but also already in Wittgenstein's mystical being, whereby the move is made from philosophical thought, proper, to all of a sudden some other order of discourse that's supposedly capable of accessing the fact of givenness itself.

The Principle of Facticity

Our exposition has shown that correlationism results in is the following proposition: to attempt a radical deabsolutization of thought at least two decisions are required –that of the correlation, and that of facticity; or more precisely, that of *the arch-facticity of the correlation*. Henceforth I'll use the term facticity to designate the inability of thought to establish the necessary *and* factual conditions inherent to the given (i.e. the consistency of the given, whose other is thinkable), and of the arch-factual being of the given, as such (i.e. that which has the consistency of givenness).

The problem for the absolute realist is clarified herein: is there a manner of thinking the absolute that's capable of overcoming the obstacle of correlationism without therein reactivating a subjectivist metaphysics? Can we recover the notion of an absolute that, rather than absolutizing the correlation, is capable of being established as independent of it? In other words,

is it possible for us to maintain a form of realism, as such, without therein effecting our aforementioned pragmatic contradiction?

To commence the second step of our analysis we must begin with subjectivism. Are we not here merely demanding a return to the strategies of those grand systems of idealism in order to counter the deabsolutization of the transcendental? As we saw before, such deabsolutization is capable of serving as a foundation for a hidden absolute –i.e. as the absolute truth of the deabsolute. Subjectivism essentially consists of regarding the correlation as no longer marking a limitation on thought, but rather as an ontological truth accessible to thought. The correlation here, far from ushering-in the end of speculative absolutes, rather proves itself as the only true absolute – it's no longer a transcendental limit to ontology, but rather an ontological truth in itself.

However, we've also seen that this approach clashes with the second decision of correlationism –namely, that of the facticity of the correlation. So my approach will be the following: I propose to overcome the obstacle of the correlation not by absolutizing the correlation itself, but rather by absolutizing *the facticity* of the correlation –that is to say, by proceeding not according to the first, but rather according to the second instrument by which correlationism effects its deabsolutization. We will propose to do for facticity –and in particular *arch-facticity*– what subjectivism does for the correlation, by making it an absolute, independent of all thought.

Before considering how I intend to justify such a thesis, first let's inquire as to its precise meaning. To *absolutize facticity*, what can this possibly denote? In short, it signifies the transmutation of unreason: from our observation of the absence of reason for that which is (insofar as unreason is that which defines facticity), we transmute this unreason *qua* non-knowledge of the reason of things into an actual property of that which is.

Let's examine this claim. Rather than saying (as the correlationist does) that thought is incapable of determining the *raison d'être* of that which is given, insofar as thought always stumbles on the irreducible facticity of being, we will instead propose that *thought is capable of accessing through facticity itself the actual absence of any raison d'être for that which is*, and thus the effective possibility for everything to become otherwise –to either appear or disappear–without any reason whatsoever. In other words, my position is the following: I propose that facticity ought to no longer mark the index of a limitation on the inability of thought to discover the reason of things; now, rather, facticity should be regarded as an index of thought's ability to discover *absolute unreason* –the absolute absence of all reason for everything. I propose to *ontologize unreason*, and consequently to make of it an extremely powerful and chaotic property of *Time*. For facticity, once ontologized, gives rise to a concept of Time in which the very meaning of reality (and this includes the thing-in-itself, our physical laws, principles of logic, even the correlation itself) is posited as effectively capable of being otherwise –that is to say, capable of radically becoming otherwise, but now according to a process that is without law, without reason, wholly inaccessible and ever unknown.

So what we're approaching here is a kind of chaos, such that even the unthinkable itself is not impossible. For example, this chaos could approximate the All-Powerful Cartesian God otherwise removed of his divine perfections; it could be some All-Powerful God, lacking all wisdom and goodness, and thus at once capable of doing anything, while yet wholly imbued with illogic, and so on.

And to be clear, this chaos is much more radical than that which is conveyed by the concept's traditional denotation. We traditionally conceive of two different kinds of chaos: On the one hand, there is *necessary* chaos, which we identify as comprised of a series of necessary processes that exist, but are ultimately devoid of any purposive ends –i.e. a kind of a physical chaos of the deterministic sort, but otherwise lacking any design capable of being rendered to sensibility. And on the other hand, the concept of chaos can also denote a *random* chaos, insofar as its processes are governed by chance encounters between independent particles or causal series (e.g. as it was for Lucretius). But it's worth noting that in both of these cases, our conception of chaos is essentially bound to the fixity of the laws of nature. Even our conception of chance implies that there exists a set of constants that ensure its actuality. For example, in the Lucretian atomic laws, atoms are indivisible, they have a fixed form, are infinite in number, and so on –and these are the laws that structure the randomness of atomic derivations. The clinamen neither destroys these laws, nor produces some other laws, but rather is presupposed as a structure endemic to their effectivity, as such.

However, the chaos of which I'm thinking here is capable of altering or even reconstituting the laws of nature themselves. I label this extreme kind of chaos –which is neither *deterministic nor random*– a *hyperchaos*. And I posit that facticity should no longer be perceived as a limitation on thought to disclose the reason of things. In fact, when properly employed, it actually allows us to access the absolute scope of hyperchaos –the latter of which is independent of thought, insofar as it's capable of ushering-in both thought's emergence and annihilation.

We should also note here that hyperchaos neither *necessarily* implies any sort of absolute disorder nor becoming to reality therein. Hyperchaos simply denotes that everything either *could* or *could not* change without reason; it could remain in perpetual flux or could remain in the same state for an indefinite duration (as it appears to be the case, for instance, with the “universal” laws of physics). In fact, it's entirely conceivable that hyperchaos might just as well result in a world wholly comprised of fixed objects, without any becoming whatsoever. Hyperchaos denotes a Time whereby everything could be abolished just as readily as everything could persist in an eternal becoming. From the vantage of hyperchaos, everything is contingent –even disorder and becoming themselves. This is why the fact of our present order itself –e.g. the perpetuation of universal laws– does not disqualify the hypothesis of hyperchaos.

It remains for us to provide justification for the absolutization of facticity. And for this, we must answer an immediate objection raised here by the correlationist.

The correlationist's objection is as that our absolutization of facticity amounts to identifying contingency with facticity; and yet because we lack any means of making such a determination, facticity and contingency are illegitimately conflated herein. Facticity, as we've observed, involves a concession of our blindness as to the modality of the correlation itself –our inability to know whether the correlation is necessary *or* contingent. We thus commit the same –albeit symmetrical– error as the subjectivist, by unwarrantedly absolutizing the modality of the correlate; for while the subjectivist absolutizes the necessity of the correlation, we absolutize its contingency.

And indeed, this is an accurate summation of our thesis of the absolute: facticity truly *is* contingent; that which we took for a lacuna *is actually knowledge*; and so facticity (more specifically understood as arch-facticity) is transmuted into hyperchaotic contingency. For this reason, we must justify our identification of a synonymy between these two concepts. On what grounds do we purport that contingency, as constitutive of the correlation, is an absolute? The

primary reason can only be this: hyperchaotic contingency is an absolute insofar as it (and only it) is capable of escaping the strictures of the project of deabsolutization effected by correlationism.

But in what way does it escape it? Let's return here to the two principal arguments of correlationism.

The first argument, as we've observed, was that of the correlational circle—namely, that of the pragmatic contradiction endemic to every realist thesis. And as we noted, if merely reduced to this argument alone, correlationism truly is insurmountable, and realism truly is rendered irreparably condemned to pragmatic contradiction. But we've also seen that correlationism was forced to proceed with a second argument—that of facticity—in order to counter the metaphysical subjectivist, and that here, this second argument reveals the Achilles heel of correlationism.

And why? In short, because it illustrates that the argument for facticity can only function insofar as it implicitly absolutizes facticity itself—that is to say, correlationism can only effectively disqualify subjectivism on condition that it implicitly concedes we're able to *think* the facticity of contingency as an absolute. In other words, it illustrates that while the correlationist alleges that the realist commits a pragmatic contradiction when the latter forwards his thesis, so too does the correlationist himself commit a pragmatic contradiction when he claims to deabsolutize thought, for deabsolutization necessarily requires an absolute.

Correlationism is forced to concede that we *can* in fact think arch-facticity, that we can in fact effectively think that which may not be of the correlation. We cannot with certainty know what it would be like to not be of the correlation, but we're at least capable of thinking *that* its non-being is possible. Indeed, if we cannot think the non-being of the correlation, we're forced to surrender to the reasoning of the subjectivist, and affirm the absolute necessity of the correlation therein. And at that point we could only counter subjectivism through our faith in the possible disappearance of the correlation—and not by way of the kind of logical argumentation that's subject to confirmation or refutation.

However, correlationism obviously purports to achieve a more elevated status of rigor, rather preferring not to view itself as one among a variety of beliefs. The arch-facticity of the correlation is therefore thinkable. But we must ask: on what *condition* is this potential non-being of the correlation thinkable? Well, as to the condition of possibility in question—the non-being of the correlation—I argue it is indeed thinkable as an absolute possibility, i.e. as a possibility *independent of the existence of thought*, insofar as it's posited as precisely that which can annihilate thought. The argument for facticity can truly function only by positing that we can think the possibility for thought to be absolutely annihilated.

In order to more intuitively (albeit less formally) demonstrate this, let's transpose this reasoning onto a more familiar example—such as the example of imagining one's own future death.

It's generally accepted that we're able to think of our own death, and thus we're capable of thinking the fact of our own corporeal and psychical annihilation. Obviously we're unable to conceive of what it would be like or feel like to be dead—insofar as we allow that our death will effect a total annihilation of our personhood. And so naturally there's a pragmatic contradiction here in saying that while we can *think* that which allows for being no longer to that extent, in *thinking this*, we precisely still *are*. We obviously can't *think* what it feels like to be dead without pragmatic contradiction; but it doesn't follow here that we're incapable of thinking our own death (even if we're an atheist, who thinks of death as pure and simple annihilation). To assert

that thinking our own annihilation is impossible for thought is to fall back into a pragmatic contradiction; and yet to purport that this demonstrates a sort of immortality of the soul devoid of the body –it would seem, alas –is to have committed a fatal sophism.

And what is this sophism? In short, it's the belief that we can imagine the possibility of our own psychical annihilation without having to positively conceptualize this annihilation itself. To conceptualize the self as an annihilated being is a contradiction; but to imagine the possibility of being annihilated is not. For here we're dealing with the matter of an arch-fact: our mental life is regarded as a fact that could just as easily be no more, without subsequently having the ability to positively determine that which *is* for the mind when the mind is no more. This means that we're able to think our own mortality in a radical, non-contradictory way. But what, then, is the meaning of this possibility of thinking the non-being of our own being? Is this particular possibility essential to the thought that we're capable of having? Of course not, for if our own mortality was only possible on the condition that we existed for thought to think it, as such, we would cease being mortals, and would therein be rendered incapable of thinking of ourselves *as* mortals. Moreover, if we were only mortals on the condition of thinking ourselves, as such, we could only die on the condition of being yet alive to think this possibility; we would only be capable of ceasing to be on the condition of thinking that we were ceasing to be. In other words, we would endlessly agonize over our own ceasing to be, but without ever actually ceasing to be.

Hence, we can only think the possibility of our annihilation, and therefore our own facticity –indeed, our own individuality itself as a structure of the correlation– on the condition of being able to think of the *absolute* possibility that we will *be* no more. And this absolute possibility of our own non-being is none other than that which we've defined as contingency – the absolute contingency of everything (again, whether defined as the laws of physics, the formal principles of logic, or even the laws governing the logic of the correlation itself). The absolute that we're investigating here is indeed marked by facticity –arch-facticity– and therein constitutive of a hyperchaotic contingency as a superior Time in which we're equally capable of being within or without life, *qua* individual, *qua* correlation.

So let's establish to some supplementary terms. We've arrived here at the following thesis: it is in fact possible to establish by reason the absolute necessity of contingency. That is to say, it's possible to demonstrate that one can only deabsolutize contingency by rendering as factual the subjectivity of the correlate itself. Contingency alone is independent of thought for its actuality, insofar as it permeates everything except itself. But in order to be absolute, this contingency must in fact be even more radical than the traditional meaning of the term –which warrants our application of the label *hyperchaotic*. No other entity is capable of exception, for contingency alone is the sole exception. Contingency alone is incapable of being properly labeled as contingent. And again, to clarify: we are not here forwarding the thesis that contingency is necessary in the Hegelian sense –i.e. in the sense that contingency is itself to be regarded as a deducible moment from the general process of the self-unfolding of Spirit. And we are not maintaining that contingency is *necessary* in the manner by which other entities or modalities are commonly held as necessary. Rather –and quite differently here– we're contending that *only* contingency is necessary. We will thus propose to use the concept of *facticity* to identify the essence of facticity itself not being factual: facticity will designate the non-factual, i.e. the singular necessity of facticity. And I therefore label as *the principle of facticity* the speculative thesis by which only facticity is non-factual –or to say the same thing, according to which contingency alone is necessary.

So now the question is whether the absolutization of hyperchaos that follows from the principle of factuality permits an absolute unity of the mathematical type? It does seem that we are the furthest from any kind of mathematical reason when imbricated in a world so purely marked by irrationality –a world which is not (other than superficially) of One. For being now finds itself undercut by a temporality that is not merely devoid of all reason, and therefore capable of any and all arrangement, but wholly illogical as well (especially since we've argued that non-contradiction is itself the sole constraint on hyperchaos). Indeed, does not the result of our absolutization upend the very grounds on which stood the question we were investigating to begin with –namely, of how to account for science's ability to discourse with the Great Outdoors?

However, there is a way of escaping this apparent impasse. It consists of acknowledging that in actuality the contingency of being does not imply that it can simply do anything whatsoever. That is to say, we can observe the existence a series of non-arbitrary conditions for contingency, which by virtue of their contingency, must conform to some precise conditions. And in this respect, insofar as they're derived from the absolute facticity of the real, these conditions are to be regarded as in-and-of-themselves properties of the absolute. I label as *figures* these non-arbitrary conditions of contingency, and *derivation* the method of deducing from contingency one of these figures. And my thesis here is that it's possible –from the principle of factuality– to derive the absolute necessity of the principle of non-contradiction as a kind of mathematical unity. In other words, it seems to me that it's possible to maintain that what appears to us as eternal in both logic (encapsulated in the fundamental principle of non-contradiction) and mathematics (encapsulated in its basic terms and principles of operation) does not point to some sort of fixed essence or ideal opposed to the contingency of becoming; rather, it proceeds by way of a radical chaos, marked by an eternal absence of reason. Far from being opposed to the unreason of chaos, that which is eternal in logic and mathematics draws its eternity from chaos itself –and it does so precisely because these discourses are grounded in conditions that guarantee that hyperchaos will always be hyperchaos.

It's not possible, within the limits of my present discussion, to provide comprehensive treatment of this twofold hypothesis. I must therefore content myself with outlining the strategy of these two derivations, and in focusing on it therein address my principal topic for today –that of the speculative derivation of mathematical unity.

The Derivation of Non-contradiction

I'll say just a few words here about contradiction in order to give you an idea about how the derivation of non-contradiction proceeds.

First of all, I should clarify that I understand a *contradiction* as that which is understood as universally contradictory –a true and confirmable contradiction, as rendered in any language. Strictly speaking, a contradiction should be marked by an inconsistency of being, in that actual beings are rendered discursively inconsistent (i.e. and a logician could proceed to itemize every given formal or syntactic contradiction). It's the manifest impossibility of paradox whose precise *reason* for such impossibility I'll try to demonstrate.

Now, a common belief among proponents of paradox and radical becoming is the notion that everything is subject to a kind of Heraclitean flux, so ubiquitous and incessant that we're forced

to concede that everything both is and other than itself –that the order of change *both is and is not* simultaneously.

I regard this common belief as utterly wrong. In the broader temporality of becoming, there's never actually any contradiction whatsoever: an object is this, *then* that, *then* yet another thing still. The temporal object never *simultaneously* contains contradictory properties, but rather contains opposite properties successively. In truth, then, a proponent of paradox can never simultaneously maintain the proposition of becoming without negating one or the other of his propositions. One can never merely say, for instance, “a temporal being is subject to contradiction” without contrarily also saying “a contradictory being finds itself lacking all temporality”. A truly contradictory being must altogether lose its temporality insofar as it loses the possibility to change in time –its being is no longer subject to any future becoming. And for this very reason, a contradictory being is always be incapable of becoming otherwise, insofar as it's then always already that which it is not. Moreover, a contradictory being even loses all capacity for living and dying –for insofar as it's incapable of temporally passing from being to non-being, conversely, both its very existence is already non-existence *and* its non-existence already exists. No new property is attributable to that which, by virtue of its contradictory nature, it doesn't always already possess. In short, a contradictory being, as such, is an *absolutely necessary being because of its inability to change*. However, by following the principle of factuality –and because we know that a necessary being is ontologically impossible (insofar as nothing can be both necessary *and* contingent)– we conclude that a paradoxical being is impossible.

In other words, the derivation of non-contradiction will be tasked with demonstrating in more detail that –far from it being a mere formal principle of logic, or some ideal essence opposed to becoming, rather– non-contradiction acts as an ontological law, guaranteeing that anything is capable of becoming other, and therein guaranteeing that everything remain contingent. And the eternal value of this law is grounded in the eternal necessity of the contingency of the real.

The thesis of contradiction finds two philosophical predecessors whose retroactive significance warrants some clarification. First of all there's Hegel, whom my teacher Bernard Bourgeois has called the greatest of all the Parmenideans. This appraisal seeks to break with the conception of Hegel as a thinker of dialectical negation, and subsequently with the Heraclitean becoming of everything moving toward its culmination. However, to the contrary, it's *because* Hegel was a great thinker of real contradiction that he was also a great thinker of absolute necessity. That is to say, it's because Spirit remains both within-itself in its other, and yet contains its own negation in-itself, that it achieves an immutable necessity already self-contained in its identity of absolute becoming. Spirit is always eternally yielding to its in-itself precisely because it already contains all of eternity in its dynamic process of returning to itself. Spirit is absolutely immutable, insofar as it's *paradoxically* identical to the dynamic process from which it takes leave. It is infinite, without limit, and without other, for it is perpetually in the process of completing its passage through itself *qua* other by way of abolishing itself *as* other. In this respect, Hegel is our master counterpoint to the thesis maintained herein: either there's contradiction, and being is absolute, necessary, and therefore neither capable of disappearing nor radically changing without always returning to itself; or conversely, contingency itself is the sole necessity, and non-contradiction is required to guarantee our ability to come into and out of existence, without therein relying on the dialectic of an eternal return of being to itself.

Even so, Hegel was not the greatest of the Parmidean philosophers. A more radical, if less well-known disciple of Parmenides was, in my opinion, Pyrrho of Elis (365 -275) (often wrongly identified as the founder of Greek skepticism –which is rather ironic, in that he actually stands at the culmination of Greek metaphysics and its corresponding examination of the pure immutable). In actuality, we only know of Pyrrho’s famous “no more” (*ou mallon*) as it’s relayed by his leading disciple, Timon of Philus, according to whom we should say “about each single thing that it no more (*ou mallon*) is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is or is not.” In his eloquent book on Pyrrho, *Pyrrhon ou l’apparence*, Marcel Conche reveals how *ou mallon* declaims the universal ruse of the three principal foundations of reason: the principle of reason, the principle of non-contradiction, and the principle of the excluded middle (which can also be read as an implicit critique of Gamma and Kappa in Aristotle’s metaphysical works). But Conche also characterizes Pyrrho as a particularly radical student of Heraclitus, who had maintained that the principle of universal becoming undermines the principle of dogmatic reason. I believe this is incorrect, and that instead Pyrrho should be read as a radical disciple of Parmenides, probing the pure Immutable in the manner of the dogmatic philosophers preceding him. However, the irony of Pyrrho’s move is this: while the Eleatics affirmed the world of sense perception as an illusory world of pure appearance, and therein derived from the various paradoxes and contradictions inherent to incessant becoming (e.g. recall here Zeno’s paradoxes) the thesis that Immutable Being is the sole reality, Pyrrho inverts the meaning of Eleatism by affirming that if the truth of the Immutable is derived from the inconsistency of appearance, this is precisely because the Immutable *is* Inconsistency itself –that is to say, Immutable Being is incapable of becoming precisely because everything and its opposite have always already been included therein. And the truth of my suspicion here appears confirmed by the fact that, of the few things we actually know of Pyrrho’s life, we know that he was introduced to philosophy by a certain Bryson, the latter of whom was said to be a student of the Megarions –a school that shared with the Eleatics a rejection of sensible reality, due to the various paradoxes contained therein (recall here both the paradoxes of Eubulides of Miletus –e.g. the liar’s paradox, the heap paradox– or of the “destructive dilemmas” of Diodorus Cronus).

And so I believe that in light of our proposition of the derivation of non-contradiction, Pyrrho should no longer be read as an opponent of Greek reason (i.e. the ancestor to a skepticism whose label was but coined some centuries later), but rather as an heir of Greek reason itself insofar as he was probing the pure Immutable by way of contemplation. Pyrrho was the first to effectively grasp (and rather astutely) that if an absolutely necessary and immutable being were to exist, the philosopher would not find it in appearance precisely because of its paradoxical and inconsistent nature. Philosophers have ever since set their sights on necessity, until the illusory search for suprasensible being has become too coherent, too logical, too truly immutable.

Two Ones

Let’s return now to the question of the One. Recall that we began with the question of whether a method exists that’s capable of substantiating a realist, non-correlational, mathematical description of the world? Henceforth, we can formulate this problem accordingly: can we derive from the principle of factuality the absolute scope of mathematical descriptions of the real? Obviously I’m unable to resolve a problem of this magnitude in the time available here (and this is indeed a problem with which I’m still grappling). But I would like to briefly outline my preliminary thinking on this matter, insofar as it directly points us toward the nature of the One – and in particular to the difference between the unity of a thing and the unity of a sign: this is

what I call the difference between *the ontic One* and *the semiotic One* [*l'un ontique et l'un sémiotique*].

What is the relation here between, on the one hand, this issue regarding two different types of unity, and on the other hand, our aforementioned question of the realist scope of mathematics?

Well, as a preliminary attempt to resolve the problem of the absolute scope of mathematics, I began by trying to identify a minimal feature common to all formal discourse (i.e. common to both logic and mathematics) capable of distinguishing it from natural language. I wanted to clarify a precise and definitive point of difference between the symbolism of formal language and that of natural language. I sought to locate a basic quality, common enough so as to characterize all symbolic language, and yet precise enough to remain foreign to all natural language. In fact, I already had an idea of what it was; my intuition was that it had to do with the capacity of thought to access the eternity of contingency. And it seems to me that this minimal feature actually constitutes a rather remarkable usage: namely, the systematic and precise usage of *a sign devoid of meaning* (henceforth I will refer to this as a “SDM”).

The rough hypothesis that I more or less adopted was that if the question of mathematical reference –i.e. the question “*of what does mathematics speak?*” –is such a perplexing question, it’s simply because mathematics at root consists of a series of operations involving the application of signs which are ultimately in-and-of-themselves meaningless. In all mathematical notation –at least in its most fundamental forms (such as Set theory or Category theory)– there are two basic types of signs:

- (i) There are signs that signify operations –what I call “operator-signs” [*signes-opérateurs*],
- (ii) and there are signs with which these operators ultimately work –what I call “base-signs” [*signes-bases*]– and whose express function is such that, because they have no signification in themselves, they’re otherwise capable of preempting the intrusion of meaning from an exogenous discourse.

What we encounter, then, in formal writing –which ultimately consists of these SDMs– is not some defect or short-circuit of meaning, but rather precisely that which provides for its very condition of possibility.

Set theory provides us with a simple example of this. The standard axioms of Set theory, to put it crudely, begin with signs –“a”, “b”, “c”, etc.– which are commonly called “sets”. But Set theory never actually defines what a set is. And of course in and of themselves the signs signify nothing whatsoever –and *necessarily* so– precisely because they’re tasked with providing a foundation devoid of all meaning on which the operator-signs can function. These signs begin to “resemble” sets insofar as they’re subject to an operator –the operator of belonging [*l’opérateur d’appartenance*]. However, it’s not the signs of the set, but the operator itself that bears the charge of signification. The signs “a”, “b”, “c”, etc. are called sets insofar as they’re subject to an operator of belonging, which then allows for such statements as “a” belongs to “b”, or “b” belongs to “a”, and so on. It’s in this respect that we say that a set is that which either belongs to another set or itself contains another set –a circular definition, to say the least– which confirms that one never truly defines what a set is (in terms of its base-sign), but only ever identifies the operations supporting it therein.

My strategy here is following: I posit that the minimal condition of possibility (which I cannot demonstrate here as the *only* condition, but nevertheless contend that it is at least *a* condition) for formal discourse is the possibility to conceive and thematize signs devoid of

meaning. Rather than merely designating it as nothing, or nonsense (i.e. something to be regarded as an absurdity), the SDM stands as the imminent condition of possibility for mathematic-rational thought, as such. The question is, how are we capable of thinking these signs devoid of meaning? My approach to this question consists in demonstrating that the condition of possibility for the very thinkability of the SDM is through our access to the eternal contingency of everything. In short, I attempt to derive from the principle of factuality our ability to produce signs devoid of meaning, and to therefore demonstrate that mathematical discourse moves within a sphere of thought “closely associated” with the absoluteness of contingency. And so while I’m not prepared here to demonstrated the absolute scope of mathematical descriptions, I can at least itemize the necessary first step towards such an absolutization.

No doubt there’s a certain absurdity to the question of how we manage to produce these SDMs? Colloquial speaking, SDM’s are often perceived as illustrative of a failure or inability –rather than a facility– of the production of meaning. What does it mean to ask the question of how we manage to produce the non-signified? And moreover, what does any of this have to do with the question of the One? Allow me to make recourse to a story in order to simultaneously address both of these concerns.

Imagine that an archeologist who’s working among the ruins of a universally unknown civilization –for example, about which we’re ignorant of whether it had even developed a written language– partially unearths, in the course of her excavations, a tablet on which she finds the following pattern of signs.

For example:

#####

Suppose that her initial response is to assume that this line is a mere frieze, i.e. some sort of aesthetic design engraved on the face of the tablet. However, a moment later she revises her hypothesis, and excitedly asserts that it may well be the penmanship exercises of a schoolboy, repeatedly inscribing the same letter on his notebook (as a young child will do when seeking to master the art of writing). However, upon further excavation of the tablet, she does not find the lines of similar characters –which would have confirmed her second hypothesis about the civilization’s development of a written language – but rather a design which convinces her that her first assumption was correct, and that she had in fact been dealing with some kind of aesthetic motif after all.

The question that arises here is the following: what shift in understanding occurred in our archeologist when she successively grasped –in one and the same pattern– the decorative motif of a frieze, followed by the recurrent production of the self-same sign? In both cases, the engraved markings were equally understood as a singular, coherently arranged unit. But what constitutes the distinction by which the motif is capable of becoming recurrent productions of the same sign –a token of the same sign-type? I propose that disclosing the nature of this distinction will take us to the heart of the question of the One.

When our archeologist first understood the pattern to be a motif, she grasped it as an entity subject to broader aesthetic judgment –it was a single decorative pattern, and composed of a

determinate number of characters (8 in our example) whose configuration (i.e. its shape + number of characters) could be judged as well-executed or poorly-executed, as attractive or unattractive to the eye, and so on. And in aesthetic judgment, it's worth noting that the number of symbols is not a matter of indifference: a pattern of 7 or 5 characters, for instance, can readily be more or less felicitous than a pattern of 8. That is to say, the motif contains what might be called a monotonic-effect [*un effet de monotonie*], or what we might generally label as a repetition-effect, whereby ostensibly identical characters of a pattern cease to be the same.

Think about this in terms of a melody: Bergson observed that two similar notes (i.e. two phonetically indistinguishable “dohs”) are understood differently, depending on how their distinct melodic sequence concludes. So a given melody –for instance, a series of 8 “dohs” – will produce a final “doh” distinct from the initial “doh”, insofar as the final “doh” is charged with a melodic past not possessed by the initial “doh”. This is the differential effect of repetition, a sort of monotonic-effect occurring in the *time* of the melody, and so homologous here to that which passes in the *space* of the frieze. For unlike Bergson, I believe that time and space are equally loaded with monotonic differences, and the pattern of our archeologist's motif is infused with a differential effect, rendering each character different from the others –even if each character empirically appears the same.

And I say this because I believe that the monotonic-effect infuses the totality of our understanding of empirical reality: everything that's understood as One – and therein accorded an empirical, ontic unity– unfolds in a space and time that produces differences among these *onethings* [*choses-unes*] such that in-themselves they're empirically indistinguishable. And so the enigma, or mystery, of the sign is such that the differential effect endemic to space-time vanishes when we perceive similar markings as no longer the mere pattern of a motif, but as elements of the self-same type. For then we can say that the elements in question are absolutely identical, and therefore lacking any empirical or spatiotemporal differential effect (i.e. repetitive). It's absolutely the same sign *as a type* that's found in each of these elements; and regardless of the number of elements, the type itself never varies –so our series (#####) could even be extended with an “etc.” in order to denote the radical indifference of the identity of the type to the multiplicity of its elements. It's an “etc.” that would have no meaning for the frieze, insofar as it's a concrete aesthetic reality, and thus inseparable from its fixed and finite number of characters.

There's something absolutely non-differential, something non-spatiotemporal, and therefore something eternal in the sign (And when I say “sign” here, of course I mean the sign-devoid-of-meaning). Herein lies the thrust of our story, insofar as it approaches the immaterial nature of language by way of the question of the ideality of meaning itself –i.e. of its resistance, for example, to historicity and context– and the very possibility of its singular identity in the minds of two different readers, from two distinct historical epochs. The point I want to stress here is that our archeologist had a kind of experience of eternity, of pure identity –an eternity *not of meaning but of type*– resistant to the differential effect of empirical markings. And her experience of eternity was the experience of a sign, rather than the experience of meaning –that is to say, it was not the meaningfulness of the signs in-themselves, but rather the signs as signs-devoid-of-meaning that gave rise to her experience. These SDMs revealed themselves such that, in reality, they were now no longer signs at all, but rather a motif. Our archeologist accessed an experience capable of apprehending in an empirical marking something eternal –a unified mode of markings, not subject to the effect of spatiotemporal repetition– and at that, she did so by

departing from a single semiotic unity, a unity for which each mark became an *one-element* [*une occurrence-une*] of an identical type, and as such indefinitely reproducible.

The eternal unity of the sign-type [*signe-type*] is such that it permits thought to access the unlimited iteration of the identical, i.e. to access the “etc.” that follows a series of elements, and which do not exist for understanding in the aesthetic design of the frieze. In other words, the very presence of the eternal is precisely that which differentiates the sign from the aesthetic marking, in which neither reference nor essence of meaning is present.

Thus, to access the SDM as such requires access to something eternal in the element, which is its type. Hence the question arises: what is the nature of this eternity? My thesis is that the eternity involved in grasping semiotic unity finds its source in grasping of the contingency of the occurrence of the sign. Allow me to elaborate this point in closing.

When I perceive something –whether an object or empirical mark– I perceive it with all of its empirical features; I perceive it as fact. But my perception of the ontic unity of the mark requires that *first* its empirical features come to the foreground, and only then, *secondarily*, its facticity. First I perceive a mark, and then I further perceive that it’s a factual one. However, if I observe the facticity of the mark, as such –if I first bring its facticity to the foreground– then I seize on that which in this mark is identical to the whole of reality, varying in neither space nor time. Here I effect a unification of the mark, but of a different type of unification than its ontic-empirical unification –it’s a kind of ontological unification, through which I grasp the eternal contingency present in *this* precise mark. I unify the mark within its contingency, not within its empirical features; and I can therein perceive in a multitude of similar marks a type of eternal unity, as such, not subject to the differential effect of repetition.

So returning now to the experience of the one-mark [*la marque-une*] as an element of the sign-type: what precisely am I doing when I grasp the sign *as* a sign? What am I doing when I cease to regard the mark as a thing in order to grasp it as a sign? In essence, I’m making of this mark arbitrarily, or contingently, a sign –i.e. I cannot thematize the idea of a sign, I cannot think the sign as a sign, without bringing to the foreground the contingency of its determinations. And I say this because, like anything else, the mark can be thought of as the necessary result of a number of causes: it could be the result of erosion, an earthquake, purposive human action, etc. And even if this necessity is an illusion, it shows that the marked-thing [*la marque-chose*] doesn’t actually require that its contingency is thematized in order to be grasped. Even if I’m a Spinozist, the same mark that becomes a sign must necessarily be posited as arbitrary, since the very nature of the sign is such that it has no necessary features. Of course there are structural constraints within language (e.g. signs for separate things must have separate signs); but the nature of any given sign or sign-system is its capacity to be re-encoded, or re-transcribed, in another structurally-identical system of signs. A sign thus exhibits its contingency ‘from its first words’, so to speak –at least insofar as I grasp it as a sign, insofar as I thematize it, as such.

So when I’m confronting a sign-devoid-of-meaning, I’m confronting a sign that refers to neither meaning nor reference, but only to itself as a sign. To think the SDM is to necessarily thematize the sign, as such, and thus to think its arbitrary nature –to allow its eternal contingency to come to the foreground, to unify it within its contingency, and ultimately to allow it to proliferate as a succession of elements otherwise liberated from the differential effect of repetition.

So it seems to me that in fact it's possible to derive the condition of possibility for mathematical discourse (as a discourse founded on the SDM) by starting from the principle of factuality, and to ontologically delineate therein between an ontic-one and a semiotic-one. This, I believe, is the first step toward a possible absolutization of a mathematical description of the real.

Translated by Benjamin James Lozano
speculativemarx@gmail.com