

21ST CENTURY SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY: REFLECTIONS ON THE “NEW METAPHYSICS” AND ITS REALISM AND MATERIALISM

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ABSTRACT: Regarding the state of contemporary metaphysics, as it has been said, “There’s something in the air.”¹ My goal in this essay is to offer some brief reflections on the state of contemporary metaphysics, otherwise called contemporary “speculative” philosophy – the “something in the air” – that has resurfaced within the early part of the 21st century. In order to clarify the nature of the new metaphysics in question I proceed by isolating *geographically* and *topically* two main tendencies of thought which appear to constitute it: namely continental *realism* and continental *materialism*.² I argue that clarifying the nature of these tendencies better characterizes what metaphysics means today. With respect to the possible ambiguity of “continental realism” or “continental materialism” in the 21st century, a consideration of “speculative realism” seems necessary if only to position my analysis upon a specific conceptual map. From there I offer thoughts as to how contemporary continental realism and materialism (the “new metaphysics”) may be said to be defined first and foremost by its engagement with a concept identified as “correlationism,” a central feature of the new metaphysics’ rejection of the sort of philosophy that has come before it.

¹ Patrice Maniglier, “Metaphysics Today: The Methodological Controversy,” *Presentation celebrating the 90th anniversary of Presses Universitaires de France (PUF)*, Multimedia Institute and Institut Français: Zagreb, (June 2012), series MétaphysiqueS.

² The term “continental” may be misleading here, however the new metaphysics in question, while mostly part of a phenomenon that has stemmed from Europe (Germany and France), is nevertheless in dialogue with a much larger Anglo-American tradition, as well as a *historical* tradition whose geographical borders are porous. Yet, if there were one “history” or “tradition” of idiom and conceptual structure within and through which the new metaphysics proceeds, it would be the “continental” tradition first and foremost, i.e. post-Kantian philosophers such as Deleuze, Derrida, Heidegger, Badiou – even if the new metaphysics in many cases sets itself *against* these figures polemically by pragmatically appropriating resources from competing traditions. “Continental realism is a middle path that accepts, contra traditionalist continental philosophy, that the natural sciences, realism, and analytic philosophy are not a threat, but aids in the task of first science: *metaphysics*.” Paul Ennis, *Continental Realism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), preface.

KEYWORDS: Speculative Philosophy; Realism; Materialism; Phenomenology; Quentin Meillassoux; Ray Brassier; Speculative Realism

I. INTRODUCTION

“Speculative realism” was a term originally coined by the philosopher Raymond Brassier (b. 1965), author of *Nihil Unbound* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).³ It was essentially used to describe a broad array of topics in metaphysics which were under discussion at a conference titled “Speculative Realism,” held at the Goldsmiths College, University of London in April of 2007.⁴ Earlier, however, the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (b. 1967) used the term “speculative materialism” to describe his own position which would later be expounded upon in his momentous *After Finitude* (trans. Ray Brassier, London and New York: Continuum 2008).⁵ In recent times, the term has fanned out to include what is now generally perceived as a certain “spirit” of speculation animating a “new metaphysics” or a “new materialism,” where such positions comprise contemporary realism and materialism in the 21st century.⁶ This new “spirit” may be described as a “speculative turn” which occurred after continental philosophy’s late 20th century “theological turn.”⁷

³ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

⁴ See Collapse III: Unknown Deleuze + Speculative Realism, ed. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2007).

⁵ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), also Quentin Meillassoux, “L’inexistence divine. Essai sur le Dieu virtuel,” Thèse de doctorat, École normale supérieure, 1997.

⁶ As Jussi Parikka notes, despite the current enthusiasm for “neo-materialism” or the “new materialism,” the term “neo-materialism” was first employed in the early 1990s by Rosi Braidotti, well before its re-appearance in the first part of the decade in the twenty first century. See <http://jussiparikka.net/2013/05/13/new-materialisms-round-four/>, retrieved July 23, 2013.

⁷ The “speculative turn” is largely credited with the Goldsmith’s conference, however it is true that continental philosophy has had a *longstanding* interest in metaphysics despite recent critiques (someone such as Deleuze would be a recent philosopher who emphasizes metaphysics, for example). A dated but fine engagement with speculative philosophy which accounts for this historical lineage can be found in Andrew Reck, *Speculative Philosophy: A Study of its nature, types, and uses* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972). This volume traces the historical antecedents of speculative philosophy and leads up to the middle of the twentieth-century. It may serve as a historical “go-by” for those seeking an overview of the history of speculative philosophy and indicate how the “turn” to speculative philosophy owes much to a history of both continental and Anglo-American metaphysics. I would also suggest Lee Braver, *A Thing of This World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007) and Ian James, *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012) for contemporary perspective on the debate. American philosophy, a much younger style and domain of philosophy distinct from the continental tradition, has always been speculative as much as it has been grounded in the concrete and

The central themes of this new current of philosophy could be summarized rather tersely, although the philosophical implications taken therefrom are far reaching. The themes, simply put, are *materialism*, *realism*, and *metaphysics*.⁸ While the term "speculative realism" specifically is now less frequently used due to the controversy surrounding what it actually means (no one philosopher appears to self-identify with the term "speculative realist" as such), "speculative realism" *can* be used as an initial marker "of sorts" in order to describe *tendencies of thought* whose concerns remain tied to materialism, realism, and metaphysics in a specific sense. (This sense, I would argue, may be analogous to using the term "postmodernism" in order to mark off general tendencies or shared points of concern which then may be distilled down to specific themes: for example, moving from the broader category of "postmodernism" to the more specific category of "deconstructionism.") Although that clarifying usage of "speculative realism," too, is becoming less frequent as the boundaries of the term dissipate. Still, in its short five or six year history, if I were absolutely pressed to summarize it, the spirit animating "speculative realism" could be compared to a remark that I once heard concerning the best of German idealism: it was an astonishing but brief flare in the night.⁹

"pragmatic." Metaphysics is not uncommon to the likes of Peirce, James, and Dewey, who all strive to show how the practical and theoretical are one. See Sandra B. Rosenthal, *Speculative Pragmatism* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1990). Interestingly, figures often associated with the revival of metaphysics in Europe, including Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, cite James and Dewey as significant influences.

⁸ I believe that there is a good consensus that these three items could serve as uniting points for this new version of speculative philosophy. I am drawing from the generally positive reception of a recent conference held at the Freie Universität of Berlin in 2012, "Contemporary Materialism, Realism, and Metaphysics," organized by Armen Avanesian and Tobias Huber. See: http://www.sfb626.de/veranstaltungen/veranstaltungsarchiv/workshops/sfb626_workshop_Contemporary_Materialism_3.html.

⁹ My goal here is not to debate the "existence" of speculative realism but rather to simply state that the term's meaning is, at best, ambiguous and not a popular label that contemporary philosophers self-identify with. Only one book that is exclusively *about* "speculative realism" has been published in the half decade that has passed since the first Speculative Realism conference: Peter Gratton's *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (London & New York: Continuum, 2013). It may be safer to say, as Iain Hamilton Grant has, that "speculative realism" at best can, at times, substitute as an "umbrella term" in order to describe specific metaphysical concerns - concerns that were initially presented at a conference having the name "Speculative Realism." Today those concerns have been taken up by numerous philosophers - mostly in the continental tradition although not exclusive to it - who have a renewed interest in metaphysics. See, Iain Hamilton Grant, "Speculative realism," *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 50 (3) 2010: 58-9. It is worth noting that Grant, as well as Brassier, were among the original four conference participants. Brassier's take on speculative realism may be more harsh than Grant's, but is fairly accurate in my opinion: "The 'speculative realist movement' exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-

As Meillassoux (the most prominent figure of speculative realism) is from France though, and setting German idealism aside for the moment, European continental philosophy has had a longstanding relationship with French philosophers who have largely dominated what continental philosophy *means*, especially when it comes to attitudes concerning metaphysics.¹⁰ Today, the speculative spirit figures into contemporary continental philosophy positively such that philosophers including François Laruelle and his "non-standard philosophy" (Brassier was among the first of the speculative philosophers with an interest in Laruelle), Bruno Latour (responsible for the creation of a school of thought known as "actor-network theory," responsible as well as for a recrudescence of interest in science and technology studies, philosophical anthropology, and sociology among continental circles), and Catherine Malabou (responsible for a corresponding resurgence in new forms of materialism and neurobiology) have all received significant attention in France where they all, also, represent the new metaphysics underway.¹¹ Also in France, the new metaphysics is shaped by the CIEPFC organization, headed by Quentin Meillassoux, Frédéric

psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don't believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze's remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a 'movement' whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity." Interview with Ray Brassier, "I am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in Truth," *Kronos* (March, 2011).

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy* (London and New York: Verso, 2012). It must be noted here as well that continental philosophy is often pitted against "analytic" philosophy, however this distinction, too, is appearing to dissipate in the approach of the new metaphysical philosophy in question. A "hybrid" form of metaphysics has appeared in the sense that many of the analytical pragmatists (Brandom, Sellars) are included in the conversation as much as Heidegger and Deleuze are. Others from traditions that are *neither* explicitly continental or analytic (the American process tradition, for example) including Whitehead and Peirce, have made their way into the conversation vis-à-vis contemporary philosophers on both sides of the analytic and continental divide. Two examples that immediately come to mind are Steven Shaviro's *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics* (MIT 2009) and Brassier's 'Badiou and Science' in *Alain Badiou: Key Concepts*, A. J. Bartlett and J. Clemens eds., (Chesholm: Acumen, 2010).

¹¹ The output of all three philosophers: Laruelle, Latour, and Malabou is enormous, but I would certainly suggest from Laruelle: *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy*, trans. Rocco Gangle (New York, Continuum 2010), *The Non-Philosophy Project: Essays by François Laruelle*, ed. Gabriel Alkon (New York: Telos, 2012); and from Latour: *An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), and *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and from Malabou: *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic* (New York: Routledge, 2004); and *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

Worms, Élie During, and Patrice Maniglier. Its members are in charge of the *MétaphysiqueS* collection at Presses Universitaires de France, whose major publications include works by Etienne Souriau, Viveiro de Castro, and an essay on Whitehead by Pierre Cassou Noguès.¹² Many of these developments have been traced and expounded upon by Alexander Galloway, whose book *Les Nouveaux réalistes : C. Malabou, B. Stiegler, M. Belhaj Kacem, Q. Meillassoux, F. Laruelle* (Léo Scheer, 2012), serves as a critical benchmark.¹³

If naming personages were *required*, then one may perhaps go further out and yet still capture a *meaningful flavor of dialogue* happening by mentioning Martin Hägglund (a Swedish born philosophical materialist teaching at Yale University), Adrian Johnston (another prominent materialist philosopher working in the United States who is also critical of the recent continental tradition), or even Slavoj Žižek, whose own materialism is probably among the most discussed, yet his position could *not* be described as "speculative" or as a "realism" *per se* (it is certainly a materialism).¹⁴ I must also not neglect to mention an English philosopher, Iain Hamilton Grant, whose own speculative philosophy draws upon the German philosopher, Friedrich Schelling. Grant has written one book on Schelling, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London and New York: Continuum 2006) and his philosophy has become a reference point for those in the new metaphysics who rally behind what is known as "process philosophy," a perspective which emphasizes the self-powering and vital nature of matter as well as matter's own processual generative pre-conditions.¹⁵

¹² This is the most active place, to my knowledge, of metaphysical developments in France. Of note also is the Club de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, directed by Martin Fortier. For a recent French "scene" report see: <http://www.afterxnature.blogspot.com/2013/10/louis-morelle-french-scene-report.html> Thanks to Louis Morelle for communicating the details of these affairs to me.

¹³ Alexander Galloway, *Les Nouveaux réalistes : C. Malabou, B. Stiegler, M. Belhaj Kacem, Q. Meillassoux, F. Laruelle* (Paris: Editions Leo Scheer, 2012). See also Galloway's "French Theory Today: An Introduction to Possible Futures," a pamphlet series documenting the weeklong October 2012 seminar at the Public School New York (TPSNY/Erudio Editions 2010). In English one may also wish to consult Ian James' *The New French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

¹⁴ See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), and *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Finally Slavoj Žižek's* published body of works is simply astounding (he has authored as sole author three books in 2012 alone), but recent interest has centered on his equally astounding *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).

¹⁵ Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature After Schelling* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008). Philosophers who have rallied behind Grant's approach could be considered by and large as accepting theses of what is known as "process philosophy." Whether this "process" camp of speculative philosophy is guilty of Meillassoux's "subjectalist" critique is still open for debate, as these currents of thought are

Now, there are many, many others, too many to mention here, who could be named as having a connection with this new spirit of materialist and realist philosophy, and I would admit that the dimensions of materialism, realism, and metaphysics certainly casts a wide net.¹⁶ But I am certainly obliged to identify *some* conceptual compass and map to get us started at the very least. Afterall, the ideas and theories in question are more important than specific names or labels, and while a specific term or title such as “speculative realism” may be useful to gain an entry point into understanding the spirit of a philosophy, relying flatly upon specific “name brands” or specific individuals can be downright harmful or even illusory – and so I hope that I have taken appropriate care here in using these labels. If anything, “speculative realism” simply can be said to be an “umbrella term” for philosophies that “*uphold the autonomy of reality*” and which question the “*correlationist consensus*.” [emphases mine]¹⁷ It is upon this consensus that I would like to focus: namely, the concept of *correlationism*.¹⁸

21st century metaphysics appears to either reject correlationism or deconstruct its history and return to it in a *modified form* (radicalizing it from within)¹⁹. This is true for two reasons. First, the radical “materialist” metaphysics under review here seeks to

each very much in their own unique lines of development. While historical figures such as Schelling, Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Peirce have been major reference points in the conversation about speculative philosophy from a process perspective, these philosophers have indeed been utilized from a *contemporary* vantage point as well. One could therefore mention in the same breath as Grant contemporary process philosophers (also sometimes called “neo-processists” or “neo-vitalists”) such as Steven Shaviro, Adrian Ivakhiv, Jason Hills, Ben Woodard, and Jane Bennett. These figures are connected to speculative realism in ways similar to Grant, but also draw on a variety of traditions and resources that go beyond Schelling: American pragmatism, process-relational metaphysics (Whitehead, Deleuze, and Peirce), panpsychism, and vitalism have all come into play.

¹⁶ Historical references within debates of the new metaphysics are wide ranging and (mostly) constitute the giants of speculative metaphysics in the history of philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze, Whitehead, Bergson, Schelling, and Peirce have all been mentioned at some point or another. Of course speculative philosophy – “metaphysics” proper – is a vast field, although it is not uncommon to find the above names consistently addressed.

¹⁷ *Collapse III*, 306.

¹⁸ Some preliminary discussion of “correlationism” as a concept central to the new metaphysics, continental realism, etc. can be found in Josef Moshe, “Correlationism Reconsidered: On the ‘Possibility of Ignorance’ in Meillassoux” *Speculations* No. 2 (2011):187-206; Raoni Padui, “Realism, Anti-Realism, and Materialism,” *Angelaki* Vol. 16, No. 2 (2011): 89 – 101; and Jussi Backman, “Transcendental Idealism and Strong Correlationism,” *Phenomenology and the Transcendental*, Research Project for “European Rationality in the Break from Modernity,” University of Helsinki, Finland (2011). Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* is considered to be the authoritative text on the issue, although “correlationism” is also substantially discussed in his interview, “Interview with Quentin Meillassoux,” in *Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, ed. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Open Humanities Press, 2012). Additionally, Meillassoux’s Berlin paper, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign” discusses the issue with respect to a new term which he calls “subjectalism” which is explained in this essay.

¹⁹ “Interview with Quentin Meillassoux,” 71.

consider a reality devoid of subjectivity or human thinking where it is possible to reinstall the ontological power of rationality back into the world itself. And second, the radical form of “realism” under review here seeks to consider reality as it is absolutely independent of humans considering it, where it is possible to consider what the world was like – or will be like – without human beings (this move is radical if only because it positions itself against the dominant 20th century trends of postmodern thinking that have stated reality *cannot* be accessed independently of the conditions human beings bring to it). In both of these one finds the structure of a “correlate” between human and world, or between thought and being, each necessarily co-related to the other. The question of “correlationism” therefore shall serve as a focal topic in exploring how exactly the new metaphysics’ materialism and realism operates.

II. CORRELATIONISM

Continental philosophy in the last century has, by and large, suggested that, “we can only ever know the correlate between thought and being, *but not being itself*” [emphasis mine]. As Meillassoux explains:

correlationism in general is an anti-absolutist thesis: one uses the correlate “subject-object” (broadly defined) as an instrument of refutation of all metaphysics to enforce that we would have access to a modality of the in-itself. Instead, for correlationism, we cannot access any form of the in-itself, because we are irremediably confined in our relation-to-the-world, without any means to verify whether the reality that is given to us corresponds to reality taken in itself, *independently of our subjective link to it*. [emphasis mine]²⁰

For the correlationist philosopher, “access” to the real is never possible without some *condition* tainting it, where the conditions in question are what human beings bring to the table in a “co-relation” with reality.²¹ This co-relation has taken a number of forms: *Dasein* and Being, consciousness and world, subject and discursive formation, text and meaning, and so on. In each case humans are “embedded” in a world, in a text, in a discursive formation, within a conscious appearance, within a series of signs, within a *relation* of some kind. Stated another way: according to the correlationist, there is a necessary “link” between human and world: if there is to be a “world” there must be a given presentation of the world in some context or another. The human and world are therefore inextricably tied, and discussing how they are tied has been the theme of continental philosophy in the last century.

²⁰ “Interview with Quentin Meillassoux,” 72.

²¹ This is another way of expressing the “correlationist circle.” See Meillassoux, “Iteration,” 2.

Epistemologically speaking, correlationism is at once a remark concerning *human finitude* with respect to “knowledge” of an absolutely “outside” world, but more directly, it is also a remark about *the nature of reality itself*; a metaphysical claim. If a metaphysical reality is claimed to be unknowable outside of the conditions of human knowledge confronting it, a self-referring circle is established between the world and the human consciousness attempting to gain access to it. One cannot get outside of the “cage” that human consciousness presents. As Meillassoux explains,

By correlationism, I thus understand...every philosophy that maintains the impossibility of acceding through thought to a being *independent of thought*...that is not always already correlated to an act of thinking...I thus call the “correlationist circle”...[A] deadlock that lies in wait [however it is:]...How can one claim to think *what is when there is no thought*, without seeing that this claim involves a manifest contradiction? Correlation itself can be thought in many different ways: subject-object, consciousness-given...being-in-the-world, language-reference, etc. But in each case, correlation will be posited as a primordial fact rendering null and void any belief in the thinkability of an “in itself” transcending all thought.²²

Let us then review by providing a very basic sketch of the fundamental features of correlationism, especially with regard to how the new metaphysics’ claims that correlationism has operated within 20th century continental philosophy. This should prove helpful in attempting to clarify what exactly is “co-related” in correlationism, how each term ought to be understood, and why the new metaphysics finds correlationism so problematic.

III. TWO FACES OF CORRELATIONISM

“Correlationism” can be understood in two ways. First, it may indicate the relationship between *thought* and *being*. Second, it may indicate the relationship between *human* (or better, “human subjectivity” or “human experience”) and *world*.²³ There is a subtle difference here, I think, and in order to understand this subtle difference one must parse out the “strong” and “weak” determinations of correlationism - between what is involved in the “co-relation” between the activity of

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Meillassoux theorizes other possible “worlds” with differing laws of nature, thus other multiple “natures.” But he does not mean “world” as in a phenomenological “life-world.” Moreover, while “nature” is indeed no one “thing,” nor is it a super category (a One), it is not a predicate of worlds, either. I am venturing to guess that what Meillassoux means by “reality” (Being) is what a metaphysical naturalist would mean by “nature.” But more importantly with respect to “nature,” concerning the *thought* and *logicity* of nature – while distinct and not co-relational – both “inhabit” the same *absolute*. For, how is it that in the progression from Matter, to Life, to Thought, something is *retained* from the last?

thought and the reality of being, or between human thinking/experience and the reality of an external world that human thinking/experience is about. Let me elaborate just a few, rough thoughts about what these terms might mean and then explain how the *thought* and *being* correlation differs from the *human* and *world* correlation.

Meillassoux distinguishes between “strong” and “weak” varieties of correlationism.²⁴ Essentially, “strong correlationism” absolutizes the subject pole of the correlate. We cannot know “the in-itself...not even in its taking place or logicity”; we are “radically confined in our thought.”²⁵ Subject and object collapse into the region of phenomenal consciousness, and the result is absolute idealism. On this account Hegel would be a token strong correlationist as would be the tradition of idealist or transcendental phenomenology. “Weak correlationism,” on the other hand, admits an “in-itself” apart from thought, as in Kant’s transcendental philosophy, where that “something exists in-itself and is thinkable (non-contradictory).”²⁶ However, for “weak correlationism” the *conditions* of thought bar the in-itself *as it is* in-itself, and the result is a sort of fideism, a “faith” in what is on the outside to know.²⁷ Again, on Meillassoux’s view, here Kant would be the token weak correlationist as would post-Kantian philosophies stating that language or the conditions of society and culture bar off the outside world as it is in and of itself.²⁸

In spite of these two faces of correlationism, there are yet *two more*. One speculatively moves from or “through” thought and subject, human mind (or explaining away those terms given some metaphysical or scientific account) to the world *absolutely* in itself, to a real absolute which is without *subject* and which is, for the intents and purposes of a discussion within contemporary materialist metaphysics, *wholly material* (although that term requires clarification as well, and not all contemporary speculative philosophers are materialists in the same way).²⁹ The question given this face of correlationism is: given Meillassoux’s requirement of “logicity” – presumably conducive to materiality even in its logical feature of being non-contradictory and rational – how does one “accede to” an absolutely outside real which is devoid of subjectivity?

²⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 42 and 48ff.

²⁵ “Interview with Quentin Meillassoux,” 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, Chapter 2.

²⁸ One could, however, argue that post-Kantian postmodern philosophers are “strong” correlationists in the sense that one (perhaps stereotyped) feature of postmodernism is that it is relativistic. For the postmodern philosopher, conditions do not “taint” reality or cut us off from reality, but rather *are* reality.

²⁹ This “ascension” to being is described in Meillassoux, “Iteration,” 1-2.

Meillassoux's answer to this question defers to a power that establishes the principle of non-contradiction as well as the powers of thought. For him, a necessarily contingent ground provides the conditions for things to change over *time*. This involves his concept of "factuality," a term meaning that things can be otherwise than what they are. Ontologically, factuality is able to establish the epistemological character of what humans can know, and can know *absolutely* (thus the finite conditions of knowledge are removed; i.e. the meaning of the title of his book, *After Finitude*). Thus, necessarily, all created events are contingent. However, this move also rids Meillassoux's metaphysics of the *principle of sufficient reason* given how his notion of *surcontingency* (otherwise called Hyper-chaos) operates. Sucontingency is the very power that creates whatever is but always does so in a temporal manner. Non-contradiction ensures differing advents of creation which constitute the movement of time. This is *not* to say that there is a "reason" for whatever appears in non-contradictory fashion, however. In other words, surcontingency is a *necessarily* contingent ground where "time" is the creation of events where other events were before.³⁰ Meillassoux states that there is *no sufficient reason* that events are one way versus another. So he is able to hold the principle of non-contradiction but deny sufficient reason for whatever is created.

At this stage, my concern is only that there is a danger of equivocation given the dual terms of the correlation (and not necessarily Meillassoux's own response to the problem of correlation with his concept of "factuality" or surcontingency). It may be asked of course: may one simply conflate terms on the side of the epistemological correlation with those on the ontological side? Does the activity or power of *thought* necessarily equal *subjectivity*, let alone *human subjectivity*? Is "thought" within such a discussion what traditional forms of idealism have meant by it, or, given how "logicity" is related to an ontological ground of surcontingency (non-contradictorily but without sufficient reason), may it mean something else, perhaps a scientific rationalist materialism?

Meillassoux attempts to answer the charge of an equivocation of ontology and epistemology through his critique of "subjectalism," that is, the knowing subject pole of the correlate. On the one hand, correlationism has survived in skepticism, Kantian transcendentalism, and postmodernism: forms of philosophy that deny all access to an absolute outside. Here the outside is always given through a filter of human epistemological access, it is always "given to" the human within an array of conditions: language, history, culture, structures of power, social conditioning, etc.³¹ On the other

³⁰ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 33, 61-70, and in engagement with Hume, 87. The subtitle of *After Finitude* is "An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency."

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4-6.

hand, the correlationist that absolutizes *thought*, or certain *characteristics* of thought, represents the position which unnecessarily read features of *human* thought as the absolute itself: this is also the “subjectalist.”³² One or more traits of humanity subjectivity are read upon reality, and “absolutized across all things.”³³ The subjectalist thus “hypostasizes the relation we have with things that...withdraw continually from the contact we can make with them...The implicit form of this withdrawal is given by *our relation* to things.”³⁴ In other words, so says both the correlationist and the subjectalist, in order for things *to be*, they must be *given to* the human, whether within *human thinking* or *human existing* (language, history, discursive formation, sign, etc.) This tactic belongs to “the era of Correlation” in that the *metaphysical real* is replaced by the *epistemological filter* of human experience and subjectivity.

How does the “thought” within the thought and being correlate mix with a materialist standpoint, especially if thought is in such a close proximity to subjectivity? Meillassoux answers: “We are materialists in so far as we obey two principles: being is *not* thought, [yet] thought *can* think being.” [emphases mine]³⁵ This suggestion may imply that the *thought* possessed by a subject is itself *not exclusively human*, yet is fully *material* (or as I would put it, fully *natural*) and capable of serving as speculative instrument. Therefore, while thought and being are indeed distinct, as Meillassoux states, this is not to say that neither are not material, not natural, or are not conducive to speculative or scientific thinking. They are both conducive to the other so that the co-relation has been re-constituted within a realist, materialist metaphysics.

IV. THE CRITIQUE OF PHENOMENOLOGY

It is arguable that phenomenology has been a staple of 20th-century continental philosophy, and given that the new metaphysics seeks to go beyond the correlationism of continental philosophy’s past, it is not surprising that the new metaphysics calls into question phenomenology as well. Let me turn toward a critique of phenomenology with respect to the above discussion of correlationism, as discussing the relationship between a subject or mind and the external world “outside” subject or mind should help to define how the new metaphysics differs from traditional correlationist philosophies.

Within the new metaphysics there are several rejections (or modifications) of the correlate that can be made when the relationship between co-related terms is

³² Ibid., 4-6.

³³ Ibid. 4-6.

³⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁵ Meillassoux, “Iteration” 12-13.

questioned. If one is to adopt a materialist metaphysics, then one needs to account for what thought *is*, especially if one wants to cut the correlate between human and world, and thus either *retain* or *eliminate* subject (thought).³⁶

Various approaches have been taken here: some keep the subject, the human, and retain human practices and activity as a pinnacle in the progression of “worlds” (for example, epiphenomenally from matter to life to thought); yet others reach for the concept of “ontological parity” - a term initially coined by the American philosopher Justus Buchler to mean that no one element of reality is any more “real” than any other; and so being no more real than anything else “human” thought or experience is decentered from any privileged position in the universe.³⁷ But let us stay with a critique of the correlation itself rather than jump ahead to any new formation of the correlationist circle just yet.

From the perspective of the new metaphysics one critique of phenomenology seems to be as follows. Phenomenology is a method which requires appearances given to a mind. Therefore the method is necessarily “representational,” focused on a “given,” and requires the “presence” of what is given to a mind. This constitutes a form of “intentionality.” That is, in order for there to be “mind” something must always be given to it if consciousness is intentional (consciousness is always consciousness “of” something). In short, traditional notions of phenomenology emphasize the reference to, and require relationship between, a conscious mind or observer who describes what is “given” and the world “out there” (which is presumably the same as what is given in an appearance, hence Husserl’s dictum, “to the things themselves.”) This is a highly simplistic way to understand the character of phenomenology, but allow me to continue.

In this respect, phenomenology simply cannot “get to” the real if “givenness” is a necessary feature of intentional consciousness. Phenomenological observation and description references “backward,” as it were, the givenness of the real in conscious experience rather than the real itself. Even if the real and appearance to consciousness

³⁶ The materialism reference is to Žižek’s *Less Than Nothing*. Still, the notion of “subject” has not been clarified with respect to the *eliminative* materialists versus those who are charged with subjectalism. In this regard, and I’ve been repeating this, we need to return to Hegel, although my Hegel is Whiteheadian rather than Lacanian, and one arrives to such a Hegel by working with *Schelling*.

³⁷ Meillassoux maintains that a future Christ-like mediator along with a “God-to-come” (a divine inexistence) will inaugurate a “Fourth World of Justice,” a world distinct from the prior worlds of Matter, Life, and Thought. See “L’inexistence divine. Essai sur le Dieu virtuel,” Thèse de doctorat, École normale supérieure, 1997. See also Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* (New York: SUNY Press, 1966), 31 on the notion of “flat ontology,” a concept that Buchler developed nearly fifty years ago in the form of a concept titled “ontological parity.” For specific usages of Meillassouxian terms see the forthcoming *A Meillassoux Dictionary*, ed. Gratton & Ennis (Edinburgh University Press).

are “collapsed” (or even if the metaphysical status of the difference between the real and appearance is bracketed, as it is in the phenomenological method) they are collapsed always into given *appearances* which are always intended by a conscious observer. And so a correlationist circle develops where one is unable to distinguish between descriptions of reality by an intentional *someone* (the phenomenologist) and *the world* as it really is (there is no “apart” from description). For the phenomenologist, then, reality is just the appearance and its description. Here, the radical realist question concerning the world “without us” becomes impossible to ask; it never makes it to the table given that phenomenology is necessarily an intentional, human-consciousness-centered, descriptive method. Suddenly, everything becomes appearances to consciousness, always a description of appearances from *a correlated point of view*. As Ray Brassier summarizes,

Indeed, the founding axiom of phenomenology (Husserl’s ‘principle of principles’) could be simply stated as: appearances can only be understood in their own terms. But what are ‘their own terms’? Precisely the terms concomitant with the first-person phenomenological point of view.³⁸

On this view, phenomenology is claimed to be descriptive reportage, and from the standpoint of continental philosophy in the last century, what is *not* description and from *some* vantage point? It was Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida who emphasized the finite beginning point of the subject, a conditioned vantage point: whether a being thrown into a world, a conscious representation, a sign, text, or embodied culture, some form of translated, *mediated embodiment* whose beginning point was *always already* a *conditioned* human awareness, a *conditioned* human situation. To cinch the point here in so far as the phenomenological method is specifically concerned: it seems that because phenomenology is essentially a descriptive reportage it is guilty as charged for requiring a correlated mind or observer to 1.) be there for the data to enter and suffer description, and 2.) to “do” the describing, without which there would be no “world.” Human and world are tied in a mutually informing relationship where there cannot be one without the other.

To review: the history of correlationism, as we have stated, asserts that reality is conditioned always by something: by the faculties of a mind, by language or discursive formations, by signs, by appearances, by power structures, by the body - where the point is not to transcend these conditions but to account for how these conditions shape subjective human experience. The new metaphysics critiques this point of view from a realist, materialist standpoint that reduces human experience to its (non-exclusively human) power of rational thought within a (largely indifferent) contingent

³⁸ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 27.

material universe. This power of speculation is enabled by the principle of non-contradiction as expressed within the temporal creative nature of surcontingency. Or to repeat Meillassoux from above, “being is not thought yet thought can think being.”

I would like to close this essay by articulating what might be problematic about the new metaphysics’ materialism and realism and its critique of correlationism. A pressing problem seems to be in how some strands of the new metaphysics the human being is decentred nearly entirely, which for the sake of scientific knowledge in a context of metaphysical realism may sense if we are concerned with the world as it was, is, or will be apart from the human. Or from another viewpoint, at the very least, ecologically speaking, the new metaphysics questions how a new methodological perspective might place human experience along side nonhuman experience, where each is placed on an equal footing using Buchler’s principle of ontological parity.

But, if the human and human conditions are to be set to the background rather than allowed to inhabit the foreground, as they have been within the history of correlationism, then the very important question of the “value” of experience certainly comes to the fore. Here there appears to be two options in confronting this problem of value: either drop human experience as a region of concern within one’s materialist metaphysics and then decide to drop value altogether (opting for a radical naturalism and scientific realism), or, situate axiologically experience, objective value, within one’s materialist metaphysics and include an account of experience had by the nonhuman other (a “noncorrelationist” phenomenology that is equally materialist and realist). In order to pursue *either* option one seems to be forced to justify a particular value judgment regarding the very nature of value itself.

With respect to the first option, the consequences may be scientific: a materialist approach that champions reason may disregard subjective human experience and value in such a way that pernicious nihilism is the result. Further, this result (as it vaguely has in the work of Meillassoux, for example) draws upon the findings of scientific data to challenge any supposed worth of or meaning within the universe: including the presumed importance that human beings took for themselves vis-à-vis an absolutely indifferent cosmos.³⁹ This would be a “risk” mainly insofar as the value of

³⁹ See Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign.” An interesting corollary becomes apparent here. If the human and human conditions are to be set into the background so that others may enter the foreground, or if the truth simply is that reality is indifferent to whatever is human or indeed living, then by what measure of value, or minimally, by what standard of judgment, do we deem the truth of a valueless for all of life, or to a hopelessness and pessimism applicable to all of the universe – and actively *endorse* such a cosmic pessimism? Ironically, perhaps, it is by through the power of *rationality*. But the new metaphysics has yet to engage the normative standards, or lack thereof, of rationality.

human rights, the importance of correlated conditions such as gender, race, and class, take back seat to the championing of an intrinsically indifferent, meaningless, material universe. A cosmic pessimism regarding an indifferent material universe may lack normative justification on the premise that there would be no worth to claiming the value of that perspective over any other perspective, and a relativism would ensue defeating the realist pretension of the scientific materialist judgments involved.⁴⁰

The consequences for the second option, that experiences of value had by others ought to be brought up to an equal level of importance that we human beings have thought ourselves to occupy alone, certainly admits value and the creation, expression, and apprehension of value. But this may result either in a value monism - an objective value axiology that levels an “absolutist” conception of univocal value where the individuality and specificity of value-perspectives in the particular is challenged. Or, it may result in an all-too-radical value pluralism that winds up being a relativistic perspectivalism of competing values where each perspective exists simply for itself, making alliances and waging war on others without the possibility of any sustainable unity or coherence.

Here I would like to state that looking in particular at the risk involved *with the first option* (dropping value and meaning as legitimate regions of scientific concern within a materialist metaphysics, pace Meillassoux and Brassier) may help to refine the purpose of this essay in particular, that is, looking at how the new metaphysics’ rejection of correlationism brings to light new questions concerning the place of reason and speculation, *metaphysics*, as a valid philosophical instrument within the 21st century – especially as posed against the correlationist methods of the 20th century. As for the new metaphysics in its ethical, political, and social dimensions – that is, questions concerning value and normativity vis-à-vis the new metaphysics, the second option has been, by and large, an unpursued avenue of inquiry.⁴¹

⁴⁰ This would be nihilism pushed through to its worst extreme, and the challenge would be to balance the legitimacy of scientific claims with the value of pessimistic “anti-value” claims.

⁴¹ I should qualify this statement: *certain camps* of the new metaphysics have been silent concerning ethical, social, and political questions. Regarding “speculative materialism” (Meillassoux) or Brassier’s “Prometheanism” (also called “transcendental nihilism”), there has been little response to the problematic of nihilism, as for them, nihilism is not a problem from within a scientific, rational viewpoint. See Brassier’s *Nihil Unbound*, for example. On the other hand, the “processualists” mentioned above, most notably Jane Bennett and William Connolly, have been taken to task for lacking a *standard or program* within which their vital and indeed, political, ontologies to operate. See Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ontology of Things* (NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (NC: Duke University Press, 2011). It has become apparent that an axiological line can be drawn between the options that I have outlined above – drop and disregard value and experience, or admit it into one’s ontology. Doing the latter may necessarily politicize one’s ontology where, without a standard or program of measure and judgment, we are lead back into a correlationist perspectivalism and subjectalism

V. CONCLUSION: THE ENLIGHTENED TRUTH - OF NIHILISM?

Correlationist philosophy states that the world requires the human either for knowledge or for its very being. But to this speculative philosophy and the new metaphysics says "No." There is at first a certain *shock* or *horror* that the universe can gladly go on without us, a reaction to the "cosmicism" in play; but then an enlightened moment of Stoic truth rears its head. In trade for phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, or semiotics, methods such as ontology understood as mathematics or set-theory (emphasizing the mathematizable powers of the real), or neurobiology (emphasizing the material distribution of powers) become preferred methods of choice due to their *non-human referential capacity*. It is along these lines that figures such as Brassier and Meillassoux champion the rational powers of science, and why Malabou champions the advances of neurobiology. The "realism" to this new metaphysics makes more sense, then, in a scientific context. What value, if any, is there to this scientific perspective?

On the view of these figures an absolutely outside is indeed entirely conducive to the power of thought, to reason, which, while not exclusively human, knits with the reasoning of human beings which the outside itself has produced, even if contingently and without reason. In this way Brassier's own criticisms of correlationism knit with a philosophical naturalism, a scientific realism and "transcendental nihilism," that at once constitutes a scientific but also rational outlook. And Meillassoux's own "speculative materialism" is at once rationalist and materialist, friendly to the powers of the mathematizable, yet recognizing the implicit dynamical powers of an ancient material "outside," the "arche-fossil." It too befriends the sciences and places trust in the speculative power of *reason*.

There is often a dark or apocalyptic tone associated with 21st century metaphysics, especially those speculative philosophers who follow Brassier or Meillassoux. Is it possible that such a tone might actually *invite* more understanding, given the nature of

of Nietzschean *competing* values. Bennett and Connolly, as well as others who have attempted to address the political within their new metaphysics, have also been scathingly attacked. See the recent blog post by Christian Thorne titled, "To the Political Ontologists:: <http://sites.williams.edu/cthorne/articles/to-the-political-ontologists/> (retrieved July 24, 2013). Two other texts relevant to this debate are *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics* ed. Cool & Frost (NC: Duke University Press, 2010) and *Religion, Politics, and the Earth* ed. Crockett and Robbins (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). One can easily see the axiological line drawn between these sorts of materialism and the sorts of materialisms proposed by Brassier and Meillassoux. Of course, in addition to the question concerning value as it operates within ethics and politics from a materialist standpoint, there is the question of value operating within theological and religious frameworks appropriated from the new materialist standpoint as well. Here "immanent" materialist theologies and empirical theologies may be constructed and addressed. See Leon Niemoczynski, "Speculating God: Meillassoux's Divine Inexistence," *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Clayton Crockett, Keith Putt, and Jeffrey Robbins (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

speculation itself? I have hinted to this above, given this section's title, "The Enlightened Truth" and its subtitle, "Nihilism?," and answer in the affirmative.

First, Brassier,

[N]ihilism is... the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the 'values' and 'meanings' which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable.... Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a *speculative opportunity* [emphasis mine].⁴²

And,

Like Nietzsche, I think nihilism is a consequence of the 'will to truth'. But unlike Nietzsche, I do not think nihilism culminates in the claim that there is no truth. Nietzsche conflated truth with meaning, and concluded that since the latter is always a result of human artifice, the former is nothing but a matter of convention. However, once truth is dismissed, all that remains is the difference between empowering and disempowering fictions, where 'life' is the fundamental source of empowerment and the ultimate arbiter of the difference between life-enhancing and life-depreciating fictions. Since the abandonment of truth undermines the reason for relinquishing illusion, it ends up licensing the concoction of further fictional narratives, the only requirement for which is that they prove to be 'life-enhancing'.

I consider myself a nihilist precisely to the extent that I refuse this Nietzschean solution and continue to believe in the difference between truth and falsity, reality and appearance. In other words, I am a nihilist precisely because I still believe in truth, unlike those whose triumph over nihilism is won at the cost of sacrificing truth. I think that it is possible to *understand* the meaninglessness of existence, and that this capacity to understand meaning as a regional or bounded phenomenon marks a fundamental progress in cognition.⁴³

Truth, therefore, as exposed by the power of reason, becomes paramount. Rather than sliding into the relativistic existential nihilisms of the past century, the new metaphysics faces an indifferent universe and pushes through it, via reason, to the meaninglessness (and truth) of existence. Meillassoux, likewise, notes that, "I do not do metaphysics, I do speculation. I am a resolute anti-metaphysician precisely in so far as I *speculate on the absolute*.[emphasis mine]"⁴⁴ At this point an equally resolute Stoic response is in order, and as a *realism* concerning the absolute, nothing less would be appropriate.

⁴² Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, xi.

⁴³ Brassier, *Kronos*, <http://www.kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151,896>

⁴⁴ Meillassoux, "Iteration," 17.

In these quotes lies a dormant power, I think. This is the dormant power of speculation as metaphysical instrument. Pragmatically, an “understanding” of the truth and the fact that one may “speculate on the absolute” seems to be the goal of this instrument. A new form of knowledge, one that is non-correlational and of “the absolutely outside,” the real itself, appears to be the answer. For those who have been trained in the continental tradition, with its emphasis on divulging conditions that human beings specifically bring to the table; that is, for those who have learned the major figures of the tradition of continental philosophy until this century (Heidegger, Husserl, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, etc.), metaphysical truth has always been human-dependent and context dependent. But I believe that there is a certain form of liberation from a context-dependent view of the truth, one that is found in the instrument of speculative philosophy, and one that is present in that dormant power to go “beyond” the subjective link with the absolute. Indeed, whether the absolute itself contains a rational power, a power of rational circumscription, or whether the absolute itself is entirely devoid of rationality (or the power which makes for and animates rationality – i.e. concepts) is still a debate to be had. But the new metaphysics’ view of truth and reality certainly advances “beyond” continental philosophy’s aversion to metaphysics nonetheless. In the use of the instrument of speculative philosophy there is a freedom from the longstanding tradition of imprisoned speculation. What is gained in the use of this instrument is not only an understanding of a new form of metaphysical knowledge, but a freedom from narcissism, the idea that human thought is somehow required within the edifice of reality and knowledge that is the world.

My challenge here has been to frame what “the new metaphysics,” or “the new materialism” or “the new realism” has fundamentally concerned itself with in the past few years. There is no clear cut answer, but I have ventured to state that an engagement with correlationism may be a way to start the conversation, especially concerning how 21st century philosophy differs from the last century’s philosophy. In the end, it is easier to claim that, indeed, there has been a “shift” in contemporary continental philosophy, in contemporary metaphysical thinking, and that continental materialism and realism are offering thought provoking critiques of canonical figures and traditions prior to it. No one can predict what the consequences of this shift in continental philosophy will be, but the vanguard of philosophy must confront this new “spirit” of speculation, this new way of thinking. And so the question: How will philosophers respond to the challenge?

Only time shall tell.

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