

Reality, Contingency, Objects, and Agency:
A Žižekian Reading of the Speculative Turn

By

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Thesis presented for the degree of
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One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see.

-John, 9:25

Introduction

One of the most vivid memories from my childhood is looking at myself in the mirror and being perplexed by the thought that I am looking at me, of being aware that I am not just myself, but also an object for others. It was perplexing since it was absolutely clear that though I am an object for others, I cannot ever know what that object is. One of my biggest fantasies was to escape my body, to become an inhuman gaze, a non-active participant in the human drama. To watch the world unfold without having a stake in the outcome. But that is simply impossible, since I belong to this body, and it belongs to me.

Becoming a philosopher has shown me that this thought is perhaps not as original as I initially took it to be, and that the issue of how one can come to know the world in itself is alive and well. This is especially true in Continental philosophy, which since the turn of the century has experienced, in the words of Bryant et al., a “speculative turn”:

The first wave of twentieth century continental thought in the Anglophone world was dominated by phenomenology, with Martin Heidegger generally the most influential figure of the group. By the late 1970s, the influence of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault had started to gain the upper hand, reaching its zenith a decade or so later. It was towards the mid-1990s that Gilles Deleuze entered the ascendant, shortly before his death in November 1995, and his star remains perfectly visible today. But since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a more chaotic and in some ways more promising situation has taken shape. Various intriguing philosophical trends, their bastions scattered across the globe, have gained adherents and started to produce a critical mass of emblematic works. While it is difficult to find a single adequate name to cover all these trends, we propose ‘The Speculative Turn’, as a deliberate counterpoint to the now tiresome ‘Linguistic Turn’¹.

Philosophy under the linguistic turn,

[focused] on discourse, text, culture, consciousness, power, or ideas as what constitutes reality. But despite the vaunted anti-humanism of many of the thinkers identified with these trends, what they give us is less a critique of humanity’s place in the world, than a less sweeping critique of the self-enclosed Cartesian subject. Humanity remains at the centre of these works, and reality appears in philosophy only as the correlate of human thought. [...] In the face of the looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world (including our own bodies), it is not clear that the anti-realist position is equipped to face up to these developments. The danger is that the dominant

¹Levi Bryant et al. 2011. “Towards a Speculative Philosophy”. In: Levi Bryant et al. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re:press, p. 1.

anti-realist strain of continental philosophy has not only reached a point of decreasing returns, but that it now actively limits the capacities of philosophy in our time².

In addition to climate change and the infiltration of technology into the everyday world, we can also add quantum mechanics as a third reason for why the linguistic approach might be reaching its limit. Quantum mechanics are pushing the boundary for what our reason is able to comprehend, inviting us to accept a universe where a single particle can occupy multiple points in space simultaneously, and where quantum entanglement allows particles to share information instantly across any distance. The speculative turn applies to a new wave of philosophers who attempt to get out of this perceived deadlock of the linguistic turn and rethink reality. It is important to note that “[speculation] is not an outright rejection of these critical advances [of the linguistic turn]; instead, it comes from a recognition of their inherent limitations”³. This new philosophy is therefore deeply appreciative of its predecessors, and, as we will see, heavily indebted to them, but it sees that the time has come to go beyond their masters. The slogan of the day is: it is time to get real.

When philosophers talk about realism what they usually have in mind is *naïve* realism. Graham Harman⁴ defines naïve realism as the view that “reality exists outside the mind and we can know it”⁵. Naïve realism is therefore a double assertion, first the ontological thesis that there is in fact a world outside the mind, and second the epistemological thesis that we can know it. The naivety of naïve realism is its reliance on a direct relationship between world and thought, as if thought was a perfect mirror of the world. Continental philosophy has, since Kant, been anti-realist in the sense that it has denied this unmediated relationship between thought and world. The world, it is said, can only appear to us within a transcendental framework, a set of a priori categories that determine the way the world appears. This means that there is no guarantee that what we experience is actually correlated with the world as it is in-itself. However, this is not the primary crux of continental anti-realism, it is rather the fact that, as Heidegger made explicit, the very realist/anti-realist distinction only makes sense insofar as it is posited within a transcendental framework (i.e. ‘world’). The following quote from *Being and Time* makes the point succinctly: “‘Consciousness of Reality’ is itself a way of Being-in-the-world. Every ‘problematic of the external world’ comes back necessarily to

² Ibid., p. 2-3.

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ See below.

⁵ Graham Harman. 2016. *Immaterialism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 17.

this basic existential phenomenon”⁶. Bryant et al argues that “from this [...] there results a subtle form of idealism that is nonetheless almost ubiquitous”⁷, since it does not explicitly deny that there is a world-in-itself beyond appearance, yet it cannot consistently hold that there is. The problem for a continental realism is how to overcome this mediation, to circumvent the for-us so as to get to the in-itself. To do that, one has to radically rethink the nature of being and knowledge and their relationship.

What follows is an investigation and discussion of three approaches to realism in contemporary continental philosophy. There are four chapters, the first three exploring a single philosopher or movement. These chapters function as a set-up for the last chapter, which consists of a deeper reading of the speculative turn based on the thought of Slavoj Žižek. Accordingly, each of the three chapters will consist of a presentation of the philosopher and his or her (or their) thought, and conclude by identifying the central problem that drives their thought, that is, what do these philosophers consider their ultimate *raison d’être*. In the last chapter these problems will be revisited, and re-read from the standpoint of the Žižekian reading of the speculative turn.

The first chapter is on Quentin Meillassoux, a student of Alain Badiou whose 2006 book *Après la Finitude* (translated into English in 2008 by Ray Brassier) has been widely influential in the new speculative movement. In it he argues that all philosophy since Kant has been a variation on “correlationism”, “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”⁸. Correlationism is essentially the outcome of Kant’s Copernican revolution, of which the result was that “it is no longer the mind that conforms to objects, but rather objects that conform to the mind”⁹. Kant was able to account for the necessary conditions of knowledge, but at the cost of a “renunciation of any knowledge beyond how things appear to us”¹⁰. As such, correlationism is Meillassoux’s word for the transcendental limit to human thought, of the assertion of the finitude of human reason, its inability to know the in-itself. The linguistic turn is for Meillassoux therefore the logical outcome of correlationism, since the only meaningful question to be asked after Kant is: “who has grasped the more originary correlation: is it the thinker of the subject-object correlation, the noetico-noematic correlation,

⁶ Martin Heidegger. 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated by Macquarrie, J. & Robinson E. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, p. 246. Emphasis in original.

⁷ Bryant et al., 2011, p. 4.

⁸ Quentin Meillassoux. 2008. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Translated by Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, p. 13.

⁹ Bryant et al., 2011, p. 4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

or the language-referent correlation...¹¹. Because questions about what is beyond appearances are meaningless, philosophy becomes a game of coming up with the best explanation for why such questions are meaningless. Against correlationism, and against Kant, Meillassoux attempts to articulate a *speculative realism* that opens up the possibility for thought to think and know the in-itself.

His main complaint about correlationism is its failure to account for the “arche-fossil”, which in contrast to the regular notion of fossil as an indication of past life refers to “materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life”¹². This distinction is important because an arche-fossil is evidence that there is being beyond appearances, or rather, that being at a certain point in time was not correlated to thought. An ancestral statement is any scientific proposition that refers to an arche-fossil, such as statements about the Big Bang or the accretion of the earth. Correlationism is unable to adequately account for arche-fossils, since for correlationism an arche-fossil cannot be anything but a thing-for-us (it is the-world-before-correlation/appearance-for-us), which is contradictory since the arche-fossil, by definition, preceded transcendental correlation. Meillassoux does not think that a return to naïve realism is viable, since correlationism effectively refutes it. Instead, Meillassoux attempts to turn correlationism against itself, by arguing that the finitude which is at the basis of correlationism is itself a way of coming to know the world in-itself. Finitude, Meillassoux argues, “will be revealed to be a knowledge of the absolute [/the in-itself] because we are going to put back into the thing itself what we mistakenly took to be an incapacity in thought”¹³, that is, the very limit to our knowing the in-itself will be shown to be a positive fact about reality. The principle underlying this knowledge is *the principle of factuality*, which states that “only the contingency of what is, is not itself contingent”¹⁴. This principle, Meillassoux argues, can be shown to be true independently of our thinking it, i.e. it pertains to the world-in-itself, not merely for-us. Having established this principle, Meillassoux thinks that it is possible to develop a ‘mathematized science’ built on this principle, thus making mathematics the mode of access to the in-itself.

The central problem that Meillassoux outlines is what has become the central problem for a lot of philosophers who associate with the speculative turn, namely that of overcoming correlationism. For Meillassoux this problem comes in the form of an ultimatum: either

¹¹ Meillassoux, 2008, p. 15.

¹² Ibid., p. 22.

¹³ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 130.

thought can think the in-itself, or we remain within correlationism. The stakes of this problem is made clear by Meillassoux, and concerns the foundations of science itself. As long as we remain within correlationism, science will be deficient with regard to its truth-claims. Since this situation is unbearable for Meillassoux, he takes it upon himself to articulate the conditions for the possibility of meaningful discourse about the in-itself.

The second chapter brings us to Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and its lead figure Graham Harman. Object-oriented philosophy is a term coined by Harman¹⁵ referring to philosophical approaches that emphasize the independent reality of all objects. A disclaimer is on order at this point with regard to what OOO means by the term object. Usually it refers to concrete things, but for OOO it includes non-concrete things like thoughts or ideas, and also things like events, relations, properties, and quite literally anything that can be thought of as independent from other things¹⁶. Though Harman began publishing before Meillassoux, his philosophy did not really begin to gain traction until after the release of *After Finitude* and Harman's appearance alongside Meillassoux at a 2007 conference at Goldsmith's College, London, on the topic of speculative realism. Since then, OOO has established itself as one of the major schools of thought to come out of the recent speculative turn. Harman agrees with Meillassoux's assertion that post-Kantian philosophy has been under the sway of correlationism, and echoes his call for a return to things-in-themselves. However, he disagrees that inventing new epistemologies is able to fulfil this promise; on the contrary, he sees epistemology as the very obstacle itself. Harman argues that objects, which can be literally anything, cannot be reduced to knowledge about that object. "Things are simply not convertible into knowledge, or into any sort of access through our "practices," without significant transformation"¹⁷. He distinguishes three fundamental forms of knowing, overmining, undermining and duominig (a combination of over- and undermining). Undermining an object is to "explain it in terms of its smaller constituents, by way of a downward reduction"¹⁸, a method typical for the natural sciences, while overmining "tells us that the object is nothing but a bundle of qualities [or] that the object is nothing but its

¹⁵ Graham Harman. 2002. *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing.

¹⁶ In studying Harman I have only encountered one example of a thing he is not willing to call an object and that is mathematical entities. On their objecthood he remains agnostic. (He says this in a response to a question in a conversation with Jeffrey Kipnis. The conversation is on YouTube under the title 'Jeffrey Kipnis & Graham Harman On Enchantment (April 12, 2017)'. Harman makes his comment around the 55:10 mark).

¹⁷ Harman, 2016, p. 29.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

relations of discernible actions”¹⁹, which is more typical for the social sciences. Duomining is a combination of the two, and a prime example is Parmenides who proclaimed “a double cosmos with a single unified being on one side and a truthless play of opinion and appearance on the other”²⁰. What happens in all these instances is that the thing itself is lost, since we are either talking about its parts or effects (or both). For this reason, Harman has no problem with Kant’s thing-in-itself since the thing-in-itself is precisely what resists this upward or downward (or bothward) reductions. Harman does however disagree with Kant’s premium on the specifically *human* relation between things-in-themselves and appearances,

The real problem with Kant is not his introduction of the things-in-themselves, but his notion that the tragic burden of finitude is shouldered by a single species of object. What Kant failed to note is that since any relation fails to exhaust its *relata*, every inanimate object is a thing-in-itself for every other as well²¹.

Our failure to adequately paraphrase objects into knowledge points to a deeper failure of any object to exhaust the qualities of any other object, that is, every object is a thing-in-itself for every other. The world is littered with these objects that fail to exhaust each other, and the philosophical task is to expose the inconsistencies of all theories that claim to know them, thus “the philosophical foundations of any theory cannot be a form of knowledge but must be a subtler, more indirect way of addressing the world”²².

Timothy Morton, one of Harman’s more well-known followers and a distinguished philosopher in his own right, attempts to do just that by articulating a theory of causality as an *aesthetic* feature of objects, i.e. that causality has to do with the appearances of objects, not their intrinsic being²³. Causality cannot be a matter of one object, the cause, relating to another object, the effect, since an object cannot interact directly with another because there is always a part of the object that resists such interaction. “Since objects are prior to any relation, and since causality (including time and space) is just a series of relations between things, causality must be ontologically “in front” of objects”²⁴. Because objects cannot relate to each other directly, causality becomes a matter of one object “interpreting” another, or in

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

²¹ Ibid., p. 29. Emphasis in original.

²² Ibid., p. 13.

²³ This is an elaboration of Harman’s theory of *vicarious causation*, see Harman, “On Vicarious Causation”. In: Robin McKay (ed.), *Collapse Volume II*, Falmouth: Urbanomic, pp. 187-221.

²⁴ Timothy Morton. 2012. “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry”. In: *New Literary History*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Spring 2012, p. 206.

Morton's words, of *translating*²⁵ one object in terms of another. Translating, however, is not an exact science and can be superseded by better translations, meaning that causality begins to look more like poetry or art, which is also best understood through (good and bad) metaphor(s)²⁶ that are constantly up for revision. What is important for Harman, Morton, and OOO is not that causality is shown to be a real occurrence between two real objects, but to explain how a universe wherein objects never come into direct contact can nevertheless exhibit those features of the world that are constitutive of our experience, i.e. causality and change.

What drives OOO is the problem of relationality, or more specifically, how relations can occur between what are initially unrelated entities. This problem has, according to OOO, been glossed over in modern western philosophy, but is in their philosophy re-actualized and given a possible resolution.

In the third chapter we turn to the movement calling itself New Materialism. The movement, which has its own website²⁷, is a loose collective of philosophers, media scholars, social scientists, and researchers, spread across the world, who, in Rosa Braidotti's words, attempt to "[rethink] the embodied structure of human subjectivity after Foucault"²⁸. Out of the philosophical approaches discussed in this essay, New Materialism is the one whose form is closest to that of their predecessors of the linguistic turn. New Materialism sees itself as a materialist response to what we somewhat broadly might call *poststructuralism*, which here would include figures like Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Butler, i.e. philosophers that are representative of the linguistic turn. On the one hand New Materialism affirms the poststructuralist critique of representationalism, the belief in "the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing"²⁹. Poststructuralists argued that representations come to be through cultural or, more generally, human production, meaning they did not apply to an independent reality as such. On the other hand, New

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Think about the vulgarity of trying to understand a poem merely by describing its properties, like the amount of words or its rhyme scheme. Even a bad interpretation of a poem is more interesting than such a listing of its features.

²⁷ <http://newmaterialism.eu/>

²⁸ Rosa Braidotti. 2000. "Teratologies". In: Buchanan & Colebrook (eds.), *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p. 158. Quoted in Rick Dolphijn & Iris van der Tuin. 2012. *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. Ann Arbor: Open Universities Press, p. 96.

²⁹ Karen Barad. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 46.

Materialism is critical towards the poststructuralist tendency to subsume everything under the rubric of cultural production. “[It] boils down to”, Dolphijn and van der Tuin explain, “matter *immanently escaping* every possible representation in the modernist, scientific meaning as well as in the postmodernist, social or semiotic constructivist sense of the term according to which representation is not the scientific “mirror of nature” but rather the equally representationalist “mirror of culture”³⁰. In other words, to think reality one must think the ability of matter to escape not just scientific representation, but also cultural representation, since matter in both cases is excess which cannot be properly represented by either. For New Materialism, this means that matter must be rethought as a dynamic becoming which is productive of reality as well as of human subjectivity.

Karen Barad, who will be the main focus of this chapter, attempts such a rethinking in her theory of *agential realism*. By combining Niels Bohr’s interpretation of quantum mechanics with a materialist reading of poststructuralism, she will argue that “the primary ontological unit is not independent objects with independently determinate boundaries and properties but rather what [Niels] Bohr terms “phenomena””³¹. A phenomena, rather than referring an individual entity, refers to the “ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components”³², meaning that the reality is not primarily made up of individual entities, but that individual, differentiated entities only come to be through the intra-action (Barad’s materialist alternative to performativity) that occurs within the phenomena. Phenomena ultimately coincide with matter as such, or rather, “”matter” refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization”³³. Such a view of matter sees matter as inherently agential, as capable of having agency. This does not necessarily mean that matter has intentions wishes, but signals a move away from matter as a kind of being (particles in the void) to matter as a kind of *doing*.

Barad relies heavily on the insights of Niels Bohr in the field of quantum mechanics, where he argues that there is a fundamental *indeterminacy* when it comes to quantum phenomena, indeterminacies that only become determinate with the help of an apparatus. The apparatus, Barad argues, can be seen as any *material-discursive practice* that “constrains and enables what can be said”³⁴. Importantly for Barad, a material-discursive practice is not necessarily human or linguistic in nature. Rather, any “actual physical arrangement” can

³⁰ Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 107. Emphasis in original.

³¹ Barad, 2007, p. 33.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 151. Emphasis in original removed.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

constrain and enable in this way, thereby going beyond “what is usually meant by the frequently heard contemporary refrain that writing and talking are material practices”³⁵. This means that every determinate being is a part of the ongoing materialization of the world, thus blurring the lines between knowing, acting, and being. Barad therefore conceives of agential realism as an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology*, “an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being”³⁶.

The main problem that drives Barad’s thought is the Bohrian insight that concepts are embodied in the (scientific) apparatus. In Barad’s interpretation this means that all concepts, all knowledge, is rooted in apparatuses, or more generally, material-discursive practices. The problem is thus how reality must be for knowledge to be embedded in it, and her answer is that in the absence of embedded concepts, i.e. a material-discursive practice, the world is just indeterminate. It is neither this nor that, and at the same time both. It is therefore not so much that concepts are embedded in reality, but that there is no reality without embedded concepts.

I choose to take Barad as representative of New Materialism, although there are other figures one could have chosen as well, such as Jane Bennett, Manuel DeLanda, or the aforementioned Rosa Braidotti. The main reason for choosing Barad is that she is one of the major New Materialist philosophers, and is frequently cited by contemporaries. She is an excellent example of a thinker who not only uses New Materialism as an approach to critique, but also one who tries to develop a systematic theory from the ground up. Another reason for choosing Barad is because engaging with New Materialism as a whole, or picking out a portion of New Materialists, would quickly become a comparative investigation, one trying to make out the differences between these thinkers. From the standpoint of this paper, which wants to survey different versions of contemporary realism, we are not to be bothered by such minutiae. In any case, there are more points of overlap between these philosophers than there are differences, and these differences are mainly the result of an emphasis on a particular aspect of New Materialism, be it neo-vitalism à la Bennett, assemblage theory à la Delanda or posthuman embodiment à la Braidotti.

The fourth chapter will bring us to a crescendo, where the individuality of these three philosophers will be put aside so that a deeper understanding about what they have in common can be reached. The way in which this will be done is inspired by the works of Slavoj Žižek, focusing on the way in which he reads the nature of historical change. The historical change is in this case of course the speculative turn, and the three philosophers

³⁵ Ibid., p. 147.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 185.

discussed are its vanguard. The key concept in a Žižekian reading is the *vanishing mediator*, a Hegelian term which in Žižek's parlance refers to a phenomenon (e.g. a thinker, a philosophical work, an idea) which is "a necessary moment in the emergence of a new form" but whose "role becomes invisible once the New has arrived"³⁷. In Freudian terms, what we are seeking is the *repressed content* of the speculative turn, the idea or notion that must remain unconscious/unstated if the speculative turn is to maintain its internal coherence. The chapter begins by scrutinizing Meillassoux's attempt at overcoming correlationism, arguing that while his critique of correlationism is correct, he fails to take note of its most crucial aspect. This aspect is precisely the genesis of the correlation itself, of how something like a correlation between thinking and being can come to be from inert reality. More specifically it concerns subjectivity as such, of how the subject fit into reality. Meillassoux is overly focused on how we, within the correlation, can think the in-itself, but the status of the correlation itself is never problematized. It will then be shown that Meillassoux's philosophy do not have the resources to address this problem properly, the first indication that something is wrong with the speculative turn. We then move on to OOO and Barad to see if their philosophies are able to address this problem, which will we shown to be equally dissatisfactory. The reason for this is that even though OOO and Barad conceive of subjectivity differently from Meillassoux, they still agree on a basic premise: either subjectivity can be reduced to matter (in Meillassoux's case, mathematics) or subjectivity must be a part of objective reality. This, precisely, is the vanishing mediator of the speculative turn, the belief that subjectivity cannot be an emergence from matter, but must either be reducible to it or else a part of materiality/the world as such.

In the second part of this chapter an attempt will be made to turn the speculative turn, represented by Meillassoux, OOO, and Barad, into a vanishing mediator itself. Though this goes beyond what initially was named a Žižekian reading, it should rather be seen as a continuation of it. Having uncovered the vanishing mediator of the speculative turn, it is possible to return to what is identified in the foregoing chapters as the central question driving their thought and re-interpret them in light of this new discovery. If progress is to be made in the field of realism, then, as with any field of inquiry, one must take note of all possible alternatives, and instead of dismissing them outright one must again look for their inconsistencies and unstated premises. Reading these philosophers after coming to be aware of their vanishing mediator will precisely open up new possibilities of inquiry, and what may

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek. 2014. *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso, p. 188.

seem like problems can turn into solutions, and vice versa. No definite claims will be made in this part of the chapter, rather the focus is on showing that there are lines of inquiry that open up once the assumptions of the speculative turn are uncovered, lines of inquiry that are unthinkable insofar as one remains within the current speculative paradigm.

In this paper there is an overlap between the thesis and the form of the paper itself. The thesis is very simply that in order to successfully complete the speculative turn, one must first pass through all its individual moments. Obviously going through all its moments would be an immense task, so in this case we limit ourselves to three of its most notable examples. By juxtaposing these philosophers in the first three chapters, we formally “pass through” its moments and begin to get a glimpse of what might be the assumption that keeps them together. In the fourth chapter this assumption is asserted, and then the procedure is repeated, only now it is not the philosophies as such that are juxtaposed, but the form the unstated assumption assumes in each of them. By repeating this manoeuvre the possibility of other theories begin to emerge, theories that do not just negate and destroy, but theories that actively take into consideration what other philosophies have to say about the matter. The proper formulation for the thesis of this paper is that with regard to realism, we are confronted with a certain paradox. The attempts at articulating a consistent realism encountered in this paper are flawed, yet, as flaws, they are the very conditions for articulating a better theory of realism. One has to enter into a friendly dialogue with one’s contemporaries in order to at some point become hostile to them (in a philosophical sense, obviously). For this reason, the conclusion of this thesis will be of the type that says, “everybody is somewhat right, and everybody is somewhat wrong”, but which nonetheless does not affirm relativism. There is truth to be sure, but that truth is illusive to the point that one has to indulge in untruth in order to get a sense of it.

Part One: The Case

Chapter 1: Quentin Meillassoux, Correlationism, and Contingency

Quentin Meillassoux emerged as the leading figure of the Speculative Realist movement in the mid-2000's with the release of his debut book *After Finitude*³⁸. In it he provides one of the most substantial critiques of post-Kantian philosophy, arguing that Kant's "Copernican revolution", which aimed to do for philosophy what Newtonian mathematics had done for the sciences, i.e. giving it a basis in absolute truth, was a failure and instead resulted in a "Ptolemaic counter-revolution". The name Meillassoux gives to this counter-revolution is *correlationism*, which since then has become a key term in the speculative turn.

Correlationism refers to the idea "according to which we only ever have access to the correlation of thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from each other"³⁹. For correlationism it is impossible to think or know the in-itself, since thought can only access being insofar as it is for-us. Meillassoux traces the history of correlationist thought from Kant, whom he calls a 'weak correlationist', to Heidegger, who for Meillassoux is an arche-typical 'strong correlationist', the difference being that Kant maintained that even though we could not know the in-itself, we could think it, while Heidegger and strong correlationism maintains that the in-itself is both unknowable and unthinkable. The difference between weak and strong correlationism is nonetheless minor, and they are both equally unable to account for Meillassoux's *arche-fossil*. An arche-fossil is any being or event that preceded human thought, i.e. a being or event that existed in a time antecedent to correlation (like the Big Bang or the accretion of the earth). For correlationism the arche-fossil is a contradiction, since being is always correlated to thought, yet science tells us that these are indeed objects and events that could not possibly be correlated with thought. Correlationism has, according to Meillassoux, been a deterrent against all attempts to think the Absolute, i.e. the world in-itself, and Meillassoux sets for himself the goal of trying to overcome the circularity of correlationism in an attempt to reach the Absolute. The 'after' in *After Finitude* refers to the way in which he will attempt to reach the Absolute not by overcoming correlationism by way of postulating a necessary being, but by showing that correlationism has within it the very solution to its own overcoming. Correlationism, Meillassoux argues, can only sustain itself by absolutizing the facticity of the correlation, that is, by turning the fact that we cannot discover an ultimate reason for why being appears in this or that way into a

³⁸ Meillassoux, 2008.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

fact about the in-itself. This leads Meillassoux to articulate the *principle of factuality*, which states that only the contingency of any and every entity is necessary. This new Absolute is not an absolute entity or being, but a principle that holds for all existing entities. It is from this principle Meillassoux maintains that it is possible to derive the condition of possibility for the absolute scope of (Copernico-Galilean mathematized) science. This remains a possibility in *After Finitude*, as Meillassoux does not follow through on that project. He concludes by arguing that he has demonstrated the ability of thought to think the in-itself, and thus that a demonstration of mathematics providing access to the in-itself is possible.

Correlationism and the arche-fossil

The Copernico-Galilean revolution in science is according to Meillassoux the first attempt to establish the conditions for thinking the world the world in-itself. The Copernico-Galilean revolution “institutes the idea of a mathematical knowledge of nature – a nature that is henceforth stripped of its sensible qualities”⁴⁰. Descartes gave this revolution its legitimacy through his “rigorous distinction between the mathematical knowledge of nature and the knowledge of those *qualia* that are considered to be attributes to of thinking alone”⁴¹. However, Descartes’ attempt to secure absolute knowledge of the world was thwarted by his insistence upon the demonstration of a perfect being, God, who assured that we were not being deceived. When Hume came along, the Copernico-Galilean revolution reached a second stage. The scientific revolution that began with Copernicus was not only about mathematizing the world, it also became a program of destroying “every form of *a priori* knowledge of why the world is as it is”⁴², i.e. metaphysics. Hume famously argued that there is no a priori guarantee that our experience of past events is any indication of how things will unfold in the future, and that habit is the only thing that links the past to the present. Positing a deeper necessity to the world is not warranted by reason, since it can only synthesize the impressions it gets from experience. Kant was the nail in the coffin for metaphysical speculation by “turning correlational knowledge into the only philosophically legitimate form of knowledge”⁴³, in other words, the a priori could only tell us about the universal conditions for

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

⁴¹ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁴² Ibid., p. 202.

⁴³ Ibid.

experience. Claims about the nature of reality independent of experience turned into nonsensical metaphysical speculation that went beyond the bounds of reason. The ‘Kantian catastrophe’, according to Meillassoux, is the tendency of modern philosophy to read the Kantian end of metaphysics as “an irrefutable inference from the end of metaphysics to the end of absolutes”⁴⁴. In other words, by renouncing every form of Absolute, the absolute scope of mathematics had to be renounced as well. For this reason he renames Kant’s Copernican revolution a Ptolemaic counter-revolution, since rather than opening up the possibility for thought to dissociate from the object (the sun is out there and we revolve around it), the object became what it was only in its relation to thought (the sun revolves around the transcendental ego). However, the idea that thought cannot think any absolute being does not mean that it cannot think any absolutes at all.

Certainly the [capacity of science] to undermine all previous forms of knowledge enjoined us to stop believing that knowledge could demonstrate that a determinate reality must, absolutely and necessarily, be the way it is rather than some other way; but it also enjoined us to think that other mode of absoluteness that it had introduced for the first time into thought, in the form of the latter’s Copernican decentering⁴⁵.

This Absolute, the ‘Copernican de-centring’, refers to the idea of mathematics as a way to think the unthought, to think the world stripped of its sensible qualities. Meillassoux’s task is to stay faithful to the scientific de-centring of thought, without resorting to metaphysical necessity, i.e. without postulating an absolute entity at the root of being. In this sense, Meillassoux sees himself as the fourth stage of the Copernico-Galilean revolution, the one that completes the de-centring of thought and establishes, finally, the conditions for the absolute scope of mathematized science.

While Meillassoux may seem overly dismissive of Kant, he does recognize the greatness of his thought. In particular, he sees correlationism as the vital anti-metaphysical import of transcendental idealism. The core of Kant’s correlationism is found in his rejection of Descartes’ ontological proof for God, which essentially states that a non-existent God is contradictory. To defeat Descartes’ proof, Kant argued that ‘existence’ is not a predicate that can be deduced from the concept of a thing, since contradiction can obtain only “between an *already existing* entity and one of its predicates”⁴⁶. Though one might argue that a perfect

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 203.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 203-4.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 55. Emphasis added.

being should have existence, conceiving such a being does not imply its existence. Meillassoux praises Kant's refutation of the ontological argument as a refutation of all proofs that would presume to demonstrate "the absolute necessity of a determinate entity"⁴⁷. Another name for this is 'real necessity', the "ontological register of necessity which states that such and such an entity necessarily exists"⁴⁸, be it natural laws, a perfect God or the train of History. Meillassoux ties the belief in a necessary being to the principle of sufficient reason, according to which "for every thing, every fact, and every occurrence, there must be a reason why it is thus and so rather than otherwise"⁴⁹. Adopting the principle of sufficient reason necessitates that not only the reason for this or that thing be uncovered, but also that the reason for the totality of being is uncovered. "If thought is to avoid an infinite regress while submitting to the principle of [sufficient] reason, it is incumbent upon it to uncover a reason that would prove capable of accounting for everything, including itself"⁵⁰, i.e. an absolutely necessary being. Rejecting metaphysical reason, which postulates a necessary entity, means rejecting the principle of sufficient reason. The rejection of the principle of sufficient reason latent in Kant's thinking is what fuels Meillassoux's thought, and opens up the path for Meillassoux's truly *speculative* alternative to metaphysical reason. A speculative philosophy is any philosophy that claims to be able to access the Absolute, yet the rejection of the principle of sufficient reason means that this Absolute cannot be a determinate entity, a being. Meillassoux's task is therefore to "think an absolute necessity without thinking anything that is absolutely necessary"⁵¹, in other words, to think necessity in the absence of the principle of sufficient reason.

Before Meillassoux can arrive at this new Absolute he has to go through the most radical articulation of the Kantian 'de-absolutization' of thought, *strong correlationism*. Strong correlationism is a response to Kant's *weak correlationism*. The general thesis of all correlationism is that thinking and being can never be thought apart from each other, i.e. being is always being for-us and thought is always directed at being(s). Being-in-itself, the Absolute, is impossible for thought to reach, since thought is limited by the finitude of its being. Kant, however, maintained that even though it is impossible to know the in-itself, we can think the in-itself since we can know a priori that the in-itself is non-contradictory. It was because of this concession to the in-itself that Kant had to refute Descartes' ontological proof,

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 56-57.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 57.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 58.

since if Descartes was able to prove that the non-existence of God is non-contradictory, we would have absolute knowledge that God does in fact exist. Strong correlationism disputes the notion that non-contradiction can be proved a priori. “By what miraculous operation”, the strong correlationist asks, “is Kantian thought able to get out of itself in order to verify that what is unthinkable for us is impossible in itself”⁵², in other words, how does Kant know that that non-contradiction as a principle of a priori reason extends to the world in-itself?

Kant believes that we are not making a cognitive claim about the thing-in-itself when we submit it to the principle of non-contradiction [...] but on the contrary, it seems presumptuous to believe that one is capable of penetrating so deeply into the in-itself that one is able to *know* that God’s omnipotence could not extend as far as logical inconsistency⁵³.

Strong correlationism does not assert that the universe is filled with contradictions, rather, it asserts the inability of a priori reason to refute the possibility. Strong correlationism upholds the fundamental unsurpassability of the correlation, of the impossibility of stepping over its bounds. It does not claim to know the Absolute, the in-itself, what it knows is that it does not know the in-itself, that is, it is equally ignorant of all the possible ways the world could be in-itself.

The claim that strong correlationism responded to Kant has to be modified, since there is an important step in between that laid the basis for strong correlationism. Philosophers after Kant were, similarly to strong correlationism, distrustful of Kant’s claim that we could think the in-itself even though we couldn’t know it. Since being was always correlated with a mind, the very thinking about the in-itself turned it into a thing-for-us. One option that presented itself was that of absolutizing the correlation, thus getting rid of the in-itself all together. Meillassoux’s main example of this strategy is Hegel, who hypostasized Mind (or Reason) as the ever-present subject of the correlation. According to Hegel it is possible to deduce the a priori form of knowledge, in other words, the necessity of the correlation can be logically demonstrated. Kant never attempted this path since for him the a priori form of knowledge “constitute a ‘primary fact’ which is only susceptible to description, and not to deduction”⁵⁴. Strong correlationism follows Kant in this respect, but goes a crucial step further: “Like Kantianism, strong correlationism insists upon the facticity of these forms, but differs from

⁵² Ibid., p. 60.

⁵³ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

the former by extending this facticity to logical form as well”⁵⁵. In other words, the deduction of the absoluteness of the correlation is invalid since logical form is itself just a part of the facticity of correlation. “Consequently, there is no sense in claiming to know that contradiction is absolutely impossible, for the only thing that is given to us is the fact that we cannot think anything that is self-contradictory”⁵⁶. Heidegger, for Meillassoux the archetypical strong correlationist in the continental tradition⁵⁷, is emblematic of this approach, arguing that the question of the meaning of Being can only be answered by doing an existential analytic of Dasein, i.e. describing how the a priori structure of thought makes, among other things, logical reasoning possible. Facticity, the fact that we are ‘thrown’ into the world, is the unsurpassable limit of thought,

The fact that beings are, or the fact that there is a logical world, is precisely what cannot be encompassed by the sovereignty of logic and metaphysical reason, and this because of the facticity of the ‘there is’; a facticity which can certainly be thought [...] but thought solely on account of our inability to gain access to the absolute ground of what is. I cannot think the unthinkable, but I can think that it is not impossible for the impossible to be⁵⁸.

Against the Hegelian absolutization of the correlation, the strong correlationist re-affirms the Kantian facticity of the correlation, the ‘thereness’ of the world, a thereness which cannot be objectified by the subject of that world.

This brings us to Meillassoux’s principal argument against correlationism: the arche-fossil. An arche-fossil is any material “indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life [or more specifically, to the correlation between thought and being]”⁵⁹, e.g. a radioactive isotope whose half-life extends further into the past than human life or evidence of the Big Bang occurring 13.7 billions years ago. Meillassoux’s point in bringing up the arche-fossil is to expose the idealism at the root of correlationism. Recall that for correlationism, in particular strong correlationism, the facticity of the correlation is what is primarily given, i.e. the fact that there is a world. This means that an object, like a radioactive isotope, presents itself first as a fact of the world, within which it is posited to have existed in the ancestral past. To make the problem clear, let us first note how the Hegelian absolutizing approach would understand the arche-fossil. According to it, “the

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Wittgenstein being Heidegger’s analytical counter-part, see Meillassoux, 2008, pp. 70-71.

⁵⁸ Meillassoux, 2008, p. 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 22

ancestral statement presents no particular difficulty: the metaphysician who upholds the eternal correlate can point to the existence of an ‘ancestral witness’, an attentive God [or Mind or reason], who turns every event into a phenomenon”⁶⁰, in other words, s/he would claim that since the correlation is absolute there can be no antecedence to the correlation. The strong correlationist however does not have this option, since the only fact about correlation is its facticity, its thereness, and all claims of its absoluteness goes beyond what can be meaningfully claimed about it. The arche-fossil nonetheless contradicts correlationism by indicating a past in which there could not have been correlation, since it points to a past where no humans (i.e., no thought) were present. An arche-fossil becomes a thing-that-happened-in-the-past-for-us. From the standpoint of strong correlationism there cannot be arche-fossils since being is always correlated with thought, which means that an ancestral past, a past that is un-correlated with thought, is impossible to think within correlationism. Therefore, ancestral statements, such as “the Big Bang was an event that took place 13.7 billion years ago” cannot be understood in the literal sense since “the referent cannot possibly have actually existed in the way this truth describes it”⁶¹. The literal meaning of the statement must be supplanted by a secondary statement, which notes that the truth of the former only holds insofar as it is construed as true for-us, i.e. within the parameters of the correlation. This leads to what Bryant et al. referred to as the “subtle idealism” of correlationist thought, since it does not explicitly deny that there is a world beyond the correlation, but that “knowledge of a reality independent of thought is untenable”⁶², or rather, unthinkable.

Meillassoux goes further than Bryant et al.’s description, and argues that correlationism is essentially a sophisticated version of Berkeley’s idealism. Berkeley famously argued that ‘*esse est percipi*’, that to be is to be perceived. Where correlationism differs, according to Meillassoux, is that it substitutes subjective perception for inter-subjective thought. Berkeley’s response to the arche-fossil is that there is an omnipresent God that perceives everything at all times, guaranteeing the independence of the arche-fossil from any particular perceptions from humans or other perceiving beings. Correlationism however cannot postulate a God without contradicting its own premises, since it cannot claim the existence of an absolute entity. Meillassoux considers two ways for the correlationist to respond to his charge of idealism. First the correlationist can argue that the temporal distance invoked by the arche-fossil is analogous to anything that is spatially distant to us, since “in

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶² Bryant et al, 2011, p. 4.

both cases, what we are dealing with are events devoid of possible witnesses (or at least of terrestrial ones)⁶³. Spatial distance is a vague concept, since there is no inherent criterion that would settle where “the proximate” or “the recent” end, and where the “distant” or the “ancestral” begin [...] Thus, for example, craters observed on the moon are actually ‘closer’ to us, from the viewpoint of the argument under consideration, than a vase falling in a country house when there is nobody there⁶⁴. Therefore, the correlationist argues, the argument from the arche-fossil against correlationism fails, since it incorrectly assumes that there not being a witness to an event is an unusual situation. The point is precisely that since temporal distance is analogous to spatial distance, this “problem” presents itself all the time. The backside of this object I am holding in front of me is equally ‘distant’ to my thought as an event that happened several billion years ago. The simple way to solve this is by introducing a counterfactual, “*had there been a witness*, then this occurrence would have been perceived in such and such a fashion⁶⁵. Meillassoux’s rejoinder is to argue that this objection fails to appreciate the difference between ancestrality and spatial/temporal distance. The ancestral “does *not* designate an ancient event – it designates an event *anterior* to terrestrial life and hence *anterior to givenness itself*”⁶⁶. It indicates a time in which there could not have been a witness, since the event occurred before there was any givenness. The correlationist counterfactual simply does not work in this case, because it assumes that it was anything to witness. If we want to make a spatial metaphor for anteriority we should not think of an entity that is far away like stars or nebulae, a better metaphor is what in special relativity would be an occurrence outside the light cone of a frame of reference. In this case, what happens outside the light cone is not merely distant from us, it is absolute unreachable (unless one has infinite energy and can escape the light cone). In this case, it is not enough to say that an occurrence outside the light-cone is unwitnessed, rather, what is outside the light cone is by definition unwitnessable, since having a witness presupposes that the occurrence happens within the light cone of the witness. In any case, the point is that ancestrality does not refer to a now-point which is an x number of now-points from the present, rather, it refers to a time where there were no present at all, insofar as a present requires there to be a ‘witness’ for-whom it is present. Ancestrality “poses a challenge to correlationism which is of an entirely different order than that of the unperceived, viz., *how to conceive of a time in which the given*

⁶³ Meillassoux, 2008, p. 35.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 36. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

*as such passes from non-being into being*⁶⁷. To conceive this time, one cannot use a counterfactual to think how it could have been given, since that would be a contradiction in terms. Thus, insofar as correlationism is unable to think the world without givenness, without the world being correlated with thought, it cannot think the arche-fossil.

The second objection Meillassoux considers concerns the status of the subject of the correlation itself. The correlationist argues that Meillassoux's charge of idealism "evinces an elementary confusion between the empirical and the transcendental level of the problem under consideration"⁶⁸. The empirical problem is understanding what causes an entity to come into being, say, an arche-fossil. The transcendental problem is to determine how "*the science of this physical emergence [...] is possible*"⁶⁹. For the correlationist these levels are related, yet distinct, and the charge is that Meillassoux conflating the two. Meillassoux proceeds as if "the transcendental subject [...] was of the same nature as the physical organ which supports it", which is indefensible because whereas "the conscious organ *exists*" [...] the transcendental subject *simply cannot be said to exist*"⁷⁰, at least not in the same manner as the organ that supports it. The transcendental subject is not a thing, but a set of conditions which makes empirical knowledge possible. Thus, "to inscribe these conditions in time is to turn them into objects and hence to anthropologize them"⁷¹, i.e. it takes what is just a condition for knowledge into an object *for* knowledge, which is simply meaningless. This is, according to Meillassoux, the "classic defence" of transcendental idealism. "The core of such a rejoinder consists in immunizing the conditions of knowledge from any discourse bearing on the objects of science"⁷², however, it is not clear that it works in the present case. Even though the transcendental subject is not an object, transcendental subjectivity has to exist, even if in a minimal sense. This means, moreover, that we can meaningfully ask the question about what conditions must be met in order for there to be a transcendental subject, the simplest of which is that "such a subject *takes place*"⁷³. By taking place, Meillassoux means that transcendental subjectivity is situated in the world, or rather, at the very heart of it, from which it has access to a finite part of it. If, however, "the transcendental subject is localized among the finite objects of its world in this way, this mean that *it remains indissociable from its incarnation in*

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 42

⁷² Ibid., p. 43.

⁷³ Ibid.

a body”⁷⁴, meaning that even if the transcendental subject is not itself a body, the body is itself a non-empirical condition for the “taking place” of transcendental subjectivity. The correlationist has to accept this if he or she does not want to hypostasize an eternal subject or advocate the controversial thesis that transcendental subjectivity is independent from the body in which it seems to be embodied, views that are incongruent with both weak and strong correlationism.

By considering these objections to his argument from the arche-fossil, Meillassoux claims to have shown the urgency of developing a theory which establishes the conditions for how thought can think the unthought, the non-correlated past of the arche-fossil. Correlationism is important for Meillassoux because it attempts to think reality without positing an absolute entity which would guarantee our access to it, but the only way for it do to so is by denying the literal truth of (ancestral) scientific statements, that is, by being unable to think reality independently of human thought. This is problematic, because the arche-fossil indicates the reality of a world without thought, and the means the correlationist have to account for it fails. It is not merely that this world is not given in the trivial sense, that if one were there it would have been like science told us, the point is precisely that it could not have happened in that way since there were no thought to begin with, it did not happen “to” something or someone. Nor is transcendental subjectivity merely a set of conditions, since the existence of these conditions are inseparable from the body in which they are instantiated, a body that at some point in time was not, and at a later time is. Meillassoux’s task is therefore to account for the literal truth of scientific statements, that is, articulating the conditions for thought to think the unthought, without turning transcendental subjectivity into an eternal omnipresent subject or postulating a necessary entity which grounds our access to the in-itself.

The principle of factiality and the absolute scope of mathematics

So far we have only gone through the negative part of Meillassoux’s philosophy, which consists on the one hand of his defence of (strong) correlationism against approaches that try to absolutize the correlation, and on the other his charge that correlationism is unable to think the arche-fossil, i.e. the world before or absent of the correlation of thinking and being. The

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 44

positive part of his philosophy revolves around *the principle of factuality*, which we will now turn to.

“What we seek”, according to Meillassoux, “is a non-metaphysical absolute, capable of slipping through the meshes of [strong correlationism]”⁷⁵, that is, the option to strong correlationism cannot postulate an absolute being which grounds necessity, nor can it absolutize the correlation since it goes against the facticity of the correlation. Since absolutizing the correlation is inhibited, Meillassoux will argue that the only way to secure a non-metaphysical Absolute is to absolutize facticity. Recall that facticity is used by strong correlationism as the ultimate defence against any Absolute, it marks the point at which our knowledge is unable to escape itself and at which even logical laws are questioned in their necessity. What, then, does it mean to say that facticity, the point of *impasse par excellence*, is in fact absolute? “No doubt”, Meillassoux admits, “this will require a ‘change in outlook’”, but once that has been achieved it will become clear how “facticity will be revealed to be a knowledge of the absolute *because we are going to put back into the thing itself what we mistakenly took to be an incapacity in thought*”⁷⁶. His argument, in short, is that the distinction between the for-us and the in-itself is conceivable only insofar as an absolutization of facticity has already been admitted, in other words, strong correlationism is itself the path to its own overcoming.

Meillassoux proceeds by envisioning a dialogue between two ‘metaphysical dogmatists’ who discuss the nature of reality after death, a Christian dogmatist who claims that after we die we go to heaven, and an atheist dogmatist who claims that after we die we return to inert being (both, supposedly, with their own “irrefutable” proof). Then a (strong) correlationist enters, arguing for a “strict theoretical agnosticism”⁷⁷. Both the Christian and the atheist position, the correlationist argues, are equally legitimate when they are asserted within the correlation since “theory is incapable of privileging one eventuality over another”:

Consequently, the [correlationist] has little difficulty in refuting both these positions – all she has to do is demonstrate that it is self-contradictory to claim to know what is when one is no longer alive, since knowledge presupposes that one is still of this world. Accordingly, the two dogmatists are proffering realist theses about the in-itself, both of which are vitiated by the inconsistency proper to all realism – that of claiming to think what there is when one is not⁷⁸.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 88.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

A fourth disputant enters, the Hegelian absolute idealist, who argues that all of them are wrong, since the very thought of my non-being is a contradiction. The idea that the world in-itself could differ from how it appears for-us is unthinkable qua the unthinkability of the in-itself (of being without thought). The only way for the correlationist to avoid agreeing with the idealist is to argue that the possibility of the mind surviving the death of the body is as possible as my going to heaven or perishing. However, the reason that the correlationist has to offer in support of his or her response is that “I think myself as devoid of any reason for being and remaining as I am, and it is the unthinkability of this unreason [...] which implies that the other three thesis [sic] are all equally possible”⁷⁹. In other words, it is the unthinkability that there *could be* a reason for why one of the possibilities should be impossible that sustains the correlationist position. Here Meillassoux, the speculative philosopher enters, confronting the correlationist with the urgent question of “how [s/he is] able to *think* this “possibility of ignorance”⁸⁰. The correlationist construes the problem as a problem of knowledge, that facticity is essentially a limit to knowledge, one that drives a wedge between our ability to think how the in-itself might be and a method for ascertaining its validity. Meillassoux turns this assertion about facticity on its head with the assertion that “the truth is that you are only able to think this possibility of ignorance because you have *actually* thought the *absoluteness* of this possibility, which is to say, its non-correlational character”⁸¹. Facticity, far from limiting knowledge, provides the very entryway into absolute knowledge, which instead of asserting absolute reason asserts the very un-reason of reality being in this or that way. The possibility of the three theses about the afterlife is not due to ignorance on our part of how the world is in-itself; rather there is no inherent reason why they should be impossible. The correlationist retort is to argue that this ‘possibility of all possibilities’ is just as (im)probable as the other theses about the afterlife, i.e., we are as ignorant of its possibility as we are of its counterparts. The speculative philosopher will point out, again, that the only way for the correlationist to think the (im)probability of the ‘possibility of all possibilities’ is to think the absolute scope of that assertion. In other words, “this open possibility, this ‘everything is equally possible’, is an absolute that cannot be de-absolutized without being thought as absolute once more”⁸². Facticity, the very fact that I cannot provide a reason for why the world appears this or that way, is therefore not a limit to knowledge, but at the heart of the in-

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 92-93.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 96.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., p. 95.

itself. The in-itself is characterized by facticity, of being devoid of a reason for being this or that, and harbours within it the potential for becoming anything whatsoever, be it thinkable or unthinkable.

Meillassoux's argument, in short, is that strong correlationism can only de-absolutize the correlation by absolutizing facticity, that is, by turning the un-reason of facticity into a positive fact about the in-itself. Conversely, de-absolutizing facticity can only be done by once again absolutizing the correlation. The latter approach is prohibited because it implies the existence of a necessary being, perhaps a God, Reason, or the subject of the correlation. Absolutizing facticity does not imply the existence of a necessary being, since "we do not maintain that a determinate entity exists, but that it is absolutely necessary that every entity might not exist [...] we are thinking an absolute, but it is not metaphysical, since we are not thinking any *thing* that would *be* absolute"⁸³. The principle uncovered by absolutizing facticity is a *principle of unreason*, it asserts the absence of a reason for anything to be or stay the way it is. From this general principle we gain two important insights, "first, that contingency is necessary [...] second, that contingency alone is necessary"⁸⁴. The second point is particularly important, since we can in fact infer from it the absolute impossibility of a necessary entity. While we were still strong correlationists we could not exclude the possibility that beyond the facticity of the correlation were an absolute necessary being. The principle of unreason decisively refutes all metaphysical speculation, since any claims about deeper necessities, even their possibility, are prohibited, "everything is possible, anything can happen – except something that is necessary, because it is the contingency of the entity that is necessary, not the entity"⁸⁵. The principle of factuality is precisely the principle that contingency alone is necessary, or as Meillassoux puts it, "*only facticity is not factual – viz., only the contingency of what is, is not itself contingent*"⁸⁶. The Absolute is not some absolute entity, but the absolute principle of the necessary contingency of any entity.

Meillassoux was quoted above as saying that adopting the principle of factuality requires a 'change in outlook' since it makes what we took to be a limit to thought into a principle of knowing. Yet the 'knowledge' we gain is not about entities, but about the restrictions that must be in place to secure their absolute contingency, like the fact that there

⁸³ Ibid., p. 99.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

⁸⁵ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

cannot be a necessary entity⁸⁷. We have now come full circle to what was Meillassoux's original intent, namely to take the Copernico-Galilean revolution to its end by establishing the conditions for a mathematized science. The absolute scope of mathematics is grounded in an

intellectual intuition of the absolute. 'Intuition', because it is actually in what is that we discover a contingency with no limit other than itself; 'intellectual because this contingency is neither visible nor perceptible in things and only thought is capable of accessing it, just as it accesses the chaos that underlies the apparent continuity of phenomena⁸⁸.

Recall that the absolute that was needed for sustaining the absolute scope of mathematics was not a necessary entity, as Descartes believed, but rather a way for thought to think being in-itself. Meillassoux concedes to correlationism the fact that all being is being for thought, however, not everything that is unthought is a being. Mathematics is not about the appearances of objects, but of their qualities apart from their appearances, which just is their absolute contingency. "What is most fundamental in all this [...] is the idea that the most powerful conception of the incalculable and unpredictable event is provided by a thinking that *continues to be* mathematical – rather than one which is artistic, poetic or religious"⁸⁹, in other words, the only way to not lapse into metaphysics is to let mathematics be our guide to the in-itself. If the precise nature of how mathematics is able to uncover the in-itself remains obscure it is because it still remains obscure within Meillassoux's own writings. Towards the end of *After Finitude* he explains that "our goal here was not to tackle this resolution as such [i.e. how mathematics gets its absolute scope]. Our only aim has been to try to convince the reader not only that it is possible to rediscover thought's absolutizing scope, but that it is urgent that we do so"⁹⁰. To establish the absolute scope of mathematics requires a demonstration of its derivation from the principle of factuality, i.e. how "what is mathematically conceivable is absolutely possible"⁹¹. That this has not yet been done is not of vital importance, since the point in Meillassoux's demonstration is only to show that it is possible.

⁸⁷ Meillassoux argues that given the principle of factuality it is possible to demonstrate the truth of three 'figures': the principle of non-contradiction, the fact that there has to be something rather than nothing, and that the laws of nature are contingent, see chapter 3 in Meillassoux, 2008. Meillassoux also writes about non-contradiction and how it might be derived by the principle of factuality in his doctoral thesis, see Meillassoux, Q. 1997. "L'Inexistence Divine". Université de Paris.

⁸⁸ Meillassoux, 2008, p. 133. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 175. Emphasis in original.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 207.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 205.

Concluding remarks

Meillassoux stands out as somewhat of a godfather for the speculative turn. *After Finitude* was an instrumental book for popularizing speculative thought and creating a sense of urgency for rethinking thought's access to reality. What drives Meillassoux is the failure of correlationism to adequately account for the absolute scope of scientific statements, paradigmatically the arche-fossil which points towards the ancestral, of a time where being is devoid of thought. If the scientific revolution inaugurated by Copernicus and Galileo is to survive, the limits that have been put on thought by correlationism must be breached, and the ability to gain (mathematical) access to the in-itself must be re-asserted. Meillassoux nonetheless concurs with correlationism that this access cannot be grounded by demonstrating a necessary entity. Therefore, Meillassoux has to uncover an absolute, which is nevertheless not an entity, that he discovers in the *principle of factuality*. The principle of factuality states that the only necessity is contingency, and we can know that this is true since we cannot de-absolutize the scope of it without re-absolutizing the correlation, i.e. making the correlation itself eternal/necessary. Thus, the principle of factuality follows from correlationism itself, that is, for correlationism to remain consistent it has to absolutize either of these features. Having discovered this principle, Meillassoux claims that it is possible to derive the absolute scope of mathematics from it, thus guaranteeing full access to reality in-itself. It is important to note that *After Finitude* functions more as a *prolegomena* for further investigations, rather than a complete articulation of Meillassoux's thought. What is important for him in the book is not primarily to demonstrate how thought can access the in-itself, but to develop in detail what the main obstacles are. It is in this sense that Meillassoux articulates what is perceived as the ultimatum confronting contemporary realism, either thought has to be able to think the in-itself, or we must remain within correlationism for which the literal truth of scientific statements cannot be asserted directly.

Chapter 2: Object-Oriented Ontology, Knowledge, and Relations

In this chapter we will see how Harman develops Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), initially focusing on the major themes that underlie his philosophy before moving on to what characterizes an Object-Oriented approach. I will argue that the most important theme in OOO is its rejection of a choice that has been imposed on western philosophy, a choice between seeing relations as being grounded in one of two kinds of entities, God/absolute being or the mind. Harman asserts a secular universe in which the mind is one object among others, effectively assuming a universe where no single object has a premium on relations. On this assumption he builds the Object-Oriented corpus around an unorthodox reading of Heidegger and Bruno Latour, which culminates in his critique of overmining, undermining and duoming, which all assert the primacy of knowledge in philosophical inquiry. Harman's claim is that, on the contrary, the goal of philosophy is to show how the "foundations of any theory cannot be a form of knowledge but must be a subtler, more indirect way of addressing the world"⁹². Here we turn to Timothy Morton, who in his "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry"⁹³ provides a way of understanding this 'indirect addressing'. By reading Percy Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" through the lens of OOO he argues that relations arise when an object appears to another. He notes that what appears is never the object-in-itself, but a caricature of the object. An object can only enter into relations with this object that is not the real object, but a 'translation' of it. What this account opens up for is a 'poetry' of objects, where one through metaphor is able to assert the reality of appearances while at the same time hinting at the reality of a withdrawn object as their ground.

Occasionalism and knowledge

Usually readings of Harman tend to focus on his interpretation of Heidegger, yet it often goes unmentioned how this idea is informed by his reading of post-Kantian metaphysics through the lens of Islamic philosophy⁹⁴. Muslim philosophers in the 10th and 11th century developed the first modern iteration of occasionalism, the theory according to which,

⁹² Harman, 2016, p. 13

⁹³ Morton, 2012.

⁹⁴ Harman has spent 16 years as a professor at the American University in Cairo, and is familiar with the Islamic philosophical tradition.

The world is filled with objects or substances, but none is able to touch another. Things might seem to make contact, but in fact this is merely the occasion for God to intervene directly and affect them both. Fire does not burn cotton, but God burns cotton; no hair falls from anyone's head without God's direct intervention. Except insofar as God intervenes, we have a world with entities but no relations⁹⁵.

In the west, the view is most often associated with Malebranche, one of Descartes' followers, who used occasionalism as a means to resolve Descartes' mind-body problem. According to Harman, the history of western philosophy since Hume has been a reversal of occasionalism, one where "there are relations but no entities"⁹⁶,

The agnosticism of Hume about the outside world, and the only slightly stronger concession of Kant to ineffable things-in-themselves, do not hide the fact that autonomous objects disappear from both of these philosophies. We are left with a world in which relation does occur, though entities effectively do not. Hume never doubts that things are linked through habit and customary conjunctions, but merely doubts that they have autonomous reality and power outside such conjunctions. Kant never doubts that things are linked through the categories, but merely says that we know nothing about them outside these categories⁹⁷.

Harman rejects this reversal of occasionalism because rather than effectively refuting occasionalism it still accepts its inherent assumption. This is the assumption that "one special, pampered entity is the sole site of all relations in the cosmos"⁹⁸, which in the case of occasionalism is God or absolute being, and for Hume/Kant is the mind or 'experience' (our 'customary conjunctions' as it were).

Mainstream intellectuals today are quick to mock the gullible theology that identifies Almighty God as the source of all relations. They will tell us that we have no access to anything but human experience, and that experience is therefore a more compelling solution than the theological one. But not all relations are human-world relations [...] Hence, making human experience the homeland of all relations is no less outlandish than importing a theological concept of God into a philosophical sphere where faith no longer suffices as proof⁹⁹.

⁹⁵ Graham Harman. 2011. "Realism Without Materialism". In: *SubStance*, Vol. 40, no. 2 (issue 125), p. 70.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 70-71.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

It is important to note how Harman in this case moves beyond Meillassoux, for whom the problem was the dogma of the correlation of thinking and being. Harman argues that it is in fact Hume's empiricism, rather than Kant's transcendentalism, which is the root of the problem. The problem is not the idea that being and thinking is always correlated, but the idea that relations must be mediated by a third party. Realism, for Harman, begins by accepting the radical disavowance of all objects, including minds and God(s), of the fact that objects are initially not related to each other. OOO as a theory tries to account for the existence of such a universe, and how such a universe can give rise to relations despite this radical independence.

Harman's reading of Heidegger forms the bedrock upon which he develops his alternate path towards realism. He specifically focuses on what he calls Heidegger's 'tool-analysis', according to which "our primary relationship with objects lies not in perceiving or theorizing about them, but simply in relying on them for some ulterior purpose"¹⁰⁰. He rejects the standard reading of Heidegger, for whom this is taken to mean that (articulated) theory is grounded in a more primordial (pre-articulated) practice. What Harman notes is that the failure of the object present-at-hand to exhaust it as ready-to-hand (the object can always reveal itself to be more than what it is present-at-hand) is also true of the ready-to-hand in relation to the object as such,

We distort when we see, and distort when we use. Nor is the sin of caricature a merely human vice. Dogs do not make contact with the full reality of bones, and neither do locusts with cornstalks, viruses with cells, rocks with windows, nor planets with moons. It is not human consciousness that distorts the reality of things, but relationality *per se*. Heidegger's tool-analysis unwittingly gives us the deepest possible account of the classical rift between substance and relation. When something is 'present-at-hand' this simply means it is registered through some sort of relation: whether perceptual, theoretical, practical, or purely causal. To be 'ready-to-hand' does not mean to be useful in the narrow sense, but to withdraw into subterranean depths that other objects rely on despite never fully probing or sounding them.¹⁰¹

The truth of objects is that most of the time they do not appear at all, neither as ready-to-hand nor as present-at-hand. "Heidegger's tool-analysis", therefore, "opens the gates on a strange new realism in which entities flicker vaguely from the ocean floor: unable to make contact, yet somehow managing to do so anyway"¹⁰².

¹⁰⁰ Graham Harman. 2007a. On Vicarious Causation". In: Robin McKay (ed.), *Collapse Volume 2*. Falmouth: Urbanomic, p. 192.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Besides Heidegger, Harman's greatest influence has been Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT). The key feature of Latour's philosophy that Harman praises is its flat ontology, his insistence on the irreducibility of any and all objects (*actants* in Latour's terminology).

[H]is concept of actants nullifies Kant's Copernican Revolution by simply ignoring it. As soon as all real, ideal, animate, and inanimate objects are placed on the same footing, each of them occupying some concrete site in reality and both resisting and giving way to the influences surrounding it, the basic assumption of modern philosophy disappears. This assumption is that the relational gap between humans and world (whether we mourn it, revel in it, deconstruct it, or sublimate it into some deeper absolute) is the sole gap with which philosophers have permission to be concerned. Latour outflanks this tiresome, oppressive, and often invisible dogma by reminding us that the relation between Immanuel Kant and the objects in the world is no different in kind from those between police and criminals, Lucky and Godot, reindeer and forests, acid and metal, or fire and cotton. Every actant has equal rights in a democratic ontology, and relations are a problem for all of them—not just for so-called rational beings.¹⁰³

This allows Latour to grant equal ontological weight to all objects, whether or not they are correlated with a human mind. Any object, insofar as it engages in relations with other objects, is real. However, while acknowledging Latour as an important contributor to the liberation of objects from their human-centred orbits, Harman is worried about Latour's relationalism, which brings us to Harman's critique of overmining.

According to Harman, when Latour argues that an object (actant) is nothing but its relations, he makes the mistake of thinking that the object is "needlessly deep or spooky" compared to "[its] tangible properties or effect"¹⁰⁴, that there is no object in-itself apart from its current relations. The problem with this approach is simply that it cannot account for change. If an object is able to change, it means that the object is in some sense more than what it is at any given time; it is holding something in reserve. "No "feedback loop" can replace the need for an excess in things beyond their relations, since an object cannot absorb or respond to feedback unless it is *receptive*, and this requires that it be more than what it currently does"¹⁰⁵. Harman's critique of overmining repeats Aristotle's argument against the Megarians (an ancient Greek school founded by one of Socrates' pupils), according to whom

¹⁰³ Graham Harman. 2007b. "The Importance of Bruno Latour for Philosophy". In: *Culture Studies Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, March, p. 43.

¹⁰⁴ Harman, 2016, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11. Emphasis in original.

“no one is a house-builder unless they are currently building a house”¹⁰⁶. Aristotle’s obvious retort was to point out that a master at house-building is a house-builder even if s/he is not currently building a house, meaning that an object can *be* more than it is doing at the current moment. Harman’s critique of Latour and overmining thus reveals Harman’s intent is to revive Aristotelian substances as a way to account for a the kind of change that is impossible within the framework of overmining philosophies like ANT.

The opposite of overmining is undermining, which takes objects to be superficial with regard to their constituent parts, parts that ultimately make up all reality. Undermining was the guiding principle of the pre-Socratic thinkers, who “aspired to find the ultimate root that explained the composition of mid- and large-sized entities”, be it “water, air, fire, atoms, number, a formless lump, or something else altogether”¹⁰⁷. Undermining is still the dominant approach in modern science, particularly in physics, which ruthlessly tries to reduce all objects to one underlying substance, be it particles or quantum fields or whatever. If overmining philosophies say that objects are ‘too deep’, that there is no need to postulate an independent object ‘beneath’ its effects, undermining does the opposite and say that objects are ‘too shallow’ and that one must plunge into their depths to get to know them. The problem Harman finds in undermining philosophies is that they cannot truly account for “the relative independence of objects from their constituent pieces or histories, a phenomenon better known as emergence”¹⁰⁸. What Harman refers to is the fact that an object always in one way or another exceeds its parts. Take Theseus’ ship, which persists even if some of its parts are replaced, removed, or destroyed. If the ship is its parts, it is difficult to say how it can persist despite these changes. It is important to note that the independence of the ship vis à vis its parts is not absolute, meaning that destroying all the parts of the ship will obviously destroy the ship as well. The ship only has a ‘relative’ independence from its parts, meaning that there is a limit to how many changes can be made before a new ship emerges (or it becomes a pile of garbage). Nonetheless, the ship, or any object for that matter, is not reducible to its parts, but has a certain degree of autonomy independently of its parts.

In more recent works Harman has noted that over- and undermining are rarely used in isolation. Instead, they are usually combined in a move Harman calls ‘duomining’¹⁰⁹. He cites

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 9. Emphasis in original removed.

¹⁰⁹ The term duomining was first used in 2013 in Harman, “Undermining, Overmining, and Duomining: A Critique”. In: Sutela, J. (ed.), *ADD Metaphysics*. Aalto: Aalto University, pp. 40-51. It

Parmenides as the earliest western duominer when he proposed “a double cosmos with a single unified Being on one side and a truthless play of opinion and appearance on the other”¹¹⁰. This attitude is what allows scientists to claim that the world is made of strings, quarks or ‘matter’ (which is a form of undermining), and that this underlying reality can at the same time be exhausted by its mathematical properties (which is a form of overmining). Duomining is essentially the philosophy that reality can in principle be known in its totality, even though there might be limitations on the practical feasibility of gaining that knowledge. Harman disagrees that philosophy as a discipline is first and foremost about acquiring knowledge. “Philosophy”, Harman claims, “began not with the pre-Socratics but with Socrates’ un-ironic insistence that he knows nothing and has never been anyone’s teacher, along with his perpetual refusal to accept any specific definition of anything at all”¹¹¹. Therefore, “the philosophical foundations of any theory cannot be a form of knowledge but must be a subtler, more indirect way of addressing the world”¹¹².

Over-, under- and duomining all make objects into things to be known, while OOO is closer to the phenomenological tradition which argues that knowledge as such is never primary but rest on a more primordial relation between oneself and ones environment. For Heidegger this primordial relation is Dasein’s being-there, that is, objects primarily make up the background in which Dasein realizes his or her possibilities. Harman reads Heidegger as saying that objects are defined by a fundamental non-relation, that is, objects are not primarily related to us as part of an opaque background, but rather *withdraw* from all relations. Skilful coping fails to exhaust an object in the same way that knowledge of it does, since in both cases the object is holding something in reserve. Importantly, this holds not just for objects in relation to humans, but between all object-object relations. Harman, following Latour, sees no reason to restrict the burden of finitude to human beings, “since any relation fails to exhaust its relata, every inanimate object is a thing-in-itself for every other as well”¹¹³. The thing-in-itself is the name for the fact that any relation between objects fails to exhaust its relata, and not just the name for the shortcoming of human reason.

What, then, does it mean to say that philosophy must be a “subtler, more indirect way” of talking about objects? If objects withdraw from relations, are we not left with a secular

is borrowed from computer science, and refers to a method credit card companies and banks use to gather information about customers by both data- and textmining.

¹¹⁰ Harman, 2016, p. 11.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 12

¹¹² Ibid., p. 13

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 29. Emphasis in original removed.

form of ‘negative theology’, the view that Gods attributes can only be known in the negative, as what He is not. Harman’s answer again refers to Socrates, specifically his response to Meno’s paradox. Meno claims that “we cannot look for something if we have it or if we do not, and hence [...] there is no reason to search for anything”¹¹⁴ to which Socrates counters by arguing that “we neither have nor do not have the truth, but are always somewhere in between”¹¹⁵. Similarly, for OOO, the fact that we cannot paraphrase an object successfully in human terms does not mean that the object cannot be grasped at all. The nature of objects is such that “sometimes we can only reveal things obliquely, looking for paradox rather than literally accurate predicates as our entryway to a thing”¹¹⁶. Philosophy is, in this sense, more like the arts, which are indeed concerned with truth, but a truth that is ‘fuzzy’ and ‘unclear’.

If the best art critics write allusively and elliptically, this is not because they are “facile mystics” or irrational frauds, but because their subject matter demands nothing less. Good writing is not just clear and devoid of “fuzziness”: it must also be vivid writing that brings its subject to life rather than replacing it with bundles of explicit and verifiable qualities. Sometimes we can only reveal things obliquely, looking for paradox rather than literally accurate predicates as our entryway to a thing¹¹⁷.

Knowledge, according to Harman, is not an all-or-nothing affair, but an uncharted territory with no set rules. Socrates paved the way for this attitude with his claim to be a lover of wisdom, rather than a wise man. For this reason Harman claims that “if anything distinguishes philosophy from the sciences” it is precisely that philosophy is a “claim to a non-knowledge that is nonetheless not just negative”¹¹⁸.

Harman’s rejection of knowledge as the primary tool of philosophy must be seen on the basis of his rejection of the choice between occasionalism and empiricism à la Hume and Kant. If objects are initially defined by their reality independent of all relations, there is no reason to think that knowledge, which is always either undermining or overmining, should help us get closer to that reality. This is not only because knowledge necessarily fails to exhaust the object, but also because knowledge as such is a relation (generally between the object and the mind). The will-to-knowledge, if one might call it that, is at its most elementary level a distortion of the world, a failed appreciation of the depths in which objects themselves dwell. It is therefore imperative of philosophers to develop ways in which the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 32. Emphasis in original removed.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

world might be revealed to us which are not modes of knowing, but are more indirect and unassuming, thereby preserving the non-relations that hold between objects.

Poetry and relationality

Timothy Morton started out as an early follower of Harman but has since then become quite distinguished in the OOO community. He has made major contributions to the general theory of OOO, and among them is his theory of causality, which more generally is a theory of how relations come to be. In “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry”, Morton attempts to account for how causal relations can occur within the non-relational space of Object-Oriented Ontology. He reads Percy Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” as an argument for time and space being aesthetic features of objects, as the result of a “rift” between an object-in-itself and its appearance(s). An object is like Shelley’s poet, “[it] participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to [its] conceptions, time and place and number are not”¹¹⁹. “Time and place” are not essential features of objects, but are the result of their appearance to another. Objects do not appear “in time”, rather the appearance of an object “times”, similar to Heidegger’s Dasein. Poetry is, according to Morton, a way of “[forcing] us to acknowledge that we coexist with uncanny beings in a groundless yet vivid reality without a beyond”¹²⁰, in other words, poetry is deeply object-oriented.

Morton begins by bringing up Shelley’s claim that humans are like Aeolian harps¹²¹. What Shelley means is that sentience, or rather, thinking, is “attunement”. From this, “Shelley is able to imagine thinking as derivative of a physical process: a vibration “about” a vibration, or an interference pattern between vibrations”¹²². Importantly, Shelley is willing to entertain the thought that “perhaps all sentient beings are like wind harps”¹²³? From this there is a small step towards OOO, for which the question would be “[whether] wind harps are like sentient beings”¹²⁴.

¹¹⁹ Percy Shelley. “A Defence of Poetry”. This quote is from an online version of the text available at <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/A-Defense-of-Poetry.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2018).

¹²⁰ Morton, 2012, p. 222.

¹²¹ An Aeolian harp, or wind harp, is an instrument designed to be played by the wind. It is placed near an open window where the wind can make its strings vibrate, producing an ambient, mystical sound.

¹²² Morton, 2012, p. 205.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

What Heidegger thought was that a tool is withdrawn but a broken tool appears [...] Harman argues forcefully that this startling insight opens up a gigantic coral reef below the Heidegger U-boat: the coral reef of OOO, resplendent with trillions of entities all twinkling in their different ways, some of which are human, some of which are not, but all of which have what humans have, and so do what humans do¹²⁵

The “thing” that humans have and do is the transcendental limit of finitude, which Harman argued is true of all objects. Every object is an in-itself for every other. A soup spoon is like us,

not because a soup spoon is alive, but because I’m not really alive, not in the sense that matters. Not because a spoon is intelligent, but because I’m not really intelligent. I just look and quack intelligent in relation to some other entity, such as a psychologist or a daughter or an IQ test. What spoons do when they scoop up soup is not very different from what I do when I talk about spoons. Again, not because the spoon is alive or intelligent (panpsychism), but because intelligence and being alive are *aesthetic appearances* for some other phenomenon, including the object in question¹²⁶.

The Aeolian harp is an excellent image of what is going on when objects appear to each other, since what we hear when the harp is playing is not the harp as such but the wind’s “translation” of the strings. Similarly, when I speak intelligently, it is only because there is another object, a psychologist, an IQ test, through which my speech becomes intelligent. “What OOO claims is that consciousness isn’t all that different from what a tree does when it “translates” the wind. Nor do the wind capture the essence of the branches and leaves. Why? Because there *is* wind. Because there *are* branches and leaves”¹²⁷. The essence of objects is defined by their withdrawal from any and every relation. The proof of this being the case lies in the very fact that essences allude us, since “if reality were aesthetic all the way down [i.e. if there only were appearances], then we would know it was “just” an illusion and its power to beguile us would disappear”¹²⁸. It is this “rift” between the object and its appearance that “fuels” causality, that is, it is in the space between the object and its appearance causal relations occur, which circumvents the choice between mind or God as the loci of causal relations.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 215.

¹²⁶ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 206-7. Emphasis in original.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 213. Emphasis in original removed.

“Objects are contradictions”, Morton argues, meaning that objects are “themselves (withdrawal) and not themselves (appearance) at the very same time”¹²⁹. With OOO one is confronted with an “illusion-like reality”, since the appearance of an object affirms its reality, yet the appearance is itself radically deceptive. “When I reach for an apple in a red plastic bowl in my kitchen, I am reaching into an abyss; even to look at the apple, to speak about it or write a poem about it, is to plunge into the abyss”¹³⁰. This means that what we call time and space are itself (aesthetic) properties of objects. From quantum mechanics we learn that (quantum) objects cannot be located down to one noncontradictory space and time. For OOO this is a general feature of all objects, and is precisely due to space and time being “aspects of the difference(s) between an object and itself”, that is, objects, like Heidegger’s Dasein, “are” time, they “time”¹³¹. Shelley argues that time is not an objective feature of the world, but “a revolutionary upsurge of poetic inspiration”¹³², which can now be understood in the sense that objects, when they appear, disrupt the usual “flow of time” and introduces a trauma. Things are not “as they were before”. “A new temporality appears, because there is a new entity in the world, with its own way of “timing” and “spacing”¹³³. The reason it “times” is because it cannot appear as itself, its withdrawal is (literally) opening up the space for it to appear as its other.

OOO is a “realism without materialism”, in the sense that it rejects the Aristotelian view of material causation. Material causation is the answer to “what is this thing made of”, and materialism is the view that what all things are ultimately made up of is ‘matter’. “For OOO what is called “matter” is simply matter for *an aesthetic phenomenon*”¹³⁴, it is part of the timing and spacing of objects. Contrary to the materialist view, for which the wood is the material cause of the guitar, for OOO “a guitar is just what happened to some wood, which just is what happened to a tree: as we trace the story of the guitar, we never find some material substrate that is not already some object”¹³⁵. In other words, objects are just made up of (more and more) objects. There is no ultimate object to which all objects amount to, even God is Himself just an object that happened to some Israelites around 3000 years ago. This radical rewriting of material causation allows Morton to advocate for a rehabilitation of formal causation. Modern materialism, particularly scientific/Darwinist materialism, has

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 210. Emphasis in original removed.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 212.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 214.

¹³² Ibid., p. 215.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 216.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 217. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 218.

interpreted formal causation in a teleological way, as if it's saying that an objects' form is for some ultimate purpose. Modern science has been very effective in explaining form in terms of efficient causes, to the point that formal causation is often seen as old metaphysical remnant. Morton is equally suspicious of teleology, since it "turns objects into blobs that are given meaning by some "for which", some purpose"¹³⁶, i.e. it overmines them. Immaterialism opens up the path for understanding formal causation without teleology, and without resorting to material and efficient causation. Since the material cause of an object is other objects, the form of an object is just the record of its coexistence with other objects. "Form is memory, as in a memory stick: your face, your hard drive, your chipped coffee mug, records what happened to it. What is called the past is really other objects that coexist with the object in question"¹³⁷. What we usually refer to as causation, i.e. efficient causation, is an unfolding of this memory, an interpretation of the significance of the objects that contribute to an object's form. At the same time, the object in question is defined by a *rift* between its essence and its appearance (its form), the object as such never appears, but withdraws into immaterial depths. Having argued that the form of an object is nothing but a record of its coexistence with other objects, Morton can claim that "contrary to the commonly held belief that appearance is "now", the formal cause of a thing just is its pastness"¹³⁸. The form of an object points backwards, it tells us what an object has been, not what it is for. Morton's conclusion is that the essence of an object must therefore be its future, or rather, its 'future future', "the pure possibility of the object as such"¹³⁹.

What then of the present? What is existing, or continuing, or persisting? It just means being in-difference from oneself. Existing is thus futural. It is not yet [...] The present is a construct imposed on an uncanny intermeshing of appearance and essence. Presence is hollowed out from the inside by "past" and "future"¹⁴⁰.

In precise terms, the present is the introduction of a new object, a hollowing out of past and future. The meaning of the object cannot be asserted in the present, since its meaning, its essence, lies in the future. Immaterialism enables OOO to conceive of causal relations as strictly *aesthetic*, as having to do with appearances, which allows explanations in terms of formal causation.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 219.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 220. Emphasis in original removed.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 220.

In this sense, objects in OOO are like Shelley's poets, "the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows that futurity casts upon the present"¹⁴¹. To understand an object is to understand a poem in Shelley's sense of "coming from the future", a future that only comes to be with the introduction of an object. "The meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem – a poem not itself*. Likewise, the meaning of an object is another object"¹⁴². This other object could potentially be the very same object, since the object is a contradiction between its essence and appearance, similar to how re-reading a poem can make us change our opinion on its meaning. What distinguishes poetry from prose is that a poem does not have a definite meaning, not in the sense of having no meaning, but in the sense that its meaning is always allusive or up for debate. If a poem has a definite meaning it is no longer a poem, it is prose. In the same way, an object's existence depends on the rift between its essence and appearance. "An object persists and moves for as long as it can maintain its inner lie. If it is forced to speak nothing but the truth, destruction ensues: the rift collapses"¹⁴³. Attentiveness to form, to appearance, allows the continued existence of objects, while ruthless over- and undermining threaten to destroy them¹⁴⁴. This is, in other words, the Object-Oriented defence of poetry.

Concluding remarks

By bringing attention to Harman's familiarity with Islamic philosophy, in particular the doctrine of occasionalism, the impetus for his philosophy becomes clearer than if we had stuck to his reading of Heidegger. His familiarity with Islamic philosophy has made him susceptible to the problem of relationality, of how initially unrelated things can enter into relations. Understanding realism to hinge on an articulation of how relationality can come to be without privileging one entity as the harbourer of all relations, he sees Hume's empiricism, rather than Kant's transcendental idealism, as (one of) the great culprit(s) of western philosophy for establishing the human subject as the loci of relations. Kant, in this case, merely solidifies this position, correlating all being with transcendental subjectivity. His

¹⁴¹ Percy Shelley. 2002. "A Defence of Poetry". In: Donald H. Reidman & Neil Fraistat (eds.), *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. New York: Norton. Quoted in Morton, 2012, p. 220.

¹⁴² Morton, 2012, p. 220. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹⁴⁴ Often quite literally. The pursuit of knowledge often necessitates that objects be picked apart or put under severe amounts of stress, so that their effects or inner workings become apparent.

interpretation of Heidegger is the first step in fleshing out his position, where Heidegger's analysis of the ready-to-hand is interpreted to mean that what defines objects is precisely that they withdraw from their relations, and moreover that this holds for all object-object relations. Accordingly, any attempt at using knowledge to understand relations will fail, because the object of knowledge will always withdraw from the subject attempting to know it. Since we cannot come to know what relations hold, and which does not, and since we are barred from saying that relations are the product of either our mind or God's mind, a solution must be sought in the objects themselves. Morton demonstrates a way to think relationality without privileging one object over any other, and also staying true to the requirement that all objects are fundamentally dis-related. Relations, he argues, are nothing but the appearance of one object to another, or more precisely, one object 'translating' the appearance of the other in terms of itself. Relations therefore do not hold between objects as such, but is a matter of their appearances. Objects in themselves are, importantly, not their appearances, nor could they be, since it would mean that the object does not exist. Objects are like poems, if they reveal too much of themselves, they cease to be. Objects can therefore remain independent of each other since relations are essentially superficial; the object in-itself remains whatever it is.

Chapter 3: New Materialism, Agential Realism and Phenomena

In this chapter we turn to the movement calling itself New Materialism. The movement is held together by a belief in the necessity of rethinking matter and materiality, or as Rosa Braidotti puts it, of “rethinking the embodied structure of human subjectivity after Foucault”¹⁴⁵. New Materialism typically sees itself as a materialist response to poststructuralism¹⁴⁶, one that does away with poststructuralist anthropocentrism and dualism while at the same time affirming poststructuralism’s claim that subjectivity arises in and from its particular socio-historical setting. This entails viewing matter as capable of agency in and of itself, without the aid of the mediating capacities of the human mind. This leads Karen Barad, who will be the main focus in this chapter, to formulate a theory of *agential realism* which argues that “the primary ontological unit is not independent objects with independently determinate boundaries and properties but rather what [Niels] Bohr terms “phenomena””¹⁴⁷. A phenomena, rather than referring an individual entity, refers to the “ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components”¹⁴⁸, which means that individual entities do not pre-exist their relations, but rather come to be in and through phenomena. The term *intra-acting* refers to this coming-to-be of individual entities, and is used in deliberate contrast to *interacting* which suggests that the objects in question pre-exist the interaction.

Barad relies heavily on the insights of Niels Bohr in the field of quantum mechanics, where he argues that there is a fundamental *indeterminacy* when it comes to quantum phenomena, indeterminacies that only become determinate with the help of an apparatus. The apparatus, Barad argues, can be seen as any *material-discursive practice* that “constrains and enables what can be said”¹⁴⁹. Importantly for Barad, a material-discursive practice is not necessarily human or linguistic in nature. Rather, any “actual physical arrangement” can constrain and enable in this way, thereby going beyond “what is usually meant by the frequently heard contemporary refrain that writing and talking are material practices”¹⁵⁰. This move is supported by affirming Michel Foucault and Judith Butler’s critique of

¹⁴⁵ Braidotti, 2000, “Teratologies”. In: Buchanan & Colebrook, *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 158. Quoted in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 96.

¹⁴⁶ The term ‘poststructuralism’ will here be used in the broadest possible sense as an umbrella term for those (usually) 20th century philosophies that preceded New Materialism. In this context it is cognizant with terms like ‘postmodernism’ and ‘social constructivism’, and would include figures like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze (and Felix Guattari) and Judith Butler.

¹⁴⁷ Barad, 2007, p. 33.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 147.

representationalism, which argues that representationalism fails as a mode of knowing because our horizon of possible representations is itself produced and reproduced by discursive practices. For Barad this is more than just a theoretical point, because it means that one cannot separate the being of material-discursive practices from the way we come to know them, and since the way we come to know them is a way of acting in the world the way we conceive of the world becomes an ethical matter. Agential realism is therefore an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology*, “an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being”¹⁵¹.

The first section of this chapter will briefly explore Barad’s critique of representationalism, a critique which is one of the main themes of New Materialist philosophers. As mentioned this critique builds on similar claims made by poststructuralists, in particular Foucault, and as such functions as a bridge between these earlier philosophers and New Materialism. To understand the trajectory of New Materialism it will be useful to see how it diverges from poststructuralism given their similar starting points.

The next section will explore how Barad develops Bohr’s interpretation of quantum mechanics into agential realism. This requires a brief explanation of Bohr’s interpretation of quantum mechanics, which together with Barad’s commentary will show its inadequacies as a proper realism due to its humanist remnants. Specifically, Bohr’s interpretation of the apparatus will be shown to be too narrow because he conceives of it as an ideal feature of the experiment, whereas Barad will argue that the scientific apparatus is itself, in the strong sense, a part of the experiment. After this detour through the workings of quantum mechanics a deeper exploration of Barad’s agential realism will follow, focusing on the key notions of the *phenomena* as the “ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components”¹⁵², *intra-action* as “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies”¹⁵³ and the *apparatus* as “specific material reconfigurings of the world that [...] iteratively reconfigure spacetime-matter”¹⁵⁴. When these are combined into a unified system one can get a hold of the inner workings of Barad’s agential realism.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 185.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 142.

Postructuralism, Representationalism and Performativity

New Materialism is indebted to the poststructuralist critique of representationalism. Representationalism is the belief in “the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing”¹⁵⁵. For poststructuralists this belief is deeply troubling since it quickly leads to an effort to accurately represent the particulars of the world, an effort that cannot be thought of as independent of the very things that are to be represented. For example, a government may want to represent its people, but in the very act of representing they effectively produce those very people that it wants to represent (by deciding on a standardized curriculum in schools, or introducing immigration laws). The point is not that representationalism is always a bad political strategy, but that the representationalist assumption of the ontological gap between the representation and the represented is far from self-evident and in many cases, perhaps all, is simply false. The poststructuralists therefore wanted to develop a theory of *performativity* as an alternative account of the creation of representations. Performativity, rather than seeing the representation and represented as isolated terms, instead “focuses inquiry on the practices or performances of representing, as well as on the productive effects of those practices and the conditions for their efficacy”¹⁵⁶. A theory of performativity seeks to uncover the conditions for the possibility of representations, although it does not seek to uncover these in the mind but rather in the practices and institutions that make up society.

At this point, however, the New Materialists break with poststructuralism. Dolphijn and van der Tuin explains, “[it] boils down to matter immanently escaping every possible representation in the modernist, scientific meaning as well as in the postmodernist, social or semiotic constructivist sense of the term according to which representation is not the scientific “mirror of nature” but rather the equally representationalist “mirror of culture”¹⁵⁷. Whereas old-fashioned representationalism imagined a singular true representation of the world, poststructuralism merely replaced this representationalism with a plurality of representations that were all equally true. Nature, or the real, was not given prior to our representations, but rather according to them. Thus, rather than getting rid of representationalism, they turned it on its head. This means that poststructuralism is unable to

¹⁵⁵ Barad, 2007, p. 46.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁵⁷ Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 107. Emphasis removed.

avoid the representationalist assumption of the ontological gap between nature and culture, since nature is still needed as that which is beyond our representations and is represented according to them. According to Dolphijn and van der Tuin this is due to a residual belief in Cartesian dualism, manifesting itself as an a priori split between nature and culture, or language and the real, or however one wants to put it. “The key point”, they argue, “is the abandonment of assumptions about linguisticity, or who does the speaking/writing”¹⁵⁸. Barad echoes this sentiment, and argues that, with regard to the poststructuralism of Foucault and Butler, “ultimately the power of these vigorous interventions is insufficient to fully extricate these theories from the seductive nucleus that binds them, and it becomes clear that each has once again been caught in some other orbit around the same nucleus. Suitably energetic to cause significant perturbations, nonetheless, *the prized ionization is thwarted in each case by anthropocentric remainders*”¹⁵⁹. The problem for the poststructuralist account of performativity is therefore the privileging of *human* performance, the idea that the space of agency is constrained by the reach of human society (or language, or culture, and so on). Barad laments over the current situation in the following beautiful quote, “[L]anguage matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter”¹⁶⁰. To overcome representationalism in all its forms, Barad and the New Materialists wants to take performativity out of the human sphere and extend it to all matter, that is, to articulate a *posthumanist* understanding of agency and meaning, one where these are no longer dependent on the horizon of human understanding. It is important to see how New Materialism is both an affirmation and rejection of poststructuralism, that is, it affirms poststructuralist performativity, but rejects its implicit representationalism/dualism. New Materialism generally, and Barad specifically, is making a plea for a realism that circumvents the pitfalls of scientific representationalism and poststructural performativity, one where matter is shown to be performative by science itself.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁵⁹ Barad, 2007, p. 135. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 132.

Niels Bohr's philosophy-physics

What the previous section shows is that to successfully move from (scientific) representationalism to performativity requires a reworking of a number of fundamental concepts, most notably those that are modern iterations of Cartesian dualism such as nature-culture, mind-matter, and language-the real/world. Barad attempts to do this from the bottom-up as it were, by taking Bohr's interpretation of quantum mechanics and applying it to all being. I am no expert in the field of quantum mechanics, nor do I suppose the reader is, so I will focus on her/Bohr's interpretation of the "normal" double-slit experiment, which is most important for Barad, and not the more complicated ones (like the "delayed-choice" and "quantum eraser" experiments). In any case, as far as I understand, her discussions of the variations of the double-slit are corollaries, not essential parts of agential realism. During this presentation some important concepts will be introduced, in particular the ideas of the *phenomenon*, the *apparatus* and *intra-action* mentioned above, which are key concepts in Barad's agential realism. After having presented Barad's interpretation of quantum mechanics I will explore these and related concepts to get a deeper understanding of the full extent of Barad's agential realism.

Barad's engagement with Bohr is no accident. Besides being a philosopher she has a doctorate in theoretical physics, and her work on Bohr is important not only as a philosophical investigation, but also for historians of science due to her detailed readings of Bohr's full body of work, including letters and notes. The importance of the history of science notwithstanding, what we will focus on here is the move from Bohr's interpretation of quantum mechanics to Barad's agential realism. First, we must take a look at an important experiment in the history of quantum mechanics, namely the double-slit experiment. In the time leading up to the formulation of the experiment, there had been heated debates in the physics community over whether light was a particle or a wave. Some experiments indicated the former, and some the latter. What united the followers of each theory was the belief that light could not be both, it had to be either a wave or a particle, and more importantly, that this was the case for all types of matter. The double-slit experiment was a thought-experiment at the heart of the post-quantum revolution debates between Einstein and Bohr. Briefly, one can say that Einstein represented the classical view that a given piece of matter was either a particle or a wave, while Bohr argued that matter was neither, and that attributing particle-status or wave-status to matter could not be done before any measurement. "For Bohr, the crucial point is the fact that wave and particle behaviors are exhibited under *complimentary* –

that is, *mutually exclusive* – circumstances”¹⁶¹. The double-slit experiment was invented in the early 19th century, and was one of the first experiments that challenged the particle-theory of matter. The experiment is very simple; a light source is put adjacent to a detection screen. Between them are two slits, which forces the wave nature of light to produce an interference pattern on the screen. With the invention of better technology, physicists were in 1927 able to perform the same experiment with other types of matter, like electrons. They too saw an interference pattern, which suggested that electrons, an arche-typical particle, could exhibit wave-qualities. Einstein and Bohr discussed a variation of this experiment, where one could effectively measure which slit the particle had went through. If this could be done, Einstein argued, one would be able to catch the electron behaving like a wave and a particle, thus defeating the apparent wave-particle duality. Bohr, however, argued that changing the experiment to identify the electron as a particle would result in a normal scatter pattern, as one would expect from particles, and not an interference pattern. It would take another 70 years before physicists had the technology to do this experiment, but when they did they confirmed Bohr’s suspicion. It would seem that matter could exhibit both particle- and wave-qualities, but never at the same time, that is, wave-qualities and particle-qualities are complimentary. Even though Bohr never lived to see his thought-experiment enacted in the real world, he nonetheless came up with a theory that would explain how this apparent duality was possible, what Barad calls his philosophy-physics.

“Classical epistemological and ontological assumptions, such as the ones found to underlie Newtonian physics, include the existence of individual objects with determinate properties that are independent of our experimental investigations of them”¹⁶², Barad explains. In virtue of these beliefs, classical physics entails

a belief in representationalism (the independently determinate existence of words and things), the metaphysics of individualism (that the world is composed of individual entities with individually determinate boundaries and properties), and the intrinsic separability of knower and known (that measurements reveal the preexisting values of the properties of independently existing objects as separate from the measuring agencies)¹⁶³.

¹⁶¹ Barad, 2007, p. 106. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Bohr was highly skeptical of the classical view, in particular he thought that it failed to account for “the discontinuity and the indeterminacy of measurement interactions”¹⁶⁴. What this means is that there is necessarily a lower bound to the disturbance a measurement will have on its object, that is, the disturbance of the measurement is never negligible. This means that any measurement of particles will always bear the mark of the measurement apparatus, a mark that is essential to the very apparatus. Classical physicists tried to circumvent this problem by arguing that one could subtract the disturbance of the measurement, thus making the disturbance negligible in practice. Bohr was not convinced for the precise reason that “it is impossible to determine the effect of a measurement interaction and have it serve the purpose it was designed for”¹⁶⁵. In other words, to measure the disturbance of the measurement, an entirely new experimental apparatus is needed, the disturbances of which will have to be accounted for by another experimental apparatus, and so on ad infinitum. This led Bohr to question the very foundations of the classical view. His key argument was based on the insight that “concepts are defined by the circumstances required for their measurement. That is, theoretical concepts are not ideational in character; they are specific physical arrangements”¹⁶⁶. In this sense a disturbance is not really a disturbance, because the disturbance is already a part of the experiment, of its physical/conceptual arrangement. The meaning of concepts like ‘wave’ and ‘particle’ is inseparable from the physical makeup of the apparatus intended to measure them. “For Bohr, measurement and description (the physical and conceptual) entail each other (not in the weak sense of operationalism but in the sense of their mutual epistemological implication)”¹⁶⁷. Bohr’s genius was his ability to see that this implied a deep ontological truth, namely that “observation is only possible on the condition that the effect of the measurement is indeterminable”, in other words, it is a condition of knowledge that the object of knowledge is indeterminate, not only for thought but in-itself. This explains why one cannot subtract the disturbance of the measurement, because there is no measurement-independent object to subtract it from. It also explains why matter always appears as either particles or waves, since their mode of appearing depends on mutually exclusive methods of measuring. Moreover, “since observations involve an indeterminable discontinuous interaction, as a matter of principle, there is no unambiguous way to differentiate between the “object” and “agencies of observation””¹⁶⁸, meaning that the very

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 109.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. Emphasis in original removed

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 114. Emphasis in original removed.

distinction between subject and object is something that comes to be as a result of the specific material arrangement of the measurement apparatus. Thus Bohr was able to undermine the three main assumptions of classical physics: representationalism, since concepts get their meaning from the physical arrangement of the apparatus; the metaphysics of individualism, since individual entities with determinate properties cannot be said to exist independently of their measurement; and the intrinsic separability of knower and known, since the subject-object distinction is indeterminate without a specific physical arrangement of the apparatus. Bohr realized that the role of the apparatus is crucial, because it is what “enacts a cut delineating the object from the agencies of observation”, that is, it is essentially the *condition of possibility* “for determinate meaning for the concept in question [and] in particular, apparatuses provide the conditions for the possibility of determinate boundaries and properties of “objects” within phenomena, where “phenomena” are the ontological inseparability of objects and apparatuses”¹⁶⁹. The only mistake Bohr makes is, according to Barad, to conceive of the measurement apparatus as “a mere laboratory setup”¹⁷⁰.

The liberal humanist conception of the subject and the taken-for-granted static and bounded apparatus that are embodied in Bohr’s theoretical apparatus get in the way of his efforts to provide a deeper understanding of the nature of scientific practices and ultimately cut short the profound ontological implications of his ideas¹⁷¹.

In other words, Bohr repeats the mistake of classical physicists who “treats the apparatus itself as an ideal measuring device that springs full blown from the head of Zeus”¹⁷², which in turn “[reduce] the role of the experimenter to a mere recorder of the objective marks displayed by the instrumentation”¹⁷³. Barad’s agential realism is an attempt to stay true to the original insights of Bohr, while “removing the less savory anthropocentric elements”¹⁷⁴. For Barad this means taking Bohr’s central insight about the embodiment of concepts in physical apparatuses and merging it with poststructuralist performativity, in an effort to move beyond the implied representationalism/dualism of the latter (as was shown above) and the outdated humanism of the former.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 127-128. Emphasis in original removed.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 144

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 145.

Agential realism, matter and knowing

While readers and commentators of Barad tend to focus on her notion of *intra-action*, an equally important notion is the *phenomena*. To put it simply, *intra-action* refers mostly to the ‘agential’ part of her agential realism, while *phenomena* are what give it its realism. I will deal with these in turn, beginning with the *phenomena*. So far *phenomena* has been defined as “ontological inseparability of objects and apparatuses”, and we are now at the point where this definition can be given its full meaning. “Phenomena”, Barad explains, “are *constitutive of reality*. Reality is composed *not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena* but of *things-in-phenomena*”¹⁷⁵. Phenomena therefore serve a double function, on the one hand referring to the inseparability of objects and apparatuses, and on the other referring to the totality in which objects and apparatuses come to be separated. *Intra-action* is the name for this coming to being of (agential) separation, of “exteriority-within-phenomena”¹⁷⁶, which in turn is what produces new phenomena, “that is, it is through specific *intra-actions* that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the word”¹⁷⁷. A brief return to Bohr will help illuminate this point. Recall Bohr’s thesis that theoretical concepts are embodied in the (experimental) apparatus. For Barad, this is more than an epistemological claim, that our knowledge is limited by the form of the apparatus, rather, it is an ontological claim about reality itself. Reality is, quite literally, *indeterminate* in the absence of a particular physical apparatus, an *intra-action* that distinguishes subject from the object. The claim that the world is indeterminate is just another way to say that there is an ontological inseparability of objects and apparatuses, that there is no a priori guarantee of how the indeterminacy will be disambiguated.

This elaboration of the *phenomena* is important in the grander scheme of Barad’s attack on transcendental thought. By arguing that *phenomena* are constitutive of reality, and also produced by ongoing *intra-action*, she attempts to walk a middle path between postulating an inert being-in-itself behind *phenomena*, while at the same time avoiding falling into (naïve) idealism where being is always for-us. In a pamphlet written for documenta 13, a contemporary art exhibition held in 2012 in Kassel, Germany, entitled

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 140. Emphasis added.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

“What Is the Measure of Nothingness”¹⁷⁸, Barad engages with this problem by exploring the (non-)being of nothingness (or in physicist terms, the vacuum). In classical physics “the vacuum has no matter and no energy”, while in quantum physics “the quantum principle of ontological indeterminacy calls the existence of such a zero-energy, zero-matter state into question, or rather, makes it into a question with no decidable answer”¹⁷⁹. Therefore, “if the energy vacuum is not determinately zero, it isn’t determinately empty”¹⁸⁰. Nevertheless, what could there be in the vacuum that makes its energy/mass non-zero, given that there is, by definition, nothing there? The answer, quite simply, is quantum fields, or what is better known as virtual particles. “According to the usual lore, virtual particles are very short-lived entities that come into and out of existence so quickly that they can’t be detected, and hence are not real, not in the same sense as actual particles”¹⁸¹. This way of putting it however entails the wrong idea, since it implies that these particles are real entities that exist independently of measurement. There is no real ontological difference between virtual particles and regular particles; it is merely a matter of the one always escaping detection. However, in Barad’s analysis “virtuality is not a speedy return, a popping into and out of existence”, but rather “the indeterminacy of being/nonbeing, a ghostly non/existence”¹⁸². In other words, virtual particles appear as the very indeterminacy of (non-)being itself. When we try to measure nothingness, what we find is a “field of possibilities” which is not “static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity”¹⁸³, or what she calls ‘ghostly non/existence’ which refers to her materialist reading of Derridean “hauntology”¹⁸⁴. What this means is that matter, or simply, reality, is always ‘haunted’ by the virtual space of possibilities, the indeterminacy of any and every phenomenon. These possibilities are not metaphysical entities or something that belongs only to thought, with reality as the arbiter of which possibilities are to be actualized, on the contrary they are part of the very fabric of reality *as possibilities*. “According to [Quantum Field Theory], a physical particle [...] does not simply reside in

¹⁷⁸ Karen Barad. 2012. “What is the Measure of Nothingness: Infinity, Virtuality, Justice”. Kassel: Hatie Kantz Verlag. Available online at: <http://deptimechicago.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/barad-k-what-is-the-measure-of-nothingness.pdf> (accessed April 18th, 2018).

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 12. Emphasis in original removed.

¹⁸³ Barad, 2007, p. 147.

¹⁸⁴ See Barad, 2010, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come”. In: *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2, pp. 240-68.

the vacuum as an independent entity, but rather is inseparable from the vacuum. The [particle] is a structureless point particle “dressed” with its intra-actions with virtual particles”¹⁸⁵. This effectively gets rid of the need to postulate a being-in-itself beyond phenomena, since phenomena are shown to be a creative force in and of themselves. The reason being can never be known in-itself is not because of an epistemological limit to the finite human mind, but because being is itself contaminated by non-being, by the specter of virtual possibilities alongside the actual. The world is essentially “a radical openness, an infinity of possibilities” which is “at the core of mattering”¹⁸⁶, in both senses of the word.

Having shown that reality, the phenomena, points to a fundamental *ontological indeterminacy*, the meaning of the terms intra-action and apparatus can be put in their proper context. Above intra-action was defined as the coming-to-being of “exteriority-within-phenomena”, and was said to be conditioned by the nature of the apparatus. The way Barad puts it is to say that,

Apparatuses are material-discursive practices – causal intra-actions through which matter is iteratively and differentially articulated, reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities and impossibilities in the ongoing dynamics of intra-activity that is agency¹⁸⁷.

The key idea is that apparatuses and intra-actions refer to different aspects of the ongoing dynamics of *agency*, which is the term Barad uses to refer to the process in which particular intra-actions reconfigures the field of possibilities. Intra-actions and apparatuses refer to particular ways in which agency articulates/reconfigures matter, like how the double-slit intra-acts with the electron to produce an interference pattern. Agency is therefore not an attribute of some thing, a force the apparatus exerts on the electron, but rather the name for a process which includes that of the apparatus intra-acting with the electron to produce the interference pattern¹⁸⁸. As such, agency is just another name for matter, “a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still”¹⁸⁹.

An apparatus, which is now defined as a *material-discursive practice*, is an enactment within matter that “produce determinate boundaries and properties of

¹⁸⁵ Barad, 2012, p. 14.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸⁷ Barad, 2007, p. 170. Emphasis in original removed.

¹⁸⁸ Barad also uses the term ‘cut’ as a synonym for the intra-action of an apparatus, as if an intra-action cuts into the very fabric of reality to produce individual entities, see Barad, 2007, pp. 148, 176, 326.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

“entities”¹⁹⁰, meaning that it can be any materialization as long as it determines certain boundaries and properties (exteriority-within-phenomena). Bohr failed to see that the idea of the apparatus could not be limited to mere laboratory instruments, and that it must be broadened to include anything that creates boundaries within phenomena, which includes language and also, importantly, the many forms of matter itself. This means that all things, both human and non-human, are ways in which boundaries are made within the world, that is, ways in which ontological indeterminacy becomes determinate. This does away with the inverted representationalism of poststructuralism, where it is chiefly (human) language or culture that are the conditions of the possibility of meaning, since matter is shown to be meaningful in and of itself, or more poetically, *matter matters*. It is in this precise sense Barad calls agential realism an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology*, since the acquiring of knowledge, of using apparatuses to make clear aspects of the world, is a part of the world in its dynamic becoming. We as knowing agents are co-constituted by the rest of the world, by our intra-action with it, which means that there is no clear line between knowing, being, and acting. In contrast to representationalism in the scientific sense (knowledge is a mirror of the world) and the poststructuralist sense (the world is a mirror of our knowledge), agential realism sees knowledge as more akin to a form of *mapping* or *cartography* (hence the title of Dolphijn and van der Tuin’s book). Following Dolphijn and van der Tuin, the agential realist/New Materialist approach to knowing is not to “[search] for the objectivity of things in themselves but for the objectivity of actualization and realization. [To search] for how matter comes into agential realism, how matter is materialized in it”¹⁹¹. Put simply, agential realism is about inquiring into the conditions for the possibility and actuality of matter coming to matter, and to show how these conditions are themselves rooted in materiality.

Concluding remarks

Even though Barad, and New Materialism in general, borrows heavily from poststructuralism, the key notion that drives Barad specifically is her reading of Bohr’s thesis on the embodiment of concepts in the scientific apparatus. What is revealed in the quantum experiment, according to Bohr, is the entanglement of matter and meaning, that

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 148.

¹⁹¹ Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 113.

whether an electron is a particle or a wave is literally a matter of how the measuring apparatus is constructed. Insofar as poststructuralism considers the production of concepts to ultimately refer to “human” or “social” production, it was unable to think that the production of reality is something that could happen in the absence of humans. By taking Bohr’s insights of the scientific laboratory and applying it to all phenomena, Barad argues that it is possible to think that any object is equally productive of (or rather, embodies) concepts as a human subject, an idea that she builds into a theory of *agential realism*. She develops Bohr’s notion of the *phenomenon*, which for Bohr remained a term reserved for the phenomenon observed in the quantum experiment, and argues that reality as such is a phenomenon, the product of an *intra-action* that determines reality. In the absence of an intra-action, reality is *indetermined*, it is neither this nor that, and somehow both. In order to get reality, an apparatus, which Barad redefines as any *material-discursive* practice, must *intra-act* with the phenomenon, in order to separate the agency of observation from the object of observation, that is, to determine this thing as being *this* and not *that*. Realism for Barad therefore requires dispensing with the notion of the in-itself, in favor of thinking intra-actions as productive of reality. This means that the notion of knowledge being a “mirror” to the world, i.e. representational, or the poststructuralist notion that the world is a “mirror” of our knowledge, must be replaced by a notion of knowledge as itself a part of the on-going production of reality, a knowledge that is not privileged for humans, but one that can be embodied in any material-discursive practice. Therefore, agential realism is an *ethico-onto-epistem-ological* doctrine, and argues that there is no fundamental difference between acting, knowing, and being. Every instance of one is an instance of the other two. Importantly, this goes for all being, meaning that all entities, human and non-human, are all responsible for the production of reality, and of the differences that pertains to it.

Part Two: The Interpretation

Chapter 4: The Contingency of Interpretation

Slavoj Žižek is a figure that receives lots of attention from philosophers associated with the speculative turn. Indeed, he has contributed to the anthology edited by Bryant et al. and is also featured in an interview in the same anthology. Žižek is nonetheless an illusive figure in the speculative turn, not least due to his, as Adrian Johnston characterizes it, “flurry of references and [...] multitude of engagements with different fields”¹⁹². Žižek’s “frenetic accumulation of an ever-growing number of cultural examples” coupled with his “famed forays into the twisting nooks and crannies of the popular imagination are liable to mislead readers into viewing him as an anti-systematic thinker”¹⁹³, a stark contrast to the philosophers discussed so far, who are careful to avoid unnecessary detours in their reasoning so that the reader can easily follow the development of their system of thought. In this chapter Žižek himself will not be discussed explicitly, rather a reading of the speculative turn based on Žižek’s method will be attempted. This method is associated with the notion of the *vanishing mediator*, which was briefly alluded to in the introduction. The vanishing mediator is “a necessary moment in the emergence of a new form” but whose “role becomes invisible once the New has arrived”¹⁹⁴. In this case it refers to the unstated premise that holds together the speculative turn, a premise implicitly held by the philosophers discussed in the previous chapters. In Žižekian fashion I will begin with a foray into what could have been an interesting dispute that between Sartre and Camus. I will then show the homology between this would-be dispute and the situation we are confronted with in the speculative turn. It will then be argued that the vanishing mediator of the speculative turn is the status of subjectivity, or rather, the assumption that subjectivity is either reducible to matter or a part of objective reality. Having demonstrated this as the necessary unstated assumption of the speculative turn we turn to the second part of the Žižekian reading. In this section it will be attempted to show the possibility of taking this new insight and use it to overcome what was identified in the previous chapters as the issue at the core of their philosophies. In particular, it will be argued that the very foundations of correlationism, the correlation between thinking and being, can be shown to be false, or at least less intuitive than often presented. This is nonetheless not an argument for the

¹⁹² Adrian Johnston. 2008. *Zizek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Kindle edition). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, locations 113-114.

¹⁹³ Ibid., locations 84-85.

¹⁹⁴ Žižek, 2014, p. 188.

falsity of the philosophies presented in the previous chapters, on the contrary it intends to show how they themselves are indispensable if we want to articulate a consistent realism.

The speculative turn and subjectivity

In 1947 Sartre published a commentary to Camus' *The Stranger*, in which he shows how the novel mirrors the themes Camus develops in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In his commentary Sartre remarks upon one of Camus' examples of the absurd from *The Myth*. Camus writes about walking down the street and seeing a man in a phone booth talking on the phone. We cannot hear him, since the glass partition prevents the sound from leaving the booth. The experience is at once humorous and frightening, "you cannot hear him but you see his incomprehensible dumb-show: you wonder why he is alive"¹⁹⁵. Since we cannot hear the person, his activity seems absurd, even non-human. It is as if what he is doing is 'acting human', as if he is manipulated by something other than himself. Sartre comments on this example: "The gesturing of a man who is telephoning and whom we cannot hear is really only *relatively* absurd, because it is part of an incomplete circuit. Listen in on an extension, however, and the circuit is completed; human activity recovers its meaning"¹⁹⁶. Camus never responded to this particular point, but he should have, since there is a lot to be said about Sartre's reading of the example¹⁹⁷. First of all the paragraph that precedes the example in question is about "perceiving that the world is 'dense', sensing to what degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us"¹⁹⁸ and that "that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd"¹⁹⁹. In other words, absurdity extends into the inorganic and the world as such. Secondly, the feeling of absurdity that arises seeing the man behind the glass partition is not due to a feature of the world (or in this case, a lack of it) but rather of a change in perspective in the observer. It is only "at certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspects of [humans], their meaningless

¹⁹⁵ Albert Camus. 2013. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. London: Penguin Books, p. 13.

¹⁹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre. 1955. "An Explication of The Stranger". Translated by Annette Michelson. In: *Literary and Philosophical Essays by Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York: Criterion Books. Available online at: https://www.sysprv.com/sartre_explication_stranger.html (accessed May 28, 2018).

¹⁹⁷ Note that I do not claim that Sartre himself thinks that absurdity is relative. This example is interesting primarily because of Sartre's response, not because it was made by Sartre (although it is noticeable that a figure like Sartre would make this point, since it is at the very least incongruent with Sartre's views, and a bad reading of the text).

¹⁹⁸ Camus, 2013, p. 12

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them”²⁰⁰. What Camus states, and what Sartre does not seem to get, is that for him the absurd is not a matter of degree, but is rather constitutive of every phenomenon. Every experience is haunted by the absurd, and can at any moment reveal its meaninglessness. The ‘circuit’ can never be completed since its incompleteness is constitutive of it. What is interesting is that Sartre does not get this, or rather, why he is so quick to assert the relativity of absurdity. Why does he shy away from this other interpretation which is equally supported by the text? This last question is of vital importance in what follows, since Sartre’s misrepresentation of Camus will be shown to be indicative of a more general attitude which is at the core of the speculative turn, an attitude that might lead to its downfall.

Out of the philosophers discussed in the previous chapters, Meillassoux stands out as the exemplary philosopher of the speculative turn. Not because his philosophy is more developed than the others (indeed, it isn’t), but because he provides the most rigorous critique of what stands in the way of a proper realist philosophy. As was shown in the first chapter, Meillassoux’s philosophy consists of two parts, a negative part, the critique of correlationism, and a positive part, the development of the principle of factuality (and grounding the absolute scope of mathematics on this principle). The negative part is centred on the failure of correlationism to account for the arche-fossil, i.e. that it has to supplant the literal truth of ancestral statements with the deeper truth of this literal meaning holding only insofar as it is for-us. The positive part sees in this failure of correlationism a deeper truth, namely the truth of the necessity of contingency. The problem for correlationism is that it holds on to a fundamental ignorance of the in-itself, an ignorance Meillassoux shows is actually our entry into the in-itself, or rather, its absolute contingency. With this move Meillassoux claims that he has overcome Kant and Kantian finitude, and its reiteration in language games and existential analytics, and provided a solid ground for modern realism. Can it, however, be the end? What questions arise in the wake of this discovery? Žižek points us toward a lacuna in Meillassoux’s opus which is at the core of Meillassoux’s philosophy. This lacuna concerns the status of the subject, the thinker of the correlation between thinking and being, or more particularly, its genesis, its coming to being. This lacuna is quite surprising, since the core of Meillassoux’s argument against correlationism is precisely its failure to account for pre-subjective reality, meaning that Meillassoux must think that the subject is something that has come into being at a particular point in time. The question that imposes itself upon this

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

analysis is therefore “not so much what more we can say about reality-in-itself, but how does our subjective standpoint, and subjectivity itself, fit into reality”²⁰¹? In *After Finitude* the status of the subject is never problematized, although he has made some remarks in other places that are of interest. In “Potentiality and Virtuality” he discusses the emergence of life from non-life and distinguishes two orthodoxies concerning this emergence: “either a ‘continuism’, a philosophy of immanence [...] which would have it that all matter is alive to some degree; or the belief in a transcendence exceeding the rational comprehension of natural processes”²⁰². In other words, either life did not emerge at all, but is a part of materiality itself, and that what we call living beings is a subset of the living universe as such, or what we call life transcends non-living matter and is irreducible to it. Against both these views Meillassoux asserts that with the principle of factuality it becomes possible to think the emergence of life as an irruption “*ex nihilo*” within “the very framework of an immanent temporality”²⁰³ such that “in every radical novelty, time makes manifest that it does not actualize a germ of the past, but that it brings forth a virtuality which did not pre-exist in any way”²⁰⁴. This is different from the transcendence of life from non-life since the emergence is not immanent to matter (or non-life) as such, rather the emergence is like an alien entity entering our universe, an absolute other coming to occupy our reality, in short, it is emergence *ex nihilo*. An analogous reasoning can be exploited with regard to subjectivity, and there is no reason to think that Meillassoux would disagree. Disregarding how unsatisfactory this is as an explanation for the emergence of life and/or subjectivity, there is a bigger issue at work here, which concerns what we refer to when we talk about subjectivity. Is it not almost too simple to say that the subject is just another thing in the world, at the same level as any other object? This is especially pressing since Meillassoux is still within Kantianism insofar as he conceives of the subject as the Kantian transcendental ego that imposes its forms and categories on the world (the only difference being that he thinks there is still room for an intellectual intuition that goes beyond the limits of these forms and categories towards the mathematical absolute). A simple question will reveal the problem with this picture, namely, what is the world in the absence of a subject to impose its categories and forms on it? Meillassoux wants to say that the world remains the same, yet he cannot since what we call

²⁰¹ Slavoj Žižek. 2011. “Interview [with Ben Howard]”. In: Bryant, L. et al. (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re:press p. 415.

²⁰² Quentin Meillassoux. 2011. “Potentiality and Virtuality”. Translated by Mackay, R. In: Levi Bryant et al. (eds.), *Continental Materialism and Realism*. Melbourne: re:press p. 235.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

“the world” is precisely what is revealed to us as transcendental egos. What would remain, supposedly, is the mathematical structure of the world, yet Meillassoux is no Pythagorean. For him, mathematics is the epistemology of the in-itself, not its ontology. Thus Meillassoux, despite the anti-Kantian thrust of his philosophy, “remains caught in the Kantian topic of the accessibility of the thing-in-itself: is what we experience as reality fully determined by our subjective-transcendental horizon, or can we get to know something about the way reality is independently of our subjectivity”²⁰⁵? To overcome Kant one must therefore, as Žižek argues, begin with subjectivity itself, or as he humorously puts it, show how “phenomena themselves arise within the flat stupidity of reality which just is”²⁰⁶.

This brings us back to the previous discussion of Camus and Sartre. With the speculative turn we are seeing a repetition of Sartre’s response to Camus, albeit in a somewhat modified version. Instead of the feeling of absurdity exemplified by Camus we are dealing with (the coming to being of) subjectivity itself as the site of disagreement, and instead of one figure, Sartre, we have three figures with slightly different responses. We have already seen that Meillassoux thinks that the genesis of the subject can be construed as a contingent event, an emergence *ex nihilo* that can be mathematized. In this sense, Meillassoux is very close to Sartre’s position since he thinks that the “absurdity of subjectivity” can be explained by appealing to a higher (mathematical) reason/meaning, or in other words, the genesis of subjectivity is only relatively absurd insofar as one conceives it as either a continuism or as a transcendence of matter into its other. Let us now look at how OOO and Barad/New Materialism would account for subjectivity.

While OOO and Barad/New Materialism differ in many important ways, on the topic of subjectivity they nevertheless do have one thing in common. This is the rejection of subjectivity, or more generally, thinking, as particularly human. For both philosophies, thinking is not primarily seen as a cognitive affair, but as a name for a certain type of relation, a relation that cannot be easily distinguished from other relations. Yet, in their agreement we can also discern a crucial difference. In OOO, “what spoons do when they scoop up soup is not very different from what I do when I talk about spoons”²⁰⁷, while for Barad, “knowing is a matter of intra-acting” meaning that “in some instances, “nonhumans” [...] emerge as partaking in the world’s active engagement in practices of knowing”²⁰⁸. In simplified terms, one can say that OOO sees thinking as essentially analogous with being, whereas Barad sees

²⁰⁵ Žižek, 2011, p. 415.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Morton, 2012, p. 215.

²⁰⁸ Barad, 2007, p. 149.

being as essentially analogous with thinking. For Barad the paradigmatic example of knowing, that is, of an intra-action, is the double-slit experiment. In it one supposedly demonstrates the fact that concepts are embodied in material apparatuses. The “thought” embodied in the apparatus determines reality. In OOO the picture is reverse, the apparatus withdraws from its concept, and thinking is simply another name for this withdrawal. To see this difference more clearly, let us compare their thought with Sartre’s reproach to Camus. We have already seen that Meillassoux is very close to Sartre’s position since he thinks that subjectivity can be accounted for by appealing to a higher (mathematical) reason. Both OOO and Barad would disagree, not just on the grounds that mathematics fails to exhaust reality, but more importantly because no system of knowing can exhaust reality. They nonetheless differ from Camus in important ways. For OOO, the reason why the appearance of the man in the phone booth strikes us as absurd is that he, as an object, withdraws from relations (in this case, his relation to us). However, this apparent absurdity is easily dismissed when one is reminded that this is a general feature of all relations between objects, that is, the gesticulating is equally “absurd” for the phone booth, since its relations to the man equally fails to exhaust him. By universalizing absurdity in this way, the crux of the matter disappears, in the sense that if everything is equally absurd to everything else, nothing is really absurd. Conversely, Barad can dissolve the apparent absurdity of the man in two ways. First, she could argue that since all knowing is the actualization of an intra-action, wherein the agency of observation and the object of observation is determined, we could say of this particular intra-action that the knowledge of the subject appears as a form of non-knowing, that is, our non-knowledge can be construed as a subset of knowing as such. Second, she could also argue that absurdity, the incompleteness of the circuit of meaning, is an ontological feature of the world, which is precisely what she does when she argues that in the absence of particular determinations, i.e. intra-actions, the world is meaningless (or rather, its meaning is indetermined). For Barad, Camus’ example is interchangeable with the quantum experiment, since in both of them, we directly experience the (quantum) indetermination of the world. What, then, is the problem with these two approaches? Essentially it comes down to their initial rejection of subjectivity as fundamentally human, a rejection that is sustained, in the case of OOO, by universalizing the gap between human and world to all object-object relations, and, in the case of Barad/New Materialism, by ontologizing this gap, i.e. making it a feature of the world as such. The problem is that in both cases the move from gap between human and world to universal feature of objects/ontological feature of the world assumes that such an analogy is intelligible. In the case of Barad, we have to accept that the quantum experiment is analogous to walking

down the street, but is it? Even beginning to think about their similarities quickly makes us aware of their differences. Scientific experiments (even non-quantum experiments) are highly artificial constructs, they require planning and carefully designed apparatuses, a radical departure from quotidian life²⁰⁹. The way in which concepts are embodied in a scientific apparatus can be more readily grasped than how they are embodied in the objects of everyday life, in particular since in the former we are talking about clearly defined technical terms whereas in the latter we are often dealing with vague, perhaps even contradictory terms. In OOO we get the obverse of this movement, namely, we have to accept that the triviality of a spoon scooping is analogous with the complex reasoning that goes into a scientific experiment. Insofar as these analogies remain unfounded, or have to be taken on faith, it stands to reason that one should remain sceptical of their intelligibility.

What these ruminations make clear, again, is that as long as our theory of subjectivity is either “that of transcendental subjectivity [Meillassoux]” or “that of reducing the subjective to a part of objective reality [OOO, Barad]” we are stumped as to the why of subjectivity as such, of why “reality redouble itself and start to appear to itself”²¹⁰. The issue we are confronting bears striking similarities to the (in)famous hard problem of consciousness, of how consciousness can arise from non-conscious matter. There are four general ways of solving this problem: 1) reductionism, which argues that consciousness exists and is reducible to matter; 2) emergentism, which argues that consciousness exists and is not reducible to matter; 3) panpsychism, which argues that consciousness exists and is the same as matter; 4) eliminativism, which argues that consciousness does not exist, only matter. Meillassoux falls into the reductionist category, although he does not think consciousness is reducible to matter as such, but to its mathematized properties. OOO and Barad fall into the panpsychist camp, although we should keep in mind that the definition used here is rather vague. The point is, in any case, that for both of them consciousness as such is not reducible to matter, nor does it emerge from it, rather, the difference between matter and consciousness is unclear and unsubstantiated. Panpsychism is easily opposed to reductionism, but in light of the recent discussion we can now see their similarities. In both one ends up getting rid of subjectivity proper, in the former since its distinction from matter is lost, and in the latter because a downward reduction of subjectivity can only be performed by excluding subjectivity as such (by turning it into an object). This, precisely, is the vanishing mediator that sustains the speculative turn, namely the (false) choice between either the reduction of subjectivity to

²⁰⁹ I thank Vetlesen for making me aware of this point in our discussion of Barad.

²¹⁰ Žižek, 2011, p. 415.

matter/mathematics or the universalizing/ontologizing of subjectivity as such. The difficult task now is how to turn these philosophies into vanishing mediators themselves. For this we must return to what was identified in the individual chapters as the major philosophical problem they try to articulate and reinvestigate them with the added benefit of having uncovered their unstated assumptions.

Subjectivity and the speculative turn

In the first chapter Meillassoux was shown to be presenting contemporary philosophy with an ultimatum: either scientific statements have an absolute scope or we remain within correlationism. As long as our choice was sustained by the belief that subjectivity either has to be reducible to matter/mathematics or else must be a part of objective reality (in either the OOO sense of thinking being like reality or in Barad's sense of reality being like thinking) the choice is an impossible one, since in both cases subjectivity proper is lost. The true ultimatum is thus not the choice between the absolute scope of science and correlationism, but the choice between asserting the reducibility/analogy of subjectivity to matter and asserting its radical irreducibility (and/or non-existence). Or in other words, correlationism is not simply the thesis that thinking is correlated with being and vice versa, but also the stronger thesis of the irreducibility of the one to the other. Since the first prong of the ultimatum fails, that is, it works only by excluding subjectivity proper, we are forced to choose correlationism. The difference however is that we have now gained knowledge about the correlation, namely the irreducibility of its terms. The first step in overcoming correlationism therefore resides in the very affirmation of its premises, and to fully accept its consequences. In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux likens the correlationist position to those Christian creationists who believe in the literal truth of the Bible²¹¹. According to these people the world was created 6000 years BC, which is in flat contradiction with scientific evidence that both the planet and the universe is much older. The way in which they resolve this contradiction is by arguing that God created the world precisely so that it would appear to be much older than it is (as perhaps a test of our faith). This position is obviously wrong as a scientific theory, yet it "contains a grain of truth: what [Jacques] Lacan calls the *objet a*, the subject's impossible-Real objectal counterpart [in this case, the arche-fossil], is precisely such an "imagined" [...] object which never positively

²¹¹Meillassoux, 2008, pp. 33-34.

existed in reality – it emerges through its loss, it is directly created as a fossil”²¹². In other words, we should admit that our reality is like that of the Christian creationists, where the arche-fossil is indeed a retrojection of our present experience into the past. On its own this might seem like a reversion to some form of idealism, that reality is reducible to our thinking, but note that the corollary to this position is precisely the irreducibility of being to thinking. The strange position we are in is one where there is being only insofar as it is correlated with thinking, yet being as such cannot be reduced to thinking. The question to be asked is therefore not how we can come to know objective reality, but why reality must redouble itself, appear to itself, in order to gain substantial being. In other words, the way to overcome correlationism is not by discovering a new absolute, but to ask the meta-transcendental question of how reality must be for it to be necessary that it appears to itself in order to fully come into being. By framing the question in this manner, one can read the problems fuelling OOO and Barad/New Materialism in a new way.

Reading OOO alongside Barad shows that they both attempt to “normalize” subjectivity (what was broadly called the panpsychist option) by either making the subject-object relation a subset of all object-object relations, or by ontologizing subjectivity so that all relations are subject-object relations, respectively. This silent agreement, complimented by explicit disagreement, will help us answer anew what was identified as their main problem. For OOO it was the question of why all attempts at knowing an object always fail and leave us no closer to the object in-itself. Objects always resist paraphrasing in terms of their constituent parts (undermining) or in terms of their effects (overmining), which together with duomining are “the three basic forms of knowledge”²¹³. Realism can therefore not, from the OOO standpoint, be established through any form of knowledge but by “a subtler, more indirect way of addressing the world”²¹⁴. In contrast, what drives Barad is the Bohrian insight that concepts are embodied in apparatuses, that in the quantum experiment knowledge and reality are inseparable. She takes this to mean that all phenomena, not just scientific ones, are inseparable from the concepts embodied in the general apparatus, the material-discursive practice. For Barad the problem is precisely that one cannot postulate an in-itself beyond appearances, since if concepts and, a fortiori, knowing, is not representational, the idea of a thing-in-itself that resists representation is unintelligible. On a simplified reading OOO and Barad seem like two philosophical extremes, the former maintaining the reality of the in-itself

²¹² Slavoj Žižek. 2012. *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Kindle edition). London: Verso, locations 14266-14268.

²¹³ Harman, 2016, p. 12.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

while denying its knowability, and the latter maintaining the irreality of the in-itself while upholding its knowability (not of the in-itself per se, but of reality). This reading, however, fails to take into account how both philosophies are born out of the denial of the reducibility of subjectivity to matter and the affirmation of the panpsychist hypothesis. To complete the picture we must add the missing positions, namely the position that the in-itself exists and is knowable, and the position that the in-itself does not exist and is unknowable. The former position is represented by Meillassoux, yet the latter is not simply correlationism. Recall that correlationism is agnostic as to the existence of the in-itself, for it the unknowability of the in-itself is just that; we are absolutely ignorant of the in-itself, even its (non-)existence. The new position affirms the in-existence of the in-itself, and affirms our inability to be certain of this fact. Being is here not correlated with thinking, but with a kind of non-thinking, and thinking is correlated with non-being. This position may sound strange, but carefully reading OOO alongside Barad will show its plausibility.

The important thing to note is that in both Barad and OOO, the theme of non-knowing and non-being play a prominent role. For OOO, the unknowability of the in-itself is precisely the reason for believing in its existence, that we cannot know what a thing is in-itself means that there must be some thing that we do not know what is. In Barad we get the opposite of OOO, the quantum experiment shows that there is no being without knowledge, and so the unknowability of the in-itself is precisely the proof of its non-existence. What is important in both cases is how knowing/non-knowing is constitutive of being/non-being. In OOO, for objects to appear it is necessary that there is a thing-in-itself beyond its appearance which we cannot know, while for Barad a knowing subject is constitutive of being, including non-being. As long as their thought is guided by the notion that subjectivity and reality are analogous, this seems like a deadlock. Either the thing-in-itself exist beyond appearances and holds for all object-object relations, or there is no thing-in-itself beyond appearance which means that all relations are subject-object relations. If we affirm the emergence of subjectivity, however, this picture changes. Yes, the thing-itself exists beyond appearances but only for the subject-object relation, whereas in object-object relations there is just the object of the relation as such, its appearance, not any objects-in-themselves. Therefore, reality can only appear insofar as the subject posits this reality as existing beyond the limits of its reason, i.e. the appearance of reality is correlated with the non-knowledge of its in-itself, whereas knowledge is always about a certain form on non-being, since it tries to represent the world as it is in the absence of a subject. With this line of reasoning the parameters of Meillassoux's ultimatum have shifted. Neither can we know reality in-itself, nor do we fall back into correlationism. Rather, the

ultimatum concerns the existence of subjectivity itself. Recall that the obverse of emergentism is not reductionism, but eliminativism. An eliminativist can easily agree with the characterization of Meillassoux, OOO and Barad, and conclude that the best option is to deny subjectivity altogether. This is in fact attempted by Meillassoux's translator, Ray Brassier, in his book *Nihil Unbound*²¹⁵. In it he argues that our notion of subjectivity is based on 'folk-psychology', and could potentially be replaced with a sophisticated neuroscience. Folk-psychology is a term that refers to our discourse on propositional attitudes, a discourse that according to eliminativism is "fundamentally defective"²¹⁶ as a scientific theory of subjectivity. Brassier's claim is that it is possible to account for propositional attitudes, for the correlation of thinking and being, in objective scientific terms, thus getting rid of the need of positing a subject in the first place. The complexities of this position notwithstanding, the point is precisely that it admits of the same assumption as the position developed above. Either we have absolute access to reality, in which case there can be no subjectivity proper, or there is subjectivity in which case there can be no absolute access to reality. This, then, is the ultimate ultimatum. The antinomy between correlationism and the absolute scope of science concerns the very reality of the subject itself. Meillassoux and OOO/Barad are compromises, in the case of Meillassoux because he compromises on the absolute scope of mathematics by allowing the existence of subjectivity, and OOO/Barad by compromising the reality of subjectivity by thinking it in analogy with reality.

The upshot of this investigation is on the whole more negative in its content than it is positive. It has only been shown that an alternate path to realism is plausible, not that it is preferable. At the same time the implausibility of the other paths have been demonstrated, and a clear idea of what is at stake has been developed. If anything, this makes us more prepared to tackle the issue of realism with an increased awareness of the benefits and drawbacks of our initial position. One major point that must not go unmentioned is that even if deficiencies have been shown in the various positions that are available to us, these are as of now the positions that we have to work with. A Žižekian reading is equally as constructive as it is deconstructive. It does not claim that pointing out deficiencies is enough; it must also be shown how these deficiencies can work in our favour. A truly Žižekian reading would therefore go beyond the scope of this paper, and develop a consistent theory of realism precisely on the failed attempts of others. In this particular reading the goal was only to

²¹⁵ Ray Brassier. 2007. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

²¹⁶ Paul Churchland. 1981. "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes". In: *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 78, no. 2, Feb. Quoted in Brassier, 2007, p. 9.

uncover the unstated assumptions of the speculative turn and demonstrate the *possibility* of alternative positions, not articulate them in their entirety. The point nonetheless stands that simply dismissing these positions can not work, rather, one must work through the positions, have a dialogue with them, in order to overcome them.

Conclusion

If anything is clear from this paper it is that nothing is clear. Nevertheless, we have not returned to Socrates' position, for whom all we know is that we do not know. In the first place, we stand in a much better position with regard to knowing what it is in particular that we do not know. By going through the three major moments of the speculative turn we have gained an understanding of what presents itself as the major issues that have not been solved by contemporary philosophy, and thereby demonstrated the need for better answers.

Secondly, we have also uncovered a dimension in Socrates' position which he himself does not recognize. Juxtaposing these philosophers have shown that there are not just things we know that we do now know, but that there are also things that we do not know that we know, unstated assumptions that determines our thought. The very form of this paper demonstrates the method for uncovering this unthought thought. First one must fully assume the views in question and go along with its premises, then, having demonstrated their common assumptions, repeat the juxtaposition by focusing on how that assumption articulates itself in their philosophy. This operation does not by itself lead us to the truth, but it does steer us away from falsity. Thus, we have actually gained an upper hand with regard to Socrates, since we can claim that our non-knowledge is infinitely closer to the truth than his.

The first chapter focused on Meillassoux, who's *After Finitude* was instrumental in popularizing the speculative movement. In the wake of its release, other figures have emerged, but Meillassoux still remains a reference point due to his reading of post-Kantian philosophy as a regression from the Copernico-Galilean scientific revolution into correlationism, which he claims undermines the literal truth of (ancestral) scientific statements. Strong correlationism is the most virulent strain of correlationism, since it claims that not only is the in-itself unknowable, it is also unthinkable. All descriptions of how reality is in-itself are equally (im)probable. Conversely, the problem of realism is debunked as a pseudo-problem, since the very distinction between reality and appearance is internal to the correlation. We are always-already in the world, so asking whether there really is a world beyond that is meaningless. Meillassoux claims that strong correlationism is the default position of contemporary philosophy, and fears that remaining within correlationism might lead to the demise of scientific truth. He nonetheless praises correlationism for its de-absolutism, which he thinks is crucial if the Copernico-Galilean revolution is going to survive. Correlationism shows that if we want to ground scientific truth, we cannot ground it in a necessary entity. We cannot rely on God to make sure our thinking does not deceive us.

Meillassoux must therefore uncover an absolute which is nonetheless not an absolute entity, which he finds in the *principle of factuality*, the principle that contingency is the only necessity. Meillassoux is equally famous for his critique of correlationism as he is for his inventive solution. As with the philosophers discussed here, most philosophers of the speculative turn would more or less agree with the critique, but disagree on his solution.

In the second chapter, we saw that OOO agrees with Meillassoux diagnosis of post-Kantian philosophy, but argues that correlationism has its roots not in Kant's transcendental idealism but in Hume's empiricism. In Harman's reading of Heidegger, the way in which objects withdraw into the background is turned into an ontological principle. All objects withdraw from their relations. In order to explain how objects engage in relations, philosophers have usually posited an exception to the rule, an entity that is the mediator of relations. In the theological version God is the exception, and all interactions between objects are done vicariously through Him, while in the empiricist version, the (human) observer is the mediator of relations, cause and effect are one of its habits. Insofar as realism requires us to think reality as being independent from its relations, the "hypocritical exception"²¹⁷ of a single entity will not suffice, and a more radical approach to think relationality must be developed. To think this relationality we cannot resort to a form of knowledge, since knowing inevitably substitutes the object in question for either its constitutive parts or its effect. Therefore, the approach must be a "subtler" and more "indirect way" of talking about reality. Morton, who has become a prominent philosopher in the OOO movement and one of its popularisers, develops a theory of causality, and more generally, relationality, as an aesthetic phenomenon. Relations do not hold between objects as such, but is the appearance of one object to another. The appearance of an object is not the object-in-itself, but a caricature, a "liar" in Morton's parlance. Therefore, in reality objects never come into direct contact, rather, relations are the result of objects appearing to each other as precisely what they are not, they do not hold between objects as they are in-themselves.

In the third chapter, Barad offers a second twist on Meillassoux's critique. The problem for her is not that correlationism is antithetical to the ability of science to accurately represent reality in-itself, but because it still adheres to the epistemology of representationalism. Following post-structuralism she points out how concepts themselves arise in and through material production, and synthesizes this view with Bohr's interpretation of quantum mechanics. The key point for Bohr is that in a scientific measurement, the concept

²¹⁷ Harman, 2007, p. 115

does not so much arise as it is embodied in the very apparatus of the measurement. There is no clear distinction between the content of the concept one is attempting to measure (say, whether an electron is a wave or particle) and the form of the apparatus itself. As long as post-structuralism argued that “material production” ultimately means “human” production, it is impossible to see how concepts can be embedded in reality itself, even in the absence of humans. In her *agential realism* she argues that the quantum experiment, which demonstrates that quantum reality cannot be disentangled from the apparatus used to measure it, is an ontological principle, specific material configurations is necessary for reality to come into being. Humans are part of reality, and as such we are also responsible for its coming into being. Thus knowledge does not try to represent reality in-itself, but is itself a part of the ongoing materialization of matter.

In the fourth chapter these figures were brought together in a Žižekian reading. What drove this chapter was the notion of the *vanishing mediator*, of uncovering the unstated assumption that holds them together. It started by scrutinizing Meillassoux’s treatment of subjectivity, which is conspicuously lacking in *After Finitude*, a work that emphasises the fact that subjectivity or thought at some point in time was not. The closest we came to an investigation of subjectivity is his brief discussion of the emergence of life “Potentiality and Virtuality”, where he maintains that his system allows thinking life as having arisen *ex nihilo*. It was not unreasonable to think that Meillassoux would not use the same line of argument with regard to subjectivity as such. From the standpoint of Meillassoux’s system, however, that meant that subjectivity is reducible in terms of mathematics, since mathematics can potentially exhaust reality as such. It was then shown that both OOO and Barad are doing the same thing, but in the opposite direction. Subjectivity is not ultimately reducible to matter/mathematics, rather, subjectivity is actually quite similar to reality. For OOO, the subject-object relation is just a subset of all object-object relations, while for Barad, all relations are subject-object relations. In all these cases, what is lost is subjectivity proper. The absolute otherness of subjectivity vis à vis objectivity. The unstated premise is precisely that there is no subjectivity as such, it is either reducible to matter, or else a part of matter, in one way or another. As long as Meillassoux remains the central reference point of the speculative turn, this default attitude has to be presupposed, and the problem remains whether thought can go beyond itself and think the in-itself, or if thought is itself part of reality.

Having uncovered the vanishing mediator, it was attempted to show that it is possible to frame this problem differently, in a way that saves subjectivity proper. In order to do this, we returned to the individual chapters, and what was identified as their *raison d’être*. On this

new reading, Meillassoux's ultimatum between scientific access to the in-itself or remaining within correlationism could be construed as a choice between upholding the existence of subjectivity proper in which case access to the in-itself is impossible, or championing access to the in-itself in which case there can be no subjectivity as such. By reading OOO alongside Barad, it was shown that the first prong of this ultimatum could be developed into a coherent realism. By taking from OOO the idea that all objects are withdrawn from their relations, that all appearance essentially covers up the thing-in-itself, coupled with Barad's notion that reality depends on embodied concepts for it to come into being, the very coordinates of correlationism were shifted. It was no longer that thought is correlated with being, but that all thought is fundamentally correlated with a particular non-being, the appearances of objects, appearances whose essence is that they are not the object-in-itself. Conversely, since reality requires that a subject knows that reality in order to come into being, it is unnecessary to postulate a thing-in-itself, rather, the subject's ignorance of how an object that appears is in-itself is constitutive of the appearance of reality. This demonstrates that it is possible to think different paths to overcome correlationism, paths that avoid the pitfalls of Meillassoux's initial articulation of the problem and retains a notion of subjectivity proper. It is not unthinkable that the split in realism will not be between those who think that science can ultimately reduce subjectivity to materiality contra those who think subjectivity is a part of objective reality, but between those who think that subjectivity exists and is absolutely other to matter contra those who think that subjectivity is ultimately a fiction and can be eliminated in favour of a better scientific theory. If anything has been proved, it is that this is absolutely a way in which the speculative turn could potentially evolve.

The speculative turn is an important movement in the current philosophical climate, and resonates with tendencies seen in culture, politics, and science. The way in which the relationship between the subject, reality and truth is conceived have consequences that go far beyond the university faculty, and it is only right that philosophers should struggle with this question. Meillassoux, OOO, and Barad, are all prime examples of thinkers that take this question seriously, and are for the time being among the major philosophers associated with the speculative turn. This alone is a good enough reason to read them, although an even better reason is precisely their different takes on realism. It is interesting that something so mundane as reality should be so controversial, which for anyone observing this controversy can only mean that there are some deep problems that are ultimately fuelling it. It also indicates that there is a certain urgency to this question, a feeling of discomfort in not having a clear answer is evoked. In this regard, Meillassoux is an excellent philosopher to begin with for getting a

sense of the urgency in question. His insistence on the failure of correlationism might for some appear to be overly polemical, yet he cannot simply be dismissed as an outright lunatic. If we choose to remain with correlationism we have to accept that an important part of western thought, the Copernico-Galilean scientific revolution, is incompatible with our view. When the stakes are this high, it is simply no alternative to let that be the last word. Similarly, one must read Object-Oriented philosophers in order to get a sense of the difficulty that arises when one attempts to account for relationality, and Barad to get a sense of the difficulty of even positing a reality in-itself beyond appearance. If realism is to succeed these problems must be addressed, since they are all problems at the heart of realism.

The conclusion we have arrived at is twofold, or rather, it is one conclusion with two articulations, one substantial and the other methodical. The first articulation is what has been said so far, that the speculative turn is an important step forward in the move toward realism, yet proves to be insufficient insofar as its unstated assumptions has not been brought into the light. Uncovering this vanishing mediator has shown that with regard to the substance of the speculative turn, there are possibilities that are open and yet to be developed, possibilities that are plausible from the point of view of the speculative turn itself. The second conclusion is methodical and concern the very way in which we have to move forward if progress in the field of realism. This is the conclusion that is supported by the form of the paper. If we want to make progress, a certain openness to other views must be presupposed. One must charitably read one's contemporaries, pay careful attention to their details, since the parameters of the debate can change, making what appeared to be a deficiency in a philosophy the means for overcoming the problems of another. One should relentlessly agree with one's philosophical peers, commit to them fully, so that hopefully at some point a deficiency in the system can be spotted, or one can find in it the means for solving another philosopher's deficiency. This method is reminiscent of Groundation, a peculiar ritual found in the Rastafari religion which is a version of the Christian mass. After playing music and smoking marijuana, the priests and elders get into fierce debates about the intricacies of Rastafari doctrine. These debates can at times get heated, but when the Groundation ceremony is over, everyone becomes friends again and will not quarrel until the next Groundation. Similarly, fierce debates on the "doctrine" of realism should be encouraged, while a mutual friendship outside these debates should be cultivated. This is not the same as saying that one should stay in the position of an outside observer judging the truth or falsity of a given position, on the contrary, progress can only be made by inserting oneself in the thick of the debate, by being one of its participants. The present text does imply this, but does not

itself do it; it attempts to be an outside observer, which is why it is only able to conclude negatively. Claiming a positive truth on the question of realism would necessitate the scrutiny of that position, of uncovering its vanishing mediator, an ambition that goes well beyond the purview of this paper. If anything, the present text is an example of how not to do what one ought to do. It stops at the very moment it begins to get interesting. If a consistent realism is to be possible, it is imperative that we do not compromise our thought, but take it to its very end.

Appendix

From Absurdity to Banality: Thoughts on the Possibility of a Contemporary Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophy that addresses the facticity of our being in the world. In its essence, existentialism is an attempt to answer the question “now what?” In one simple question, the whole of reality and our place in it is put under the microscope. Yet, as has been demonstrated by a number of philosophers, not all of them existentialists, this question has no answer. By trying to answer it, we either act in bad faith, or else take an unwarranted leap of faith. For Camus, the only answer was to think that Sisyphus is happy, and enjoy our revolt against the absurdity of the clash between the world and ourselves. Is that the final word, however? Is there anything in recent developments in philosophy or the world that changes this formula? The short answer is yes. The longer answer is what follows.

What defined the 20th century was the unravelling of the rational structure of society. Diplomatic bonds turned to hostility between nations, the progress of science turned into the atomic bomb, and compassion for our fellow men turned into the holocaust. When 20th century man asked the question of the meaning of life, the response was a thunderous silence. Camus writes, in 1942, a wonderful passage that exemplifies the profundity of this meaninglessness:

And here are trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste. These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes – how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine. You describe it to me and you teach me to classify it. You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge I admit that they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multi-colored universe can be reduced to the atom and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know²¹⁸.

The beauty of this quote notwithstanding, we cannot disregard how anachronistic his examples appear to the 21st century sensitivity. Our universe is no longer the classical

²¹⁸ Camus, 2013, pp. 16-17.

universe of atoms and electrons, but the quantum universe of indeterminacy. It is as if Camus' reproach to the scientist has been assumed by the scientist himself. It is no longer he who comes up with hypotheses, rather, it is the world itself²¹⁹! In our current state, the words of Camus take on a different meaning. Whereas for him it was the statements about the world - its truths - that inevitably turned into poetry, for us it is poetry that strangely enough takes on the form of truth. A contemporary existentialism must take this as its starting point.

When Camus pondered the meaning of life, the world answered him with a roaring silence, and the truths offered by his peers turned into meaningless poetry, a mere play with words. What happens in our century is the opposite, when we ponder the meaning of life, the world answers with meaningless poetry, while our peers can only offer us silence. Is it possible to conceive of revolt against this absurdity? For Camus, the revolt against the absurd is the revolt against the failure of the world to answer our questions. What happens when instead of a failure of the world to answer our questions, we are instead confronted with an infinite multiplicity of answers, so many in fact that it becomes impossible to hear the end of one answer before another has already presented itself? It is as if God, when Job asks him why he has put him through his miseries, answers him by quoting that famous line from *The Big Lebowski*: "yeah, well, you know, that's just, like, you're opinion man". Instead of meaninglessness, what we find at the end of our pondering is a profound banality. There is meaning, to be sure, but that meaning is useless, stupid, and boring. How does one revolt against stupid meaning?

If a new existentialism is going to thrive, it has to revise Camus' notion of the absurd. It is no longer the irreconcilability of "the irrational [the world] and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart"²²⁰, but rather the irreconcilability of a world bombarding us with meaning and our longing to simply be left alone. Revolt can in this case only mean its opposite. It is precisely in the most trivial of situations we can break out of the shackles of absurdity. For Camus it is habit that keeps us from confronting absurdity, in the comfort of a routine the "one truly serious problem in philosophy" is kept at a distance. By asking "why" we temporarily escape this routine and are forced to provide an answer: either falling back into routine or self-annihilation. In this day and age, however, asking why has become routine, existential angst is a commodity that can be bought at the supermarket. The truly radical act of today is not to ask questions, but to accept the premises that are given and

²¹⁹ Is the atom here or there, not even reality knows.

²²⁰ Camus, 2013, p. 17.

struggle to maintain their continued existence. For this absurd philosophy there is but one truly serious philosophical question, and that is, “do you want fries with that?”

Is Sisyphus happy? Probably not. However, he is not sad either. In this version, Sisyphus’ mood is like that of standing in line at the convenience store behind an old lady. At first he grows impatient, and then his impatience grows into frustration. But then, as if by some miracle, he remembers something... but what? Was it to turn off the stove? No. Maybe it was that thing next week and that he must remember to buy flowers. And so, before he knows it, it is he who is standing there, tallying up his ones and fives, repeating the cycle forever, and ever.

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