

“Philosophy is not science’s under-labourer”

An interview with Ray Brassier

Nikola Andonovski

“Speculative realism” is the buzzword reverberating in Continental philosophy circles with a vigor unseen since the era of ‘deconstruction’. Originally coined for a 2007 conference at Goldsmith’s, Speculative Realism (SR) is less a designation for a homogeneous philosophical movement than an umbrella term for a group of closely related philosophical projects sharing a common enemy. The enemy – picturesquely dubbed ‘correlationism’ by SR pioneer *Quentin Meillassoux* – 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”*¹. This (on SR accounts) standard position has been the reigning dogma of 20th century Continental philosophy, from post-Kantian philosophies of representation to Heideggerian ontologizations of the human ‘lifeworld’. Taking its cue from the paralyzing impasses of this standard view, Speculative Realism defines itself as an attempt to step out of that *“correlationist deadlock”* and question both the Kantian restrictions of philosophical access and the phenomenological privileging of human experience. This imperative has been a shibboleth of the philosophies of SR’s front row quartet: of the speculative overcoming of correlationism in the works of Meillassoux and Ian Hamilton Grant, of the resolute nihilism of Ray Brassier, as

well as of the object-oriented ontology of
Graham Harman.

Here we welcome Ray Brassier, the ‘godfather’ of Speculative Realism and the author of *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007). Brassier, currently a professor at the American University in Beirut, has been a staunch defender of metaphysical realism and one of the most vocal advocates of the scientific disenchantment of the world. In his debut book, a fascinating dialogue with philosophers as diverse as Sellars, Churchland and Gilles Deleuze, he champions nihilism as *“a necessary consequence of the coruscating potency of reason, and hence an invigorating vector of intellectual discovery”*².

Brassier’s re-thinking of the relationship between thought and reality is as much of a challenge to cognitive *“radical embodiment”* theories as it is to Continental orthodoxy. We asked Ray about his general views on philosophy, as well as about some of the specific aspects of his work.

Ray, the last 150 years can easily be seen as a process of gradual relinquishing of philosophical territory. First, ontology to physics, then (naturalized) epistemology to psychology, and most recently even ethics to the proponents of the new neo-



Darwinian consensus in evolutionary theory. What are the consequences of this handing over? What, in your view, is the role of philosophy today? Is the minimal task of conceptual clarification still the benchmark for philosophizing? Or is there something more? (Out of all the "speculative realists" you were arguably the least eager to 'speculate'.)

I don't see the process as one of unilateral relinquishment on philosophy's part. And although I think philosophy's historical development is necessarily bound up with that of the sciences, I don't accept the Lockean 'underlabourer' conception of the relation between philosophy and science, according to which the *telos* of all philosophical enquiry is to reach the point at which conceptual analysis can be supplanted by empirical investigation. Certainly, philosophy has had to give up its naïve pretension to legislate about everything, and this relinquishment has been part of the process of its historical unfolding. But I think this pruning process is fundamentally conducive to philosophy's growth. Philosophy is peculiar in that it grows intensively, not extensively. It progresses by refining and sharpening the scope of certain persistent yet empirically intractable questions, which every sustained attempt at thinking, whether empirical or a priori, runs into sooner or later. Cynics like to depict the history of philosophy as the sterile reiteration of conceptual confusion. This disparagement of philosophy is common to both skeptics and positivists. Unlike these cynics, I do perceive a kind of progress in the history of philosophy, but it's one that is not straightforwardly linear. It's the

'progress' of waves wearing away rock. The history of philosophy is the progressive unfolding of the conceptual labyrinths implicit in apparently simple questions about knowledge, truth, and thought. I'm struck by the underlying continuity of this fundamental problematic, however convoluted its historical windings, from Plato and Aristotle, through Kant and Hegel, right up to contemporaries like Brandom and Badiou.

So while I remain committed to the idea that philosophical theorizing cannot afford to ignore the findings of the best contemporary science, I don't believe philosophy is merely the handmaid of empirical science either. Philosophy's relation to science is neither one of grounding nor one of subordination.

Philosophy is at once continuous and discontinuous with the sciences. On the one hand, it cannot afford to ignore the ways in which biology and physics have reconfigured basic conceptual categories like species, individual, space, time, and causation; on the other hand, philosophy's essentially abstract conceptual subject matter is not such as could ever be farmed out to empirical science.

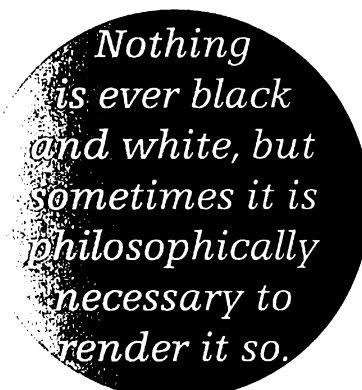
So in answer to your question: yes, conceptual analysis is the minimal benchmark for philosophizing, the very least one has to do in order to qualify as engaging in philosophy. But although conceptual clarification is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for philosophizing. The analysis of conceptual structure remains the prerequisite for constructing a bridging theory of the divide between conceptualization and reality. Thus I don't believe philosophy is or ought to be essentially speculative.

Speculation can be given a positive valence, if it means a theorizing uninhibited by utilitarian constraints. But even the most abstract speculative register, harbours latent ideological implications; the question being whether or not those implications are predictable. More often however, speculation serves as a pretext for arbitrary, self-indulgent fancy.

Ultimately, philosophy is at once analytic and synthetic. It analyses in order to synthesize. This is not an original definition; it is venerable, perhaps even hackneyed, but it's one I believe to be essentially correct. The role of philosophy today is to reformulate venerable questions about the nature of mind, meaning, and reality not only in light of physics, biology, and cognitive science, but also taking into account the most theoretically sophisticated varieties of social theory, particularly in the Marxist tradition.

You are particularly interested in the fit between human experience and the scientific understanding of the world. In an interview with Bram Ieven, you characterized the issue in terms of a decision: "Contemporary philosophers can be sorted into two basic camps: in the first, there are those who want to explain science in terms of human experience; in the second, there are those who want to explain human experience in terms of science...I side with those in the second camp".³

But is the situation really this black-and-white? The last two decades saw the emergence of movements such as enactivism, for example, which attempt to steer clear from the pitfalls of both extreme positions. Does your adherence to naturalism necessarily commit you to a full abandonment of folk theorizing?



Nothing
is ever black
and white, but
sometimes it is
philosophically
necessary to
render it so.

Nothing is ever black and white, but sometimes it is philosophically necessary to render it so. I am aware of enactivism, embodied cognition, and the extended mind hypothesis, and while I think these approaches perform a philosophical service by pointing out the explanatory deficiencies of a certain representationalist orthodoxy in the philosophy of mind, I find claims about enactivism's philosophical radicality to be much exaggerated. Much of it strikes me as Aristotelianism in a cognitive scientific dress. Enactivist critiques of representationalism are certainly instructive, but their proposed alternative is all too familiar. Enactivism invites us "to understand the regularity of the world we are experiencing at every moment, but without any point of reference independent of ourselves that would give certainty to our descriptions and cognitive assertions. Indeed the whole mechanism of generating ourselves, as describers and observers tells us that our world, as the world which we bring forth in our coexistence with others, will always have precisely that mixture of regularity and

*mutability, that combination of solidity and shifting sand, so typical of human experience when we look at it up close."*⁴

This is as succinct an encapsulation of the correlationist credo as one could wish for. I confess I fail to see what is philosophically challenging about it. Certainly, it challenges Cartesian dualism, but is this really still the hallmark of contemporary philosophical radicality? The enactivist critique of representationalism is too easily co-opted by the brand of tubthumping anti-dualism whose affinities with new-age spiritualism have been rightly denounced by Žižek and others. I don't find it coincidental that a philosophical ideology that places such a metaphysical premium on embodiment and affect should arise precisely at that juncture where the full spectrum dominance of neoliberal capitalism has successfully extirpated the ideals of rationalist universalism both in theory and in practice. A metaphysics of embodied affect is a retreat rather than an advance from the impasses of subject-object dualism. I think the challenge now is to re-conceive the theory and practice of rationalist universalism in post-computational (i.e. non-anthropological) terms. Inferentialism provides some of the resources required to do just this. It preserves the normative kernel of rationalism, while discarding its metaphysical shell. This is to say that Sellars and Brandom retain Hegel's insight into the historicity of reason, while jettisoning the neo-Aristotelian substantialization of mind which mired orthodox Hegelianism in theology. So in answer to your question: my adherence to methodological naturalism commits me to discriminating between

epistemically perspicuous accounts of the structural links between phenomenology and folk theorizing, as exemplified by Metzinger's self-model theory of subjectivity, or Pascal Boyer's work on folk metaphysics, and the metaphysical inflation of phenomenological experience that leads philosophers like Maturana, Varela, and Thompson to promote a kind of new-age Protagoreanism.

*In the humanities, it has almost become a cliché to lament the three big blows to the "primary narcissism" of man: Copernicus, Darwin and Freud. But, you have been a staunch defender of the traumatic disenchantment of the world. In Nihil Unbound you propose a view that can perhaps best be captured by the slogan "the primacy of the theoretical". You write: "Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity. Thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living"*⁵. *Why exactly does nihilism carry this liberating potential?*

Because it's not possible to carry on making sense of ourselves or the world in the way we have been for the past two and half thousand years. Or rather, it's no longer possible to do so in good intellectual conscience. Of course, one can always silence the latter by abandoning reason and truth in name of sensation and life. I've tried to show why the attempt to do so generates incoherences that stymie philosophical thought altogether. But even for those who are unwilling to forego truth in the name of life, the question is whether philosophy is to be mere nostalgia for some supposedly prelapsarian harmony between man and world, or whether on the contrary

it should reassert its originary kinship with the sciences and strive to push our cognitive capacities to their limits in order to test the grip of our organic equilibrium. Obviously, this assumes that thought can be compelled by interests that transcend those of the organism, and this is of course an idealist—ultimately Platonist—trope, which I not only admit but embrace, since I hold, along with Plato and Hegel, that the compulsion of the concept allows reason to incorporate death. But *Nihil Unbound* only skims the surface of the underlying issue: if one believes, as I do, that the imperative to think is compelled by irrecusable rational obligations, then the acknowledgment that the validity of the categories of sense that have been available to us for two millennia have now lapsed irrevocably, carries with it the injunction to transform the structure of sense. However, I now realize the issue is more dialectical than I thought in *Nihil Unbound*, because the boundary between sense and senselessness is historically determined and the formal structure of sense allows for a fundamental reconfiguration in what can and cannot be meaningfully experienced. What is conspicuously absent from *Nihil Unbound*, but what I am currently trying to elaborate, is an account of the generative status of the negative that would not lapse back into some sort of dubious emanationism. The problem consists in articulating the relation between the dialectical structure of conceptual discourse and the non-dialectical status of the real, in such a

way as to explain how real negativity fuels dialectics even as it prevents dialectics from incorporating its own negativity. Real negativity splits the logos from within, while from without it splits signification from reality. The goal is to understand how non-conceptual negativity determines dialectical negation, while preventing negation in the concept from fusing with real negativity.



You end Nihil Unbound with an emphatic portrayal of philosophy as an "organon of extinction". The "will to know", marked by the trauma of extinction is, via philosophy, rendered commensurate with the objective reality of extinction. But, does this sort of position not simply echo the Heideggerian pathos of finitude? Aren't you proposing here a form of authenticity of the disappearing self - an ethics of nihilism, perhaps?

Yes and no. Yes, if by 'authenticity' one understands the rationalist imperative to transform the structure of sense in accordance with the norm of truth, according to an impersonal ideal of collective cognitive authenticity that would be Hegelian rather than Heideggerian. No, if 'authenticity' is understood in a personal-existential register in terms of the ontological propriety of the individual self. Extinction is not just the cosmological transcoding of Heideggerian finitude, but its speculative sublation in the form of a new synthesis of thought and object, or subject and death—a dead subject. This

I mean by 'binding extinction'. But such binding can only be collectively realized at the level of rational reflection, this being understood not in terms of individual consciousness, but as the conceptual explicitation of the implicit content of impersonal rational norms. (I owe this insight to Robert Brandom's brilliantly reconstructive reading of Hegel.) The suggestion is that the 'subject-of-death' emerges as the historically appropriate form for contemporary rational collectivity. How this 'subject-of-death' might be collectively realized as a new form of reason is what I am currently trying to elaborate by examining what Hegel, Sellars, and Brandom have to say about the link between reason, nature, and history.

In the past few years, you have been increasingly engaged with the work of Wilfrid Sellars. Why is he so important for your developing system? And, concurrently, what is your take on the possible idealistic resonances of Sellars' rejection of the 'given'? How do you combine the unavoidable entrapment in discourse with the claim that you've defended so adamantly: the scientific uncovering of truth?

Only belatedly have I come to realize how indispensable Sellars' work is for my

project. Sellars helped me realize that the autonomy of conceptual rationality is the indispensable precondition for defending the truth of nihilism and hence for prosecuting the kind of radical conceptual revision which I believe nihilism entails.

What is most important for me in Sellars' thought, but what I'm still trying to properly grasp, is his two-tiered account of the relation

between mind and world. What prevents Sellars' rejection of the given from lapsing into conceptual idealism is his difficult but crucial account of the interplay between the normative, rule-governed domain of linguistic

signification and the causal/

neurophysiological dimension of what Brandom calls 'reliable differential responsive dispositions'. Like Kant before

him, Sellars synthesizes insights from rationalism and empiricism. His emphasis on the autonomy of the conceptual aligns him with rationalism, but it is tempered by a naturalistic acknowledgement of the mind's evolved status. This has important consequences for his conception of truth. Sellars believes it is possible to reconcile truth as coherence, which in his

system amounts to rationally warranted assertibility, with truth as correspondence, which he describes in terms of the relation of 'picturing' between linguistic utterances construed as 'natural linguistic objects'

*Because
it's not
possible to carry
on making sense of
ourselves or the world
in the way we have
been for the past two
and half thousand
years.*

and the empirical events or objects to which they are causally connected and which the signifying counterparts of these natural linguistic objects are about. Thus, Sellars maintains, one can dispense with any invocation of the empirically given while preserving the representational link between linguistic assertion and empirical reality. Obviously I'm caricaturing what is in fact an exceptionally subtle and complex theory, but I take Sellars' crucial proposal to be that it is possible to abjure all recourse to the given while acknowledging the mind's determination by the physical order. I hope to be able to do justice to the power and subtlety of Sellars' thought in the future, if only to amend for my woefully inadequate treatment of him in *Nihil Unbound*. He is an extraordinary philosopher and the full extent of his philosophical achievement has yet to be realized.

The criticism of speculative realism very often revolves around a single issue, the idea that the general antipathy towards 'correlationism' entails a concomitant antipathy towards any form of critique, a price that many contemporary philosophers are unwilling to pay. What is your view on this? Is the project of 'de-transcendentalization' in danger of restoring some sort of speculative naiveté?

I find the expression 'speculative realism' increasingly meaningless. What I admire about Meillassoux's *After Finitude* is the challenge it sets out to continental philosophers who think Kant resolved the issue of the relation between philosophy and the natural sciences and who continue to invoke Kant as their excuse for ignoring

the latter. Thus I wholeheartedly applaud Meillassoux's attempt to wake continental philosophers from their "correlationist slumber". But I think it would be a grave mistake to throw out the baby of Critique with the correlationist bathwater. In fact,

I think the proper import of the critique of correlationism has been misunderstood (perhaps even by Meillassoux himself?). In my eyes, it is not Kant but rather the neo-pragmatist and post-Heideggerian strains of contemporary anti-Kantianism that exemplify what is most objectionable about correlationism.

After Finitude is a philosophical intervention, not a historical treatise, and so to complain that its account of post-Kantian philosophy is somewhat cavalier would be to completely miss the point. Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that the book is not sufficiently attentive to the question that precipitated Critical philosophy—namely, "What is the root of the relation between representation and reality?" This inattentiveness tends to vitiate the credibility of Meillassoux' own speculative solution to the problem of ancestrality, given that the latter essentially recapitulates Kant's original question, viz., "How is mathematized natural science able to tell the truth about reality?" I now believe

that Kant's 'weak' or purely epistemic correlationism is, ironically enough, far stronger than its 'strong correlationist' successor, which presumes to be able to dispense with the problem of the 'in-itself' altogether. In this regard, Sellars' critical reconstruction of Kantianism is exemplary precisely insofar as it revises Kant's 'weak' empirical realism by according science access to noumena, while avoiding the difficulties that dog Meillassoux's own

resort to 'dianoetic intuition'.

These reservations notwithstanding, Meillassoux's speculative materialism is in no way naïve—on the contrary, it is an exemplary tour de force of critical rationality. However much one might want to take issue with their contentions, it would be absurd to accuse thinkers like Meillassoux or Iain Grant of being 'uncritical'. Perhaps those leveling the charge are hoping it will absolve them of the obligation to produce convincing rebuttals of Meillassoux's critique of fideism or of Grant's critique of practicicism. But Meillassoux and Grant have been commendably circumspect in relation to the blather surrounding 'speculative realism'. The trouble is that those who have seized upon the label to promote their own work are precisely those who have been most vocal about their antipathy to critique. Their chief inspiration is Bruno Latour (see Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?'). The brand of Latourian metaphysics advertising itself under the banner of 'speculative realism' strikes me not only as confused but as profoundly regressive. Those who, unlike Meillassoux or Grant, think they can afford to sidestep the Kantian problem of the relation between conceptualization and reality are peddling cartoon metaphysics for a philosophically benighted readership. Theirs is a 'realism' about anything and everything, as indiscriminate as it is inane. It is 'speculative' in the worst sense: arbitrary, self-indulgent, and frivolous.

contemporaries on that list?

Thanks for the questions... I'll pass on the final question—there are plenty of books I admire but none I wish I'd written. What I fervently do wish is that I'd written a better book and that the next one will be far superior.

Notes

1. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude* (2008, p.5), London: Continuum
2. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007, p.xi), NY: Palgrave Macmillan
3. Ieven, B. *Against an Aesthetic of Noise: An Interview with Ray Brassier*
Available at: <http://www.ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html>
4. Humberto Maturana & Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: the Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (1992, p. 241). Shambhala; Rev Sub edition
5. Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007, p.xi), NY: Palgrave Macmillan

Ray, thank you very much for your time. In the end, a more fun question: if you had to choose five philosophical books you wish you had written, what would they be? Any