

## **The Kantian Catastrophe?**

*Conversations on Finitude  
and the Limits of Philosophy*

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and the Limits of Philosophy*

For Michael Bavidge,  
fellow liminologist

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## Introduction: A Catastrophic Inheritance?

In early 2016, the Newcastle Philosophy Society (NPS), of which I am a longstanding member, ran a popular seminar series on Immanuel Kant. Although I was away at the time, on my return to Newcastle I was sat down drinking tea and eating biscuits in the kitchen of my friend, NPS colleague, and long-time philosophical antagonist, the 91-year-old former revolutionary Marxist turned postmodern sceptic, Jack Grassby. As I recall, I was engaged in some good old speculative bravado of the form ‘reality is p’, with p indicating a metaphysical-sounding statement about the fundamental nature of the aforementioned reality, when Jack cut me short.

“You can’t say that,” he said. He looked solemn, with an expression on his face suggesting that as much as he wished things could be otherwise his hands were tied over this particular matter.

“Why not?” I inquired, somewhat indignantly.

He stared hard into my eyes and a terrible gravity descended upon the room, his half-whispering voice quivering reverentially as he uttered a single damning word: “Kant.”

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It didn’t take long for me to discover that Jack was just plain wrong about this, and, as I suspected, was twisting Kant’s philosophy in order to give a rubberstamp of respectability to his nefarious postmodern ends. (That said, to use Kant to deepen the very scepticism that he had sought to overcome is hardly unusual. Think of Nietzsche: “As soon as Kant would begin to exert a popular influence, we should

find it reflected in the form of a gnawing and crumbling scepticism and relativism.”) Contra Jack, Kant in fact never forbade speculative *thinking* about reality although any pretensions to *knowing* reality in a manner that would have been considered the goal of traditional metaphysical enquiry were indeed ruled out by his Copernican revolution and the transcendental philosophy that followed from it.<sup>1</sup>

Despite being the most influential philosopher of the modern age (Maurizio Ferraris writes that “it would be no exaggeration to say that 80 percent of the philosophies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are indebted...to the Copernican revolution”), it turned out that my own knowledge of Kant was extraordinarily limited: some vague ramblings about phenomena and noumena, the reconciliation of empiricism and rationalism, his fastidious walking habits, and not much more. And yet as I researched further, still fuelled by the indignation of having my metaphysical wings so rudely clipped, I stumbled upon an unfurling drama: contemporary continental philosophy appeared to be making a decisive break with Kant and the transcendental framework that had, according to certain influential accounts, served as the very guarantor of its identity. As one of the interviewees in this book, Catherine Malabou, writes in her 2016 study of Kant, *Before Tomorrow*:

Undoubtedly, adherence or opposition to the transcendental, more than any other criteria, marks the fracture line between the continental and analytic traditions, that is, between two ways of understanding rationality.

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<sup>1</sup>If you are unsure of the nature of “traditional metaphysical enquiry” or what is entailed by “Kant’s Copernican revolution and the transcendental philosophy that followed from it”, these will be explained more fully in the opening interviews of this collection. It is hoped that all unfamiliar terms and ideas discussed in this introduction will be clarified in the interviews that follow, so if at any point you begin to feel a bit confused or overwhelmed, fear not!

Much of the energy fuelling this attempted coup has emerged as a result of the writings of a small group of philosophers loosely lumped together under the title ‘speculative realists’, all of whom, despite the heterogeneity of their philosophical and theoretical commitments, appear to share a basic antagonism to Kant and his legacy of finitude (to be discussed shortly). Unquestionably the most influential single text arising from this movement is the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux’s 2008 book *After Finitude*, an astonishingly ambitious and compelling attempt to bury Kant once and for all. It was in this book that I came across the evocative phrase “the Kantian catastrophe”.

As I don’t have much of an anti-Kantian axe to grind in comparison to Meillassoux, I am more than happy to add a question mark to his phrase, to ask whether Kant’s Copernican revolution really is so catastrophic after all. But before we consider this, it is worth asking what may warrant this dramatic talk of catastrophes in the first place. It seems to me that there are two separate catastrophes that may legitimately be claimed to have arisen as a result of Kant:

- 1) Aesthetic: to the soul of the poet
- 2) Epistemic: to the pride of the philosopher

Let’s consider both in turn. The poet Heinrich von Kleist famously committed suicide in part due to the despair induced by Kant’s transcendental idealism, writing that “my one, my highest goal has sunk from sight, and I have no other,” the goal in question being knowledge of things in themselves, absolute and independent of us, as opposed to the scraps of appearances with which we are left to content ourselves following Kant. We may of course ask whether Kleist somewhat misread his post-Kantian plight, for he was still free to write noumenal poetry to his heart’s content, to retain faith in the existence of God if he was that way inclined, to reflect upon the starry heavens above, and

so on. At the risk of lumping Kleist in with a particular Romantic and anti-scientific stereotype of the poet, it is difficult to see why he would have got so worked up over Kant banning little more than the rather circumscribed kind of knowledge of things in themselves traded in by natural scientists and rationalist metaphysicians.

As a rationalist metaphysician, however, we can understand Meillassoux's cry of catastrophe far more clearly, for, as he writes, "contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical [i.e. pre-Kantian] thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us." In Meillassoux's eyes, Kant stands accused of an unforgivable loss of confidence in the capacities of thought.

And indeed the distinction between the two catastrophisers can be most starkly drawn by questioning whether Meillassoux's solution to the catastrophe which involves a heady combination of deductive reasoning and Cantorian set theory would have offered Kleist any consolation whatsoever.

And yet maybe the two are not so far apart after all. For what we find interspersed amongst Meillassoux's more traditionally philosophical objections to Kant is a far more emotive idiom at play, one built around the theme of *entrapment*. For Meillassoux, the post-Kantian outside (i.e. outside of our heads) induces "a strange feeling of imprisonment or enclosure"; it is "a cloistered outside, an outside in which one may legitimately feel incarcerated" such that "we do not transcend ourselves very much by plunging into such a world." Similarly, Meillassoux's fellow speculative realist (and contributor to this collection) Graham Harman refers to his "escape from the Heideggerian prison" and notes that "many never escape it, and serve life sentences." Indeed, in his interviews Harman often has the feel of a latter-day Timothy Leary when discussing the liberating force of his conversion from Heidegger and phenomenology to full-

blown realism. The post-Kantian lament would appear to take the form: *I'm a philosopher, get me out of here!*

It is worth following this line of thought in greater depth as it may help us to get closer to the true 'catastrophic' heart of the Kantian legacy.

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Edmund Husserl poses an intriguing question arising from Kant's transcendental philosophy: "What is the status of the paradox...of humanity as world-constituting subjectivity and yet as incorporated in the world itself?" Arguably this world-constituting turn that subjectivity took through Kant's a priori categories is the single most dramatic event of the modern era, the profoundest rupture in our relationship to the world the paradoxes of which two hundred and fifty years of philosophy has yet to resolve.

Following Kant, the human mind finds itself condemned to a paradoxical double-take, both as source/originator of all experience and as just another object within experience, what Michel Foucault calls the empirico-transcendental doublet (as explained by Béatrice Han-Pile in her interview for this collection). We are *both* a part within the whole which has been created in the first place, whilst at the same time we are given the power to think of ourselves as the discoverer and very constitutor of that whole of which we are merely a part – an epistemological-existential conundrum indeed! (Foucault's own oscillations between the extremes of panoptical constraint and radical liberation are well documented, for example in James Miller's seminal biography *The Passion of Michel Foucault*.) What if this rather abstract-sounding philosophical paradox has in fact emerged as the central organising principle through which modern subjectivity is lived out, as we find ourselves lurching between voluntarism and fatalism, liberation and constraint, pride and abasement?

Béatrice Han-Pile writes that Kant’s “invention of the a priori gives man a position and a power that the Greeks never dreamt of, that of the ‘King’: the centre of a purely anthropological stage from which even God has been excluded as the supreme Director.” It comes as no surprise, then, that post-Kantian philosophy has been characterised by a rise in what we might call ‘heroic’ images of ourselves in relation to reality: visions of ourselves as ever more autonomous and sovereign, masters of our own fate and source of the world’s meaning and value, culminating in Nietzsche’s celebration of “the extraordinary privilege of responsibility” that the sovereign individual possesses. But think of 1) Nietzsche’s sovereign individual which resembles only itself – a fully self-contained locus of autonomy and will stripped clean of any bondage to the world, and then 2) Nietzsche himself wretchedly hugging the horse in Turin as he sank into insanity. Was his madness simply the logical outcome of his philosophy? A quintessentially post-Kantian character, Nietzsche lurched ever more dramatically between pride and abasement, chronically beset by contradictions and paradoxes that he was unable to resolve because they were hewn into the very structure of his consciousness.

But arguably it is Dostoevsky who offers the most compelling portraits of the contradictions at play in the modern mind. Consider the literary critic James Wood’s description of Raskolnikov as “unnaturally theatrical, or better still, histrionic: he seeks attention, and he is desperately unstable and inauthentic, hiding at one moment, confessing at another, proud in one scene, self-abasing in the next” or of the Underground Man as possessed of “a kind of poisonous, impotent alienation, a chronic instability of self, and a vaunting pride that at any moment might unexpectedly crash into its inverse – cringing self-abasement.” Closely linked to these Dostoevskian characters is this stunning account of the schizophrenic mind offered by the phenomenological psychologist Louis Sass in *Madness and Modernism*:

They will sometimes feel they can influence the whole universe, at other times as if they can’t control even their own thoughts or their own limbs – or, in what is one of the supreme paradoxes of this condition, they may have both these experiences at the same moment.

Seen in the light of our Kantian inheritance, we can understand Sass’ idea that “the psychotic person may at times live out, in exaggerated, almost literal fashion, the ontological and epistemological assumptions of his or her age.”

A paradox of scale emerges. Our knowledge has expanded beyond belief. Brian Cox enjoys telling us that the universe is *really* big, like thousands or even squillions of miles big. But does Brian Cox’s consciousness feel as expansive as his knowledge base? One suspects not. While our knowledge of the world has increased exponentially, our awareness has shrunk to the same degree, leaving us incarcerated in our “tiny, skull-sized kingdoms” (David Foster Wallace’s phrase). We have more knowledge of the universe of which we are a part, while never feeling more apart from that same universe. This is the Kantian paradox writ large in our culture.

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But let’s set all speculative fancies aside for now and return to the main theme of this book: Kant and his legacy of finitude.

“From Kant onwards...there is nothing but finitude,” wrote Foucault, and it is this doctrine of finitude and contemporary critical responses to it that I try to trace in the conversations that follow. But of course in order to attempt this, it is important to have in place a clear idea of what we are talking about here.

Why, we must ask, is finitude even a problem for philosophy? Is our finitude not *obvious*? We grow old, wither away, and die. We are finite beings, end of story. But as much as

questions of finitude as mortality (or temporality) certainly arise in philosophy (and especially in Heidegger through his idea of being-towards-death), it is the finitude of the human *mind* that has tended to haunt philosophers. Descartes famously meditated on the relationship of the human mind to the idea of a divine mind, contrasting our doubting finite consciousness with the most important content of that consciousness – the idea of God or a perfect being. The idea of perfection is built into our minds, while we can at the same time recognise the imperfection of our limited human minds. So the measure of our finitude is God rather than, for example, our mortality. And this is certainly true for Kant.

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Philosophically speaking, finitude in relation to God is far more troubling than finitude in relation to our mortality, as we could accept our finitude as mortal creatures while at the same time enjoying unrestricted or limitless compass in our philosophical endeavours. In this light, the subtitle to this book would appear somewhat arbitrary: what does our finitude have to do with limits to philosophy? But it is precisely this limitless scope to philosophical enquiry that Kant calls into question in such a devastating fashion in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which acts as the foundational text upon which most of the conversations that follow are built.

While there is no need in this introduction to cover the intricacies of Kant's arguments in relation to finitude as these are covered in the opening interviews of this collection, the key point for now is that Kant has emerged as the great setter of limits to philosophical enquiry. We are not Gods or creators of the reality we inhabit, but are rather finite and receptive beings who are only able to be receptive to reality *at all* because of the categories of mind that Kant identifies, including time and space. And because of these categories, we can only ever be presented with things as they appear

to us rather than as they are in themselves. And because of this, our metaphysical ambitions, for example to be able to speak (*as Gods*) *about* God, must be significantly curtailed. We are, in short, far more limited than we had thought.

But where there are limits, there are those who kick against them. As Stephen Mulhall writes:

[I]t is fatally easy to interpret limits as limitations, to experience conditions as constraints... nothing is more human than the desire to deny the human, to interpret limits as limitations and to repudiate the human condition of conditionedness or finitude in the name of the unconditioned, the transcendent, the inhuman.

Finitude as limit places us in the territory of restriction, falling short, deficiency, failure, defeat. The pride of the philosopher will not tolerate this!

We may wish to read Mulhall's diagnosis as pointing to a tendency, an *immature* tendency, in the human (and especially the philosopher) to kick against limits and strive for that which is not possible. ("Philosophers will be philosophers. When *will* they grow up!?" the sensible person thought, rolling her eyes affectionately...) This may be seen to have arisen from a long-standing and insidious philosophical tradition that has cultivated in us a seemingly insatiable yearning for the absolute or the infinite independent of our finitude and the contingencies of our human practices. Give it time and such a yearning will pass, just like the conviction that an atheist would necessarily recant on his deathbed. This would be the kind of position defended by someone like Richard Rorty.

But this is not how I would wish to read Mulhall, and indeed some of the closing remarks to his interview for this collection clearly defend this aspiration to try and make sense of things *as a whole*, even while recognising that it exists alongside the Rortyan impulse. Similarly, when I asked

Sebastian Gardner, author of guidebooks on both Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (a book that stipulates clear limits to philosophy) and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (a book that, at least according to Gardner's interpretation, refuses to acknowledge any limits to philosophy) where he stood on the question of limits, he replied, "Well, I stand vacillating or oscillating between the one side and the other. I haven't made up my mind." It seems that this Janus-faced aspect of philosophical enquiry will not go away, however inconvenient it may be. As Leszek Kolakowski memorably put it, "Excommunications do not necessarily kill."

And indeed we may see in the Rortyan perspective outlined above a similar loss of nerve to that for which Hume was chided by Kant himself: "Hume ran his ship ashore *for safety's sake*, landing on scepticism, there to lie and let it rot, whereas my project is rather to give it a pilot...with a complete chart and compass." [my italics] For Rorty, the best way to handle all the perplexities arising since Kant is simply to say: *Don't talk to me about reality!* But this is simply giving up the game. Our platform may be rickety, our intuitions finite, but this does not mean that we cannot say *anything* until our platform is satisfactorily solid and stable.

So perhaps we may usefully distinguish philosophies of finitude from philosophies of (in)finitude: the former characteristic of someone like Rorty who closes out a particular trajectory in post-Kantian thought (albeit one unwarranted from a strictly Kantian point of view) that would have us sever all connection to the non-human world, leaving us to get on with doing our best with the finite tools at our disposal, and leaving philosophers to, well, twiddle their thumbs or become politicians; and the latter characteristic of those who still consider the infinite to be not just a limit but also a *goal* of the finite, who continue to seek intimations of the infinite flickering at the threshold of our thinking.

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But can we conceive of a philosophy that has gone *beyond* finitude, that is, a truly post-critical philosophy? This was the task Quentin Meillassoux set for himself in *After Finitude*, his attempt to overcome our catastrophic Kantian inheritance. It is worth noting that it was not my initial intention to make this book in no small part a study of modern French philosophy, but with chapters on Michel Foucault and Jean-Luc Nancy, and extensive discussions of Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, François Laruelle, and Quentin Meillassoux, it seems to have turned out this way. In different ways, all of them present a challenge to Kant and his legacy of finitude.

What might explain this? Well, to put it bluntly: finitude, with its limits, strictures, and humilities, its bursting of speculative bubbles, its reining in of unruly ambition, flights of metaphysical fancy, and fantasies of ontological omnipotence, is, one suspects, simply too *dull* for the French. This sentiment is admirably summed up in Badiou's critique of Kantian 'legalism': "The critical machinery he set up has enduringly poisoned philosophy, while giving great succour to the academy, which loves nothing more than to rap the knuckles of the overambitious." Perhaps the question of finitude and limits divides according to temperament in the same way that William James famously distinguished the rationalist from the empiricist?

It is no coincidence, then, that Meillassoux, a student of Badiou's, is responsible for one of the most ambitious attempts of the modern era to destroy Kant's critical machinery, rather than simply rewire it like his many predecessors, French or otherwise. Meillassoux sets the scene for his Kantian take-down with an argument that is so deceptively simple that one is left wondering whether it is indeed up to the task of bringing the most formidable conceptual ap-

paratus of the modern era crashing to its knees. In short, Meillassoux asks the following question: if the conditions for the possibility of knowledge are rooted in the transcendental categories of the human mind such that the only kind of knowledge we can access is rooted in this correlation between mind and world, then how can we account for the fact that we appear to have knowledge that predates the emergence of the human mind?

So-called ‘ancestral statements’ (e.g. the date of the origin of the Universe or the date of the origin of life on earth) would appear to call the Kantian’s bluff, asking how seriously they are really prepared to take this whole transcendental framework. For, as Meillassoux writes, how are we “to grasp the *meaning* of scientific statements bearing explicitly upon a manifestation of the world that is posited as anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life – *posited, that is, as anterior to every form of human relation to the world?*” If we are to take ancestral statements at their word, we are forced to accept that the emergence of the mind-world correlation is simply another stage in a temporal relation that cannot thus be an *originary* relation, as the Kantian framework demands (time being one of the transcendental categories).

For Meillassoux, the challenge of how to interpret ancestral statements is not simply for the Kantian philosopher, but, as he argues, for *all* philosophers committed to some form of what he terms correlationism, i.e. those who would accept the constitutive power of the correlation between mind and world or thinking and being over the two elements considered apart. And this list would include any movement in philosophy that wishes to distance itself from the position of naive realism (the commonsensical but philosophically disputed idea that we are able to access reality unproblematically because *it’s there right in front of us*), e.g. phenomenology (with Husserl’s noesis-noema correlation), philosophy of language (with the language-referent correlation),

as well as other variants on this theme such as Heidegger’s Dasein-Sein correlation. As Meillassoux writes, “one could say that up until Kant, one of the principal problems of philosophy was to think substance, while ever since Kant, it has consisted in trying to think the correlation.”

It seems that when faced with an ancestral statement of the kind: “Event Y occurred X number of years before the emergence of humans,” the correlationist is forced to add the codicil – *for humans*. And this may seem harmless enough – after all who else is it for? Who else is doing the thinking, doing the science, doing the mathematics, and so on? But for Meillassoux the two are irreconcilable: once you have acknowledged the truth of the ancestral statement you have disqualified correlationism, and vice versa. If we try and combine the two, he suggests that we are left with the following claim: “[T]he ancestral statement is a true statement, in that it is objective, but *one whose referent cannot possibly have actually existed in the way this truth describes it*. It is a true statement, but what it describes as real is an impossible event; it is an ‘objective’ statement, but it has no conceivable object. Or to put it more simply: *it is a nonsense*.”

For Meillassoux, it is the fact that through mathematics we are able to gain knowledge of reality prior to the emergence of human life, transcendental frameworks, and so on, that restores our contact with the absolute and places us decisively after finitude.

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Meillassoux writes that “we must understand that what distinguishes the philosopher from the non-philosopher in this matter is that only the former is capable of being astonished (in the strong sense) by the straightforwardly literal meaning of the ancestral statement.” According to this cri-

terion, I am certainly not a philosopher, nor is everyone else who has received an explanation of this argument from me (although admittedly a few would not consider themselves philosophers anyway). Is it the case that we are all naive realists *at heart*? Or is there a sense that this argument *cannot surely* be the knockout blow that Meillassoux considers it to be? Faced with Meillassoux's ancestry argument, can one really imagine Kant looking bemused and muttering, "Oh shit, I never thought of that...?"

It may be that it is more of a powerful argument if you are ensnared within one of the elaborate theoretical artifices of modern European philosophy. Within the analytic tradition there has always been a far more robust leaning towards realism than in the continental tradition which in one way or another has been resolutely idealist since the time of Kant. This analytic cherry-picking of the Kantian framework is nicely summed up by Rae Langton in an interview she gave: "Then I became interested in Kant, and in metaphysics more generally... and though I never for a moment thought Kant's idealism was right, I found him fascinating." The analytic tradition, we may say, has never fully bitten the transcendental bullet, and indeed we find something like Meillassoux's ancestral argument in Bertrand Russell's 1959 book *My Philosophical Development*:

I accept without qualification the view that results from astronomy and geology, from which it would appear that there is no evidence of anything mental [e.g. transcendental categories] except in a tiny fragment of space-time, and that the great processes of nebular and stellar evolution proceed according to laws in which mind plays no part.

While not wishing to adjudicate in this vast and complex debate, it is clear that Kant would charge Meillassoux and Russell with conflating the empirical and the transcendental, collapsing the latter into the former. For Kant, the transcendental categories do not exist in the same way that the

empirical objects of scientific investigation exist because they are the very conditions of possibility for engaging in that investigation at all, and hence cannot logically be disproved from within an empirical framework.

Alternatively, we may say that, due to their naturalistic leanings, Meillassoux and Russell fail, to use Heideggerian lingo, to *disclose* the transcendental standpoint. For Sebastian Gardner, it is appropriate to talk of a transcendental *turn*, noting that:

...some self-conscious rupture with ordinary thought is required, if the transcendental turn is to reveal itself as a genuine meta-philosophical innovation, not just a constructive compromise between empiricism and rationalism which allows each to assume more sophisticated forms. Nothing less is implied by the idea that to take the transcendental turn is to embark upon a change of paradigm.

However one wishes to look at it, it is worth noting one thing: when it comes to questions of genesis, Kant's transcendental categories suddenly appear *radically mysterious*.

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In an extraordinary chapter on Nietzsche's relationship to the transcendental, Béatrice Han-Pile notes that although Nietzsche considers a priori categories like space and time to be essential for experience, he is not prepared to consider them as non-empirical, non-causal conditions of possibility as Kant would have it; rather, they have an empirical genesis. For Han-Pile, such transcendental conditions can thus only be 'transcendental' rather than (truly) transcendental, and are indicative of Nietzsche's tendency to situate the transcendental within a naturalistic framework. How, we might ask, could it be otherwise, especially after Darwin? How can the transcendental truly have precedence over the empirical, especially once we take the ancestry argu-

ment into account? How can we make sense of the idea of transcendental conditions having a subjective yet *non-psychological* character?

In light of the troubling question of the genesis of the transcendental, it is no surprise that such questions are set aside. As Tom Sparrow (another contributor to this collection) has put it:

For a long time now questions about the genesis of the transcendental conditions of knowledge, the emergence of consciousness, and the features of the world apart from human access have been regarded as out of bounds for continental philosophy. Anyone who asks them is accused not so much of metaphysical hubris as of a critical faux pas. And yet these questions persist, whether they are regarded as serious or boorish or unsophisticated.

Asking a philosopher what came a priori to the a priori appears as futile as asking a cosmologist what came before the Big Bang. However, in a nifty feat of dialectics, Catherine Malabou manages to rescue the transcendental from the grip of the very naturalistic framework that was threatening to render it obsolete. And she does this (as she explains in her interview for this collection) by arguing that the transcendental is an *epi-genetic* rather than genetic structure, such that questions of its genesis are fundamentally misguided. As she writes in *Before Tomorrow*, “[t]he transcendental is subject to epigenesis – not to foundation. The debate over whether the transcendental is innate or fabricated...is therefore pointless.”

In a sense (albeit one that Meillassoux would doubtless find rather patronising), however, the question of whether the ancestry argument is or is not quite the killer blow to Kant that Meillassoux seems to think it is, is beside the point. For what we find in *After Finitude* is philosophy let off the leash: fierce, relentless, uncompromising, taking no prisoners, coveting no idols, the pure joy of thinking. Ray-

mond Tallis is certainly onto something when he refers to Meillassoux as “the most thrilling interlocutor in a decade.”

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If it is indeed the case, as suggested above, that adherence to the transcendental framework is in some way the guarantor of the identity of continental philosophy, then what we may see in Meillassoux’s attempted destruction of an already very thinned out theoretical structure is an emerging naturalistic turn in continental philosophy.

Crudely put, the analytic school have always supported naturalism as a framework within which to undertake philosophy, with their work serving to underpin the epistemological foundations of the natural sciences, and, for the most part, justifying their claims to be making statements about reality *in itself* rather than reality *as it is for us*. The transcendental framework, by contrast, has served to allow continental philosophy to remain closer to the humanities, with the kind of metaphysical scepticism and critical tools it affords seemingly placing it in a better position to offer useful frameworks within which socio-political and emancipatory questions could be answered rather than simply defending the scientific norms of the day from sceptical onslaughts. But the analytic (as myopic, scientific, and realist) vs. continental (as engaged, humanistic, and anti-realist) distinction is imploding. For a start, it is no longer clear that social problems are best served by the kinds of anti-realist or anti-metaphysical frameworks favoured by the continental tradition.

In an interview, Meillassoux says: “But we see today that the abandonment of metaphysical reflection, far from causing the intolerance of thought to decline, did nothing but exacerbate the desire for a blind faith – as though an overreaching scepticism towards reason turned into a fa-

naticism wishing to be inaccessible to discussion.” (It is notable that Kant sought to preserve God from science, and science from scepticism. But if Kant’s empirical realism fails to overcome the sceptical attacks (e.g. from Nietzsche), then all that remains intact is God, safely protected by faith from any would-be usurpers, philosophical, scientific or otherwise.) Similarly, Terry Eagleton has argued that it is precisely the continental blend of pragmatism, culturalism, hedonism, relativism, and anti-foundationalism that has, in true dialectical fashion, generated its “full-blooded metaphysical antagonist,” the fundamentalist, “for whom absolute truths, coherent identities and solid foundations pose not the slightest problems.”

A second, related critique focuses less on the dangers of ignoring reality than on the privileging of humans *vis-à-vis* reality, the anthropocentric bias inherent in post-Kantian thinking. To place the human in a 50:50 relationship with the world is seen as an extraordinary act of hubris (in his interview for this collection, Tom Sparrow suggests that “the problem with Kantianism...is that it’s ontologically disproportionate”), as is the tendency to feel that the world can be in some way controlled or tamed by humans, for example by Kant’s transcendental categories which serve to condition the real (as Slavoj Žižek points out with his typical flair, all we can encounter following Kant will be “the already gentrified-domesticated reality of representations”) or, more recently, by language which is given the same transcendental role played by the Kantian categories. We have tamed and taken control of reality now, stripped it of all mystery, so there is no need to be afraid. No more fear and trembling à la Kierkegaard!

Seen in this light, horror and existential dread in the face of the real emerge as the defining moods of a post-correlationist philosophy! Within these new realisms (amongst many of whose proponents one can clearly discern a penchant for

the splintered, nihilistic, and apocalyptic), humans emerges as “bit players” (Ray Brassier), we are little more than “a tiny, frail species among millions of others” (Graham Harman), the world “can do without humanity” (Meillassoux), and it is this radical decentring of the human that is seen as a necessary corrective to the anthropocentric leanings of correlationist thinking.

We may conclude that a lack of respect for reality (co-extensive with the proliferation of anthropocentric and subject-centred philosophies) has been the defining feature of post-Kantian thought. And if this is so, a rehabilitated notion of the real emerges as both a potent metaphysical and socio-political necessity.

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So these are the central tensions, dramas, and smatterings of zeitgeist around which this book is organised. To end this introduction, it is worth saying a few things about the process of pulling it all together.

I recall sitting down to do the first interview burdened with six poorly organised sides of typed notes and questions, desperate for each and every one to be answered, breaking out into cold sweats at each unexpected detour from my minutely planned trajectory, watching the minutes agonisingly tick by with innumerable questions still unanswered, maybe forever to be unanswered! While there are many areas in my life where I am fairly relaxed and able to adopt the later Heidegger’s maxim, “Let being be”, it turned out that in the domain of interviewing I was a terrible control freak. But lessons were learned. For example, the wildly over-optimistic plan to cram the whole of Kant’s Copernican revolution and its aftermath into a single one-hour conversation eventually morphed into the more relaxed Kant trilogy that opens this collection, and over time the groping around in

the dark lessened, I got more of an idea of what I was doing, things began to fall into place, and a shape developed.

Around half the interviews were face-to-face and half were done via email. (As a rule of thumb, if the interviewee is located within an hour or two of the London area it was face-to-face; if they are located in Canada, the US or Lebanon, it was via email. Maybe the Bigg Books travel budget will stretch a bit further for the next publication?) While most of the interviews either focus on Kant in their entirety, or use him as a starting point and frequent reference point, a number of interviews barely reference Kant at all, focusing instead on some aspect of his legacy of finitude. I tried to customise each interview as much as possible, but in one way or another, via many twists and turns, and through numerous divergent but often overlapping trajectories in modern Western thought, the question of the limits, margins, and thresholds of philosophical enquiry remains right at the heart of what the following conversations are seeking to explore.

## *Acknowledgements*

As I am not affiliated to a university and was living away from Newcastle-upon-Tyne and my colleagues at the Newcastle Philosophy Society (NPS) for much of the time spent compiling and editing this book, it was largely a solitary undertaking so I can keep this section nice and short.

First and foremost, I am hugely grateful to all the interviewees for their time, generosity, patience, and enthusiasm for the project, and, of course, for their wonderful contributions.

I received useful advice on the project from Sebastian Gardner. I was also very fortunate to have regular guidance and encouragement from Michael Bavidge who furthermore invited me to speak about the process of getting this book together at an event he organised through the Philosophy Society of England. As a result of the comments and thoughts offered by the audience I was able to clarify my ideas enough to write the introduction to this collection. My friend and colleague from the NPS, Nigel Collins, was an invaluable source of support and useful critical feedback on much of the manuscript, while another friend and colleague from the NPS, Mike Spencer, inspired me to expand the theme of finitude into new and, for me at least, uncharted territory. Julia Annabella's eagle-eyed proofreading of the manuscript were greatly appreciated. I owe huge thanks to Esti Rimmer for providing me with a space in her beautiful home where most of the work for this book was completed. Finally, William Eckersley, my partner in Bigg Books, helped me through the struggles and periods of intense Kant fatigue that were a recurrent feature of my engagement with this project.



**Part I:**  
**Kant's Philosophy**

## 1: Transcendental Idealism

### *A Conversation with Lucy Allais*

*In this conversation, Lucy Allais offers an overview of the kinds of questions Kant was addressing in his seminal Critique of Pure Reason and the key concepts that are introduced in this work, as well as the transformation of metaphysics that Kant attempted through his 'Copernican revolution', and the controversial and highly debated status of his transcendental idealism.*

*Lucy Allais is jointly appointed as professor of philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand in her native South Africa, and Henry Allison Chair of the History of Philosophy at the University of California, San Diego. In 2015, she published her first book Manifest Reality: Kant's Idealism and his Realism which promises to be a landmark work in Kant studies.*

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#### **What are the key questions Kant hopes to answer in the *Critique of Pure Reason*?**

In the first sentence of the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that there are some questions that human reason is unavoidably troubled by, which are driven by the very nature of our reason itself, which we cannot dismiss or ignore, but which human reason is unable to answer. His central concern in the *Critique* is with such questions, which he identifies with *metaphysical* questions. He presents the *Critique* as an answer to the question of how metaphysics is possible. He wants to give an account of which metaphysical questions we are able to

answer and explain how we are able to answer them, as well as to delimit which metaphysical questions we are *unable* to answer, to explain the role they play in our thinking.

**Could you say something about the specific kinds of troubling metaphysical questions Kant is concerned with?**

When Kant is talking about metaphysics, the key questions he has in mind are whether there is a God, whether we have free will, and whether we have an immortal soul. He takes these to be the traditional concerns of metaphysics and calls such questions *transcendent* metaphysics. With respect to these questions, Kant is going to argue that it is not possible for us to have knowledge of them. Crucially, this applies just as much to the claim, for example, that there is *not* a God – we can't know this any more than we can know that there *is* a God. At the same time, Kant is going to argue that the way we think about the world when doing science unavoidably leads us to the idea of God, and that this idea plays a crucial role in our thinking. While a large part of Kant's project is negative (arguing that knowledge of transcendent metaphysical claims is not possible), in the process of answering his question of how metaphysical knowledge is possible he develops a different kind of metaphysics, which we can call a metaphysics of experience.

**Does Kant think that there is a clear-cut distinction between these more traditional metaphysical questions and the questions addressed by this 'metaphysics of experience'?**

Kant takes traditional metaphysics to have been concerned with a different kind of object than objects in space and time. Objects in space and time affect our senses: we can see them, touch them, smell them, manipulate them. We can therefore have empirical, or experiential knowledge of them. An immortal soul, in contrast, as a rationalist like

Descartes understands it, is not a spatial object that affects our senses. It does not make sense to ask of your immortal soul: how wide exactly is it? What is its texture? What is its scent? If metaphysics concerns a different kind of object to the spatio-temporal objects that affect our senses, an obvious question arises. Since we do *not* know about such objects through their affecting our senses, how do we know about them?

Kant takes it that metaphysics is traditionally a non-empirical, or a priori investigation of reality. A priori knowledge is knowledge we have independent of experience. Two areas of knowledge that are plausibly thought to be a priori are mathematics and logic. If we want to know how many chairs are in the next room we need to go into the room and count them, but if we want to know what  $2+2$  makes, we do not collect samples of two things and two things, put them together, check what result we get in each case, worry about what sample size would be relevant to the question, and then draw a tentative empirical conclusion. Rather, we seem to establish that  $2+2=4$  independent of any particular experience. Of course, we may need experience to acquire the concept of '2' and the concept of addition, but once we have these concepts we do not need any further experience to establish that  $2+2=4$ , and there is no experience which we would count as falsifying this claim.

While very many philosophers throughout history, including in the period Kant worked (and including Kant himself), were very interested in and even engaged in empirical science, Kant thinks that when they do metaphysics they are not investigating reality empirically, but rather attempting to establish claims about the world a priori. This still seems true: most philosophers today working on metaphysics in European and North American philosophy departments do not do experiments, field work, surveys or other forms of empirical investigation.

### **So how do we go about acquiring a priori knowledge of reality?**

One way in which a priori knowledge seems comprehensible is if we think about claims about what follows from the meanings of concepts. For example, we can know a priori that a triangle has three sides because this follows from what triangle means: it is part of the concept of a triangle that it has three sides. While this is a priori knowledge, it is not very interesting knowledge: it tells us only what is already contained in concepts we have. This does not tell us anything about the nature of mind-independent reality, which is what we wanted to know about. We do not just want to know what the concept of God means – we want to know if there is a God. So the question of the possibility of metaphysics is the question of how it is possible to have substantial knowledge of the nature of reality independent of experience.

The technical terms in which Kant puts the question are: how is knowledge of synthetic a priori claims possible? ‘Synthetic’ refers to substantive propositions in which a claim is being made that goes beyond what is simply contained in a concept (its opposite, ‘analytic,’ refers to propositions which simply unpack what is already – perhaps implicitly – thought in a concept). A priori knowledge is justified independent of experience. So the question of how synthetic a priori propositions are possible is the question of how it is possible to have substantive, non-trivial knowledge of the nature of reality independent of experience of reality – i.e., how is metaphysics possible?

### **And what does Kant think about the possibility of acquiring such knowledge?**

Kant opens the *Critique* with a comparison between metaphysics, mathematics and physics; the comparison is not

favourable to philosophy! He notes how much progress, and what steady progress, mathematics and physics have made, mathematics through the use of proofs and physics through the experimental method. Results are established and agreed on, and practitioners can then build on each other’s work. In metaphysics, by contrast, nothing is agreed on, and rather than building on each other’s work, each philosopher seems to start again with building their own, often completely different system.

Descartes argues that we can prove that there is a God and that reality contains two fundamentally different kinds of substances, mental substance and physical substance. Leibniz argues that fundamental reality consists of simple, indivisible soul substances. They are not able to agree on claims that can be built on, and it is not obvious how we can adjudicate between their positions: not through any empirical method (experiment, measurement, observation) and not simply by thinking about the meanings of words. Kant thinks metaphysics is simply a mess (he calls it a battlefield) and that rather than continuing to put forward metaphysical positions, we need to take a step back and ask whether and how it is even possible to have knowledge of such claims.

So he needs to establish whether and how we could establish any substantial (synthetic) claims about the nature of reality. As already mentioned, Kant is going to argue that with respect to many of the questions that traditional metaphysics has been concerned with (God, the soul, free will), it is *not* possible to establish any knowledge claims. Even more basic than knowledge, we cannot have what Kant calls ‘cognition,’ which is not quite the same as knowledge. Cognition, for Kant, is a kind of representation of objects that succeeds both in representing objects conceptually (making claims about them), and also actually latching onto or connecting with the objects the claims are about, and thereby

showing that the claims actually relate to the world. Kant thinks we cannot have cognition without somehow being able to be in contact with, or presented with, the objects of cognition. Without this, we are just spinning concepts together in a kind of game which, for all we know, does not succeed in relating to the world.

**So how would this relate to a specific metaphysical question, say, the existence of God?**

For Kant, there would be at least two problems related to a claim such as ‘God exists.’ First, how could we justify or establish knowledge of such claims, given that our two main ways of establishing claims (empirical investigation on the one hand, and logical investigation of the meanings of concepts on the other) cannot establish such claims. But even prior to this is the question of how it would be possible for such claims to concern objects that we can be presented with, and therefore can cognize. Kant holds that one of the central problems of traditional rationalist metaphysics is that it makes claims about objects which cannot be present to us; it therefore succeeds only in creating coherent collections of conceptual claims, which are a kind of play and with respect to which we are never able to establish if the objects the concepts refer to are even really possible.

**This all sounds quite abstract though, and yet these questions about God, free will, and so on are central to our lives. Does Kant think that metaphysics only operates at this level of abstraction?**

It’s certainly the case that to non-philosophers, ‘metaphysics’ sounds like a very abstract and possibly other-worldly concern, far removed from everyday life. However, as I have mentioned, Kant thinks that being led to metaphysical questions is intrinsic to human reason itself, and he thinks that all humans naturally ask such questions. Further, he

thinks that the very way we investigate the world in science leads us to metaphysical questions. One kind of question we ask when we investigate the world empirically is asking of something that happened what caused it to happen. What caused the bridge to collapse? Perhaps there was a flaw in one of the beams. What caused the flaw in the beam? The answer may concern the construction process and the nature of the material the beam is made from. What explains the properties of the material the beam is made from? Perhaps we will say something about the chemical composition. What explains the chemical composition? Perhaps we will say something about the molecular bonding. We can keep asking, with respect to each answer we get – but what caused that? What explains the properties of the molecular bonding? Asking this kind of question drives science.

Kant thinks it is also inherent to reason to ask for this kind of explanation, and never to be ultimately satisfied by an explanation which itself could be further explained. Kant has an abstract term for such answers: he says they concern something *conditioned*. Something conditioned is something that is dependent on something else, or caused by something else, or further explained by something else. It is never a completely self-explanatory, independent thing. Kant thinks reason is never entirely satisfied with providing something conditioned as a stopping point in asking for questions about what caused something or what explains something. Where we have a conditioned explanation – for example, one involving the molecular bonding of a structure – we will always find it reasonable to look for a further explanation. We would be very puzzled by someone who said: a molecule of water consists of two hydrogen atoms bonded to an oxygen molecule, but there is nothing further to be said about the properties of oxygen and hydrogen atoms and the way they bond. Explanation just stops here! This is just the way it is and nothing explains it or causes it. Kant thinks that reason can never accept this brute contin-

gency as a stopping point, and, as he puts it, reason always looks for a further condition for anything conditioned. For anything dependent, caused, not logically self-explanatory, reason asks: but what caused this? What explains why this is the way it is?

### **And this then leads on to the idea of God?**

Exactly. Because reason will not regard anything conditioned or contingent or dependent as a stopping point, it will never think we have a satisfactory end to explanation until we reach something *unconditioned*: something entirely independent and uncaused. Reason's search for a condition for every conditioned therefore leads us to the idea of the unconditioned. This is an entirely natural process of thought, and Kant thinks we should not be surprised to find most humans at some time of their lives, and most human cultures, asking for a cause of the physical universe. However, the fact that this is an entirely natural process of thought, and we are naturally led to the *idea* of the unconditioned should not be mistaken for knowledge that there *is* something unconditioned. We have no justification for concluding from the fact that reason *looks for* a condition for every conditioned that there is a condition for every conditioned.

In the process of answering his question about the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, Kant both provides an explanation of why knowledge of traditional transcendent metaphysical claims is not possible, and also establishes another kind of metaphysics, which some commentators have called a metaphysics of experience. He argues that it is possible for us to establish some substantial a priori knowledge of reality, but this will not be knowledge of non-spatio-temporal, supersensible objects, but rather will be knowledge of the spatio-temporal world. An example of the kind of claim Kant thinks we can establish is the claim that every event has a cause. Unlike the purely conceptual claim that

every *effect* has a cause (it is part of the meaning of an effect that it is the effect of a cause, so we can know a priori that every effect has a cause), the claim that every *event* has a cause cannot be shown to be true merely by investigating the meaning of the words in the claim, and it also could not be established through empirical investigation. For one thing, no empirical investigation will cover *every* event.

However, Kant does think that we can establish that this claim is true of the world in space and time, and he introduces a method for establishing this kind of claim: showing that it is a condition of the possibility of empirical knowledge. In other words, he thinks he can prove a priori that unless it were true that every event has a cause no empirical knowledge would be possible. Scientists, and ordinary people navigating the world, investigate what caused something to happen. This is an entirely different question from investigating *whether* there was a cause of something's happening. Kant thinks that we don't empirically investigate *whether* something that happened had a cause; we assume that for anything conditioned there must be something responsible for its being the way it is. We assume that there is a cause and investigate empirically what the cause was.

If we can prove that the claim that every event has a cause is a condition of empirical knowledge, then we can know that this claim is true of all the objects of which we can have empirical knowledge. Thus, we will be able to establish a substantial claim about the nature of reality. Kant thinks that this is the only kind of metaphysical knowledge that is possible for us: knowledge of the limiting framework of empirical cognition. A bit confusingly, he calls this knowledge *transcendental*, and calls his own investigation a transcendental investigation. Whereas *transcendent* metaphysics actually goes beyond the bounds of experience, and tries to answer questions about non-spatio-temporal supersensible objects, a *transcendental* investigation looks

at the a priori limiting framework of conditions of empirical knowledge.

**Surely there is a difference between establishing that a claim is true of all the objects of which we can cognize, and establishing that it is true of reality? Why should we think that we can cognize all of reality?**

Yes, it's certainly the case that even if all the events that *we can cognize* have causes, this does not show that *every* event has a cause, if it is possible for there to be events that we cannot cognize. So Kant's answer seems to depend on limiting reality to the limits of human cognition, and what enables him to make this move is the complicated and subtle form of idealism he introduces, which he calls transcendental idealism.

What philosophers mean by idealism is the claim that objects in some domain are dependent on minds (usually human minds). So, for example, one could be a realist about properties of objects like size and shape while being an idealist about properties like colour, if you think that objects do not have colour independent of human experience but do have their shape and size independent of our perceiving them. Kant's transcendental idealism holds that the spatio-temporal world that we cognize in science does not exist independent of the possibility of our cognizing it. It thus depends on our minds. Kant does not take this to mean that all of reality depends on our minds, or that there is no mind-independent reality. He distinguishes between the world as it is in itself, and the world of human experience (the world as it appears to us). He argues that the world as it appears to us, the world of human experience and cognition, does not reveal to us the nature of the world as it is in itself (the entirely mind-independent world), and in fact that it is impossible for us to cognize the world as it is in itself. And he argues that the world of human experience

is systematically and structurally dependent on features of human minds.

The kind of metaphysics that, for Kant, turns out to be possible is a metaphysics of experience that gives us synthetic a priori claims about the spatio-temporal world. This is metaphysics: it is non-empirical, and it gives us knowledge of the necessary structure of the world. It is possible because we can establish its claims as conditions of the possibility of empirical knowledge. However, it does not give us knowledge of mind-independent reality, and the knowledge it gives us is only of the limiting structure of human cognition.

**So this totally alters our entire conception of what metaphysics is?**

Yes, and this is why Kant thinks that what he is doing in the *Critique* is revolutionary: he thinks it will entirely alter philosophy. It will show us why we should cease trying to have knowledge of transcendent metaphysical claims, as well as showing us what kind of knowledge we can try to establish. Kant famously compares his position to the Copernican revolution in astronomy which altered our view of the solar system from seeing the earth as at the centre, with the stars and sun revolving around it, to seeing the earth as just one planet going round the sun. When we look up at the night sky, or watch the sun rise and set, it seems as if the stars and sun are moving around us; Kant says that Copernicus found he had more success in explaining the movement of the heavenly bodies if he attributed this apparent movement to the observer (i.e. us on a moving planet). Similarly, Kant will attribute to the observer (the human subject or the human mind) some of what we might have thought was simply attributable to the world that we are observing. Thus, Kant's Copernican revolution can be identified with his idealism, which attributes some structural features of

the world we experience to the human mind, rather than the world as it is in itself. Kant's Copernican revolution can also be associated with his metaphysics of experience: the idea that the way to do metaphysics is to start with investigating the conditions of human cognition, which is a shift from starting with the world to starting with the subject.

**So what does metaphysics look like after this revolutionary transformation? What can it still hope to achieve?**

I have said that Kant opens the *Critique* asking whether and how metaphysics is possible, and then presents a position which enables us to establish some positive metaphysical claims about the world in space and time, and also argues that we cannot have knowledge of transcendent metaphysical objects such as God and the soul. However, it is arguable that Kant's more fundamental aim in pursuing this investigation is the question of human freedom, and in particular the metaphysical question of freedom. We can also ask about freedom in relation to, for example, political arrangements, something on which Kant has a lot to say; the question of metaphysical freedom concerns how to reconcile the way we think about causality in the natural world, and when we do science, with our idea that our actions are up to us in a way that makes it appropriate to praise or blame us for them. Kant thinks that the way we think about ourselves as moral agents, and our recognition of moral reasons, requires that we have freedom in a strong sense. When I recognise that I ought, morally, to do something, I hold that it is possible for me to do it and not to do it; this does not seem compatible with thinking that everything that happens in space and time is a function of previous states of the universe together with the laws of nature. When I think of some past act for which I feel remorse, part of my feeling of remorse involves thinking that it was possible for me to not do the act in question. However, he thinks that the way we think about the world in science, and the metaphysics

we take to be associated with science, seems to threaten the idea that we have freedom, as it suggests that everything that happens in space and time *is* a determined function of previous states of the universe together with the laws of nature.

**But this is not something we can *know* to be the case, presumably?**

That's right. In Kant's account, the question of human metaphysical freedom is a transcendent metaphysical question with respect to which we cannot have knowledge. He understands metaphysical freedom as involving a causal capacity to initiate a new causal chain that is not a determined function of previous states of the universe, and he holds that it is impossible for us to have knowledge that we have such a causal capacity, and we can't even understand what this causal capacity would be, and what would really be involved in having it. However, he thinks that his transcendental idealism establishes enough with respect to securing the freedom we need for morality.

Here, it is important to keep in mind that Kant aims to show both that we cannot know that we do have freedom and that we cannot know that we do *not* have freedom. The latter is crucial for understanding what transcendental idealism secures for us. Kant thinks that we are able to show that science, and the metaphysics required to make sense of science, cannot rule out the possibility of human freedom. While establishing merely this negative claim with respect to freedom may seem like a weak position, and less than what we might have wanted, it is actually quite powerful. First, this is because many people agree with Kant in thinking that science and the metaphysics needed to support science seems to rule out human freedom, so showing that they do not is a significant result. Further, the result is made more significant by the way Kant thinks about freedom:

that it involves a capacity to initiate causal sequences that are not a determined function of previous states of the universe. He thinks he can show that this strong conception of freedom is not ruled out by thinking of events in space and time as falling under laws of nature. And finally, his negative metaphysical result has to be taken together with the beliefs he thinks we have about our freedom when we think about morality. We *do* believe that we have freedom, because we recognize moral reasons, praise and blame people, and hold people responsible for their actions. What we need to establish with respect to metaphysics is to ward off a threat that science *seems* to pose, and we do this by showing that the way we think about the world in science and metaphysics cannot show that the causality of freedom is impossible. Since we do not have scientific and metaphysical reasons to rule freedom out, and we do already believe in it in central parts of our life as rational agents, we are entitled to continue to believe in it.

**Please could you say a few words on how his transcendental idealism is supposed to secure the possibility of this kind of freedom given that he also holds to the position that every event in space and time has a cause that falls under a law of nature?**

This is a highly controversial and debated question, and depends on the equally controversial and debated question of how to understand Kant's transcendental idealism. In my view, points which are crucial are that transcendental idealism denies that science gives a complete account of reality, and denies that it cognizes the fundamental nature of reality. This means that explanations of events in space and time involving laws of nature never give a complete and sufficient explanation of why anything happens. It is easy to see how Kant's rejection of transcendent metaphysics applies to rationalist metaphysics which makes claims about souls, God, monads, etc., but it may be less obvious how it is also

supposed to be a critique of empiricism. The crucial point, for Kant, is to put empiricism, and science, in its proper place.

Empirical science explains the world in space and time; empiricist philosophy goes beyond empirical science, in making claims about the completeness of scientific explanation. While such claims are not obviously about non-spatio-temporal, super-sensible objects, like rationalist transcendent claims they in fact go beyond the bounds of experience. And as with other transcendent metaphysical claims, we are led to them so naturally and easily that we may not notice the point at which we move from claims made within science (empirical causal explanations) to metaphysical claims made about science that neither empirical science nor logic are in a position to establish.

This easy mistake is what makes us think that what we know about the world through scientific explanation shows that human metaphysical freedom is not possible; transcendental idealism enables us to avoid this transcendent metaphysical error. As I understand Kant's position, once we take seriously the incompleteness of science we can see how every event's having a cause that falls under a scientific law is not the same as there being only one possible future that follows from the past together with the laws of nature.

## 2: Finitude

### *A Conversation with A.W. Moore*

*In this conversation, A.W. Moore focuses on Kant's attempt to come to terms with human finitude, with what it means to be a finite part of an infinite reality, and how our finitude impacts on what it means to be doing philosophy. This sets the scene for the numerous discussions of Kant's legacy of finitude that follow, from Heidegger's ontological finitude to Meillassoux's attempted destruction of this 'catastrophic' legacy.*

*A.W. Moore is professor of philosophy at the University of Oxford, specialising in the work of Kant, Wittgenstein, and Quine. He is author of *The Infinite*, and his 10-part series 'A History of the Infinite' was broadcast last year on Radio 4. His monumental 2012 book *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics* has been likened to Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, with one obvious difference being the former's greater generosity and kindness in its treatment of the philosophers under consideration.*

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**Quentin Meillassoux's recent reference to the "Kantian catastrophe" brings to mind the poet Kleist's famous comment on reading Kant that "my one, my highest goal has sunk from sight, and I have no other". Both of them are picking up in different ways on Kant's legacy of finitude, so I was hoping you could say something about this ripple effect leading from Kleist's despair to Meillassoux's catastrophe.**

What you find in Kant is one of the most intense examples in the whole history of philosophy of somebody trying to

come to terms with human finitude – with what it means to be finite creatures in the way that we are – and therefore one of the most intense attempts to come to terms with the human condition. And of course there's a sense in which *all* the great philosophers are doing this, in their various ways, but Kant is really focusing, perhaps in a way that no other philosopher has done up until then, on what it is to be a finite part of an infinite reality, both in terms of the limitations that this means that we are subject to and in terms of some of the aspirations that it means we have.

So you've got this bipartite picture of a human being in Kant. And in a way, of course, you already have it in Aristotle, who tells us that human beings are rational animals. This means that there are two components to humanity: we're animals with a biological constitution and all that this entails, and yet on the other hand we've got this faculty of reason that takes us into territory that other animals can't enter into, that marks us off from other animals and means that in some fundamental respect we're different from them. So you've got that in Aristotle, and you've got it in Kant as well, since he too is keen to emphasise both our animality and our rationality. But it takes a slightly new form in Kant, because it comes to be seen as a conflict between the finite and the infinite: we're finite creatures, with finite limitations, but we have this faculty of reason as well, in a way that puts us in touch with the infinite and helps to make us aware that there is an infinite reality beyond our own finitude.

**So how is this distinctive from the appearance-reality dichotomy that stretches back as far as Plato insofar as this distinction touches on the tension we experience between the finite and the infinite?**

Of course there's a risk in exaggerating and suggesting that Kant is doing something *entirely* new in the history of

philosophy! But what is genuinely distinctive in Kant is a particular story about the form that the appearance-reality distinction takes. There is this picture in Kant that I think is helpfully captured in the analogy of a pair of spectacles. It's as if we view things through native spectacles that we carry around with us, and this means that at some fundamental level we're *only* presented with appearances and not with how things are in themselves. We have these spectacles that equip us to experience the world in a certain way, but the one thing we *can't* do is to take them off. So there's a sense in which the appearance-reality distinction comes across as altogether more profound than it had been in earlier thinkers, and the very fact that we see the world through these native spectacles is one of our most fundamental limitations and one of the most fundamental marks of our finitude. It's because we're finite creatures that we have to see the world in this way at all. The fact that we're finite means that reality is out there independent of us: we can't know anything about it without somehow being receptive to it, and we can't be receptive to it unless we've got a basic framework that equips us to be receptive to it, which is the role played by these native spectacles. And what all this means is that we end up being presented with how things appear rather than how they are in themselves.

*But* we are in a curious way in touch with the infinite as well, because the very fact that we can sit here and have this kind of conversation, the very fact that we can be self-conscious about our limitations, the very fact that we can recognise that all we can know is how things appear: these very facts show that we have some sense of the underlying reality as well. They show that we have some grasp of this contrast between appearances and reality that we have been discussing. Now that's not giving us any *insight* into reality (that's the whole point) but it does mean that we have a *sense* of reality.

**Insight into reality suggests that we can know about**

**reality, while having a sense of reality suggests that we can think about reality. But what place does this kind of thinking have in philosophy? Is it not the kind of thinking that Kant would call ‘empty’ and Wittgenstein ‘nonsense’? Is it not in the end simply pub talk, philosophically speaking?**

In a way that’s *the* pivotal question. There is this fundamental distinction between what we can know and what we can think, and this is a very important distinction for Kant. The limitations that he is so exercised by are limitations to our *knowledge*. Our knowledge is confined to how things present themselves to us through the spectacles, but we have the ability to think beyond that. So the very fact that we can be self-conscious in this way about the distinction between appearance and reality means that we’re able to *think* about reality even if we can’t know it directly. But what is the status of these thoughts? I think it’s very important for Kant that they don’t just count as nonsense, that they are genuine thoughts that we’re capable of having about reality. They exceed what we’re capable of knowing, but they can still take the form of genuine speculation about how things are in themselves. So this isn’t *nonsense*, but the other question you raised is whether they are in some way *empty* thoughts.

### **So ‘empty’ and ‘nonsense’ are not interchangeable?**

I think Kant would want to say that they are not interchangeable, and this is another important distinction that he wants to draw. The thoughts in question *are* empty thoughts, as long as you can hear that in such a way that it *doesn’t* mean that they’re nonsensical. So the idea of an empty thought reinforces the point that we’ve already made: that they’re thoughts that exceed what we’re capable of knowing, or in other words they’re thoughts that don’t relate to anything that we can have direct experience of. The obvious example (although by no means the only example) is the thought

that there’s a God. The question of whether or not there *is* a God is certainly something we can speculate about according to Kant, and it makes perfectly good *sense* to ask that question: you’re not just talking nonsense if you make claims about God. But if you make claims about God, or have thoughts about God, they are in Kant’s terms empty thoughts that are beyond what we are capable of ascertaining through experience. Scientific investigation is not going to help you settle this question one way or the other.

So the next big issue is what work these thoughts are doing, which brings us to the question of whether these thoughts are at the level of idle chit-chat that you might have with your friends down at the pub. For Kant these thoughts play a very significant role in our *lives*, but whether or not they play a significant role in *philosophy* is another question. We can philosophise *about* them, but can we philosophise *with* them? Well, in a way perhaps we have already answered that question negatively, because the whole point is that these are matters of speculation. But is it *idle* speculation? Kant thinks that these thoughts can play a *very* significant practical role in our lives, and there’s a famous quotation, in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he says that he has had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith. So this is Kant’s way of saying that, while he’s drawn this distinction between what we can know and what we can only speculate about, he doesn’t intend this as a way of disparaging what we can only speculate about. In a way it helps to reinforce the importance of what we can only speculate about, because sometimes in life we do need to go beyond mere knowledge.

### **So is speculative thinking the same as faith?**

Kant does have his own specific and rather idiosyncratic definition of ‘faith’ that he gives at one point, but I personally think that in the context mentioned above the term is

being used in accord with our everyday usage of it. So faith *is* narrower than mere thought, since there are all sorts of things we can entertain in thought where it would be inappropriate to talk about faith. For example, we can think about the possibility of other finite creatures that are completely different from us and don't experience things spatio-temporally at all, and that's an abstract and speculative possibility that we can entertain in thought – but would anybody direct their lives in accordance with such a supposition? Probably not! Whereas if you have faith in the existence of God, this can make a significant practical difference to you, and here it *is* appropriate to talk about faith. And part of what's going on here is that we're registering that faith has a practical dimension to it.

**So what's the scope of this practical dimension? It can't all revolve around faith in God presumably.**

Something else that is a feature of reality rather than appearance, and that we can have thoughts about but not knowledge about, is our own freedom. Now Kant does believe that human beings are free agents, but for various reasons he's obliged to say that this freedom occurs at the level of reality rather than at the level of appearance. For what belongs at the level of appearance is what scientific investigation can reveal to us, what we can know through observation and experience. And what scientific investigation does reveal to us about the world of appearances is that it is *completely* determined by mechanical causal laws in a way that doesn't leave any room for freedom. So if that were all there was to it, then we would have to deny that we were free agents.

**This would not have been a problem for Spinoza's account of freedom though, for example.**

That's true, but Kant is opposed to that conception of free-

dom. He doesn't think that's good enough. There may be a story to tell whereby freedom and causal determinism co-exist, and a lot of philosophers have tried to tell that story, but Kant is adamant that such a story is not going to work. So purely at the level of appearances we have to deny that there's any room for freedom. At the level of appearances we're just very sophisticated machines. But this does leave room for the possibility that we are free agents at the level of things in themselves, that the underlying reality involves genuine exercises of freedom.

**So contemporary speculation about free will in philosophy departments is empty?**

Kant is going to take issue with a lot of contemporary metaphysicians who think that we *can* establish that we're free agents. He will offer his own rival conception of freedom which I think he will claim is as rigorous and as intelligible as theirs, but it is in the end an article of faith that we're free. It's almost for Kant an *unavoidable* article of faith. The fact that it's an article of faith suggests that there is an element of choice about it, but there isn't really for Kant. Kant thinks that we can't help but think of ourselves as free agents, that if we *really* came to terms with the idea that we were just sophisticated machines our very self-consciousness would just disintegrate as we wouldn't know what to make of ourselves. For the very idea that we are *making* anything of ourselves has connotations of freedom.

So Kant would turn to the determinist and say something like: 'You haven't really thought this through. You're going through the motions when you make these claims. You can't *really* think that that's what it's like.' Of course that may *be* what it's like – it may be that there's a fundamental mismatch here between how things are and how we're able to suppose that things are – but at some very deep level Kant thinks that we can't help but think that we're free. But

'*think*' is the operative word. Yet again we come back to this distinction between thought and knowledge, because this is a matter of what's going on in the underlying reality. To talk of 'faith' in our own freedom may be a slight misuse of the word, but the really important point is that we're back with the distinction between what we can think and what we can know, and that as far as our own freedom is concerned the relevant word is 'think' rather than 'know'.

*But*, to tie this back in with God where talk of faith really is appropriate, Kant has the further view that, if we really are free and if we are to have a proper sense of how to exercise our freedom, then – because we are also finite creatures, animals with a certain biological nature – we need certain props, as it were. There's this constant temptation, because of our biological nature, to abuse our freedom in various ways. Our biological nature leads us astray. It's a classic Protestant picture of the human condition! This leaves us in a fundamental predicament, and Kant's thought is that faith in God can help us in this predicament. It can give us certain props that help to sustain us in our commitment to doing the right thing. If it weren't for these props, if we didn't feel that there were some ultimate source of help in the universe, we might just despair and give up on trying to resolve the contradictions in our nature. So this is the practical difference that faith can make.

**So if faith in God is lost, Kant is really painting a bit of a bleak picture of the human condition?**

I think that's true. He's emphasised both the finitude of human beings and the sense in which we *can* be in touch with the infinite, but ultimately it looks from his picture as if the finitude wins out, as the really important things he emphasises are our limitations, as well as the significance of our animal urges or biological urges in dictating our lives. If all that's left of our contact with the infinite is just that we

have this bare idea of the distinction between appearance and reality, then that's not much. In particular, suppose that Kant's wrong about whether we're really free beings. Suppose that, even if he's right that we can't help thinking of ourselves as free, that's ultimately just an irresistible illusion. Then that takes away a huge amount! And of course, given that so much of our focus on the question of human freedom is related to what's going on in the empirically investigable world, then Kant becomes his own worst enemy, as he would be the first to insist that we are *not* free at that level. He's made a rod for his own back: he's provided his opponents with some of their most powerful arguments!

His successors could easily turn to Kant and respond that it's only the nasty bits of his picture that really survive scrutiny, while the good bits amount to a lot of wishful thinking. And so the correct conclusion to draw would be that he has left us with rather a bleak picture. And there were many of Kant's successors who responded in precisely this way, while those who did not want to draw this conclusion felt bound to react at a much deeper level: they wanted to challenge the whole system. So, for example, Hegel, who was Kant's most important immediate successor, is *hugely* indebted to Kant and takes the whole Kantian system very seriously, but reacts against it at a very deep level. He is suspicious of Kant's very sharp distinction between appearance and reality which is so central to Kant's philosophy. For Hegel, it's not clear that we have to think in these terms; it's not clear that we have to accept this picture of native spectacles. So this enables him to present a very different vision according to which we don't have to overcome the predicament that Kant leaves us in, as we are not in that predicament in the first place.

**In *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, you discuss what you refer to as 'the Limit Argument' that Hegel uses against Kant. Please could you offer an outline of the basic structure of this argument?**

There's a tradition throughout philosophy of trying to explore the limits of our own ability to make sense of things, the limits of our own sense-making. We don't just find it in Kant, although it's very clear in Kant. One by one, philosophers have come along and explored limits in various ways and argued that we can only philosophise or make sense of things within certain particular limits. It's a pattern that's repeated throughout the history of philosophy, from way back to the recent past. And it's clear that we can place Kant in this category, that there's a sense in which that's his project as well. He's interested in the limits of what we can make sense of, where what that means is what we can make sense of in the way that's manifested in the natural sciences: what we can have knowledge of through experience and observation.

The Limit Argument suggests that the whole enterprise of setting limits may be misguided. Of course, a lot depends on exactly what limits you're setting and what you're setting them to, but let's put it in very general and schematic terms. Suppose that somebody wants to show that we can only make sense of things within such and such limits. Then the argument purports to show that this may be an incoherent enterprise. The argument goes as follows: we can't successfully follow the project of drawing limits to what we can make sense of *unless* we're able to make sense of the limits that we purport to be drawing. But we can't make sense of any limits unless we can make sense of what lies on both sides of them. We recognise that the United Kingdom has certain limits, for example. We look on a map and see a cluster of islands with clearly defined limits separating what lies within the United Kingdom from what does not. And this is fine, because we can see both the outside and the inside. By contrast, the idea of drawing limits and *not* being able to make sense at all of what's on one side of those limits looks as if it's incoherent: it looks as if we can only draw limits *within* what we can make sense of. And Hegel thinks

that Kant is guilty of trying to do this incoherent thing: he sees the Kantian project as an attempt to draw limits to what we can make sense of. He presents something like the Limit Argument to show that Kant is unable to draw the limits that he tries to draw.

So this is a very basic objection that Hegel has to the whole Kantian project, and it's part of what launches him off into his own quite different system. Of course, Hegel and other strong opponents of the Kantian system have *huge* respect for Kant. None of them are accusing him of being silly. They all recognise the depth and importance of what they're reacting against, and they also recognise that they wouldn't be doing what they are doing if Kant had not first of all done what he did. So even though they are in disagreement with him, they are fully self-conscious about the fact that the very questions that they are asking and the very issues that they are addressing are only there to be asked and addressed because of what Kant has said before them.

**We tend to associate the infinite with terms like the noumenal and the transcendent. But is there a risk of conflating all these terms when in fact there are important differences between them?**

Although there's a package of ideas that do seem to go together – the infinite, the noumenal, things in themselves, the transcendent, and so on – we've got to be very careful about making overly glib associations, particularly where the infinite is concerned. So there is a sense in which the infinite is as much a feature of appearance as it is of reality. And this ties in with the fact that even space and time are part of the world of appearances for Kant. Space and time themselves are part of these native spectacles that we carry around with us. But space and time are also infinite according to Kant (contemporary cosmologists may take issue with this idea, of course, but Kant wasn't aware of 20<sup>th</sup> cen-

ture physics). So there's a sense in which the infinite is there at the level of appearances, not just at the level of things in themselves. It takes a particular form, specifically what some people have called the form of the mathematically infinite: beyond any stretch of space there's always more to come, and so on. But these are aspects of the infinite within the world of appearances.

And then, conversely, there's also a sense in which the world of *reality*, the world of things in themselves, has its own elements of finitude because after all *we ourselves* straddle the divide, and while it's at the level of appearances that our finitude really shows up, because that's where we recognise ourselves as animals with biological limitations and so on, this is an appearance of an underlying reality. So even at the level of that underlying reality it's true to say that in some sense we're only finite, *if only* in the sense that we're merely one part of reality. There's this fundamental fact that we're up against something that's independent of us, and while that's part of what it is to say that we're only finite, it's also part of the picture even at the level of the underlying reality not just in the world of appearances. So there are all sorts of associations that we make that perhaps we're a bit too quick to make. There is a risk of oversimplification, and this is especially the case when we start tying these issues in with issues about infinity.

**In addition to Kant, you also specialise in Wittgenstein. He seemed to want to take some of the mystique out of the infinite. Could you say something about his 'deflationary' approach to the infinite?**

The infinite is of course a very puzzling concept and people have wrestled with it and confronted various paradoxes when they've tried to think about it, so there is a temptation to think of the infinite as something grand and transcendent and mind-blowing. And this is where we find a char-

acteristic debunking on Wittgenstein's part. He says that, while we do make crucial use of the language of infinity, for example when we say that there are infinitely many numbers, it's not a big deal: it's nothing grand or transcendent. If I claim that there are infinitely many numbers – 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on – I'm not doing much more than I'm doing when I use the phrase 'et cetera'. Suppose I write down '1, 2, 3, ...' using the three dots to indicate that this is a process that carries on forever. Wittgenstein says: 'Let's think of the infinite as no more mysterious than those three dots: the language of infinity is just part of the symbolism.' This is all perfectly straightforward. It's understandable in immanent terms, if you want to put it that way. So here Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to the way in which we use language, and the thought is that it's not particularly mysterious. You can soon learn how to use three dots. There they are on the page. It's not a big deal!

**You write that you consider it axiomatic that there is “a human aspiration to infinitude.” Can we see similarities here between Wittgenstein and Rorty insofar as Rorty would argue that this whole aspiration for infinitude is simply part of a bad philosophical tradition that has created these urges in us, but that they can be demystified, debunked, deflated, and so on?**

I think Wittgenstein's philosophy *does* give us licence to be rather dismissive in this way. Within his framework there is room for a kind of debunking that does enable us to say that some of this is just bad faith, and that we should be trying to rid ourselves of the urge to go beyond the three dots, or however you want to put it. But at the level of biography, rather than philosophy, Wittgenstein himself was somebody for whom philosophy was not at all easy. This is a striking difference between Wittgenstein and a lot of Wittgensteinians. Philosophy becomes a fairly mechanical process for a lot of his disciples, who just go through the motions. For

Wittgenstein, it was *never* that; it was always a *real* struggle. And although he says things that sound rather dismissive, a lot of the time what he's doing is wrestling with his own tendencies and he's fighting against himself at some quite deep level. And if you think, in particular, about the urge to transcend ourselves in some way, or the religious impulse if you want to put it in those terms, then I think these are things that are very strong in Wittgenstein himself, and he is going to be the *last* person to claim that there is an easy answer to the question of what to do with such urges: how to reckon with them, how far we should yield to them, and how far we should be trying to resist them.

**You write: “My finitude is not something I can escape. All I can do is to (try to) master the art of being finite.” So how are we to master the art of being finite?**

I'm afraid that the answer that I give to that question is going to be very disappointing! I'm sceptical that there's an answer that can be formulated. Any attempt to try to produce some kind of formula or some sort of recipe for how to live your life is going to be misguided, I think. It's *the* problem of how to live, and one of the limitations that philosophy has to recognise is that it can tell us a lot about the question, but *it* can't *answer* the question. Philosophy is not going to tell us how to live. That's a practical problem that confronts each of us individually, and we each have to do our best to try to come to terms with that question in our own different ways. Philosophy may help *some* people in the project of living their lives, but it won't help them by giving them an answer to the question of how to live, and in any case the operative word is 'some'. Not everybody will find that philosophy plays any role in their lives *at all*, and that's perfectly O.K. We don't all have to be philosophers.

**In *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, while acknowledging that 1) we cannot make sense of anything**

**transcendent (suggesting a limit), you also write that as philosophers we are 2) “free to make sense of things in a way that is radically new” and 3) “engaged in a fundamentally creative exercise” (both suggesting no limits). This is a very exciting vision but not one that most people would associate with the project of philosophy and metaphysics. So where do you see the limits of what can be placed under the category of philosophy?**

It's very gratifying for me to hear you say those things as that was meant to be one of the take-home messages of the book! It's certainly an unusual conception of philosophy and of metaphysics more specifically. But I think that the really great metaphysicians of the past, and Kant is a classic case in point, have bequeathed really interesting new ways of looking at things. Whether their answers are right or not, whether we subscribe to what they've said or not, the fact of the matter is that they've given us really interesting new questions to ask. The very conversation that we've been having we just wouldn't have been able to have if it hadn't been for Kant. And so it's in *that* sense that you can look upon it as a creative exercise. Here is one of *the* great philosophers, if not the greatest of all time, who has presented us with a whole new set of conceptual tools that enable us to think about things in new ways, frame new questions, and address new issues. At its most creative, philosophy is an exercise that gives us new ways to live so that philosophy will ultimately have a practical dimension as well.

Of course you've got to square that with the very thing I was just emphasising about philosophy's *limits*, but here what we have is the distinction between thinking that philosophy can answer the question of how to live on the one hand, which I don't think it can do, and thinking that it can give us interesting new tools for answering the question and living our life, which I *do* think it can. So that's part of what I had in mind when I wanted to emphasise that *at its best* it's a

creative exercise, and that there is always room for novelty in philosophy in general, and in metaphysics in particular. And in this sense, philosophy's never going to be in the service of anything, whether science or religion or whatever else it has been thought to be in the service of, because there's always the possibility that one of its innovations will be a licence to look back at what we *thought* it was in the service of and find ourselves saying, 'Well, that is not what's really philosophically important.'

So, for example, a lot of people have thought that philosophy was only ever somehow in the service of the natural sciences, but a very innovative philosophy might, and there have been examples in the past, enable us to see the limitations of the natural sciences and realize that precisely what we shouldn't be doing is thinking of philosophy as completely beholden to them. Kant himself would be a case in point of somebody who's trying to get us to see this.

### 3: Kant's Legacy

#### *A Conversation with Stella Sandford*

*In this conversation, Stella Sandford focuses on the numerous pathways that have emerged under the title 'post-Kantian philosophy,' as well as the differing receptions of Kant's work within the analytic and continental traditions. She also addresses some prominent critiques of Kant, such as his curtailment of metaphysics and deflation of objectivity, before discussing a very different and largely overlooked aspect of Kant's legacy – his highly controversial theory of race and its relationship to his critical philosophy.*

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**Many argue that Kant is the most influential philosopher of the modern era, and one of the most influential of all time. Please can you say a few words about the scope of his philosophical legacy?**

As influence is difficult to quantify, perhaps we can address this question by asking what is meant by the appellation 'post-Kantian philosophy,' which we now often see used in the UK at least. This can refer to the tradition of German idealist philosophy, often associated with Romanticism, which developed in the wake of Kant – notably with Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Post-Kantian philosophy in this sense basically accepted that two aspects of Kant's philosophy

had to be reckoned with, one way or another: the methodological foregrounding of the knowing or experiencing subject and the nature and meaning of this subject's freedom – particularly its relation to the infinite or the unconditioned. Kant grants this subject the speculative thought of the infinite but no knowledge of it – no representation in sensible intuition. This includes the speculative thought of the I's own infinitude (the unrestricted compass of the faculty of reason; the possibility of the existence of the immortal soul) but, again, no possibility of knowledge of ourselves as we are in ourselves, only as we appear to ourselves. This gave rise to a series of problems which for many in this post-Kantian tradition could only be addressed with a radical transformation in the mode of philosophising, often privileging aesthetic experience (as represented by the experience of art). Post-Kantian philosophy in this specific sense could be said to extend into the twentieth-century, particularly with Frankfurt School Critical Theory and the work of Walter Benjamin.

But the phrase 'post-Kantian philosophy' is also used more widely, as we use the phrases 'post-Darwinian' or 'post-Freudian.' That is, it is used to signal a kind of irreversible transformation of thought, a sea-change in philosophy. This means different things to different people. In one version of the history of Anglo-American analytical philosophy it means the consolidation of Hume's critique of metaphysics with a positive shift to the primacy of epistemology and the authority of the model of the natural sciences. In so-called 'continental philosophy' it means the definitive critique of the absolute distinction between the subject and the object, and the necessity, from now on, to think the one through the other. For many, Kant effectively introduced the idea of 'subjectivity' into philosophy and hence into Western thought. 'Subjectivity' in this sense does not mean individual particularity (that which gets in the way of or is opposed to objectivity) but the universal features of

the human subject as such. Although the word 'subject', in Latin and forms derived from it, is found in philosophy long before Kant, the concept of subjectivity in this sense is specifically modern. For Kant, the subject itself is responsible for the objectivity of knowledge. Arguably, late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist standpoint theorists, for example, are still worrying away at that conundrum.

### **So in this sense, Kant is inescapable?**

Yes, even where contemporary philosophers pit themselves against him – Quentin Meillassoux springs to mind – it is often the Kantian paradigm with which they have to contend. But, ironically, this may turn out to have less to do than we think with the oeuvre of that historical figure called Immanuel Kant, and more to do with the history of the reproduction of the discipline of philosophy as we know it today. This account of the influence of Kant is really the account of the reception of one of his works – the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In his own day, Kant's lectures on anthropology and physical geography were significantly more influential than his critical philosophy. Now knowledge of Kant's critical philosophy is often seen as basic training in the discipline. With this in mind, Jacques Derrida wrote in 1990 on what he called the 'super-canonization' of Kant in the history of philosophy. Study of Kant, he said, is the shibboleth for philosophical legitimacy. Granted, Derrida was writing from France, where study of the history of philosophy is valued more highly than it is in the UK; but the point stands.

### **I was hoping you could say a bit more about what you feel are the key issues in the history of the reception of Kant's work?**

There are different ways of looking at this, but the most obvious is the difference between, on the one hand, the epis-

temological reception that privileges the *Critique of Pure Reason* above all else; and, on the other hand, the more 'metaphysical' Romantic reception, privileging the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* – the so-called Third *Critique* – and particularly the critique of aesthetic judgement. In the very difficult First Introduction to the Third *Critique*, Kant presents the work as an attempt to solve the otherwise apparently insuperable problem of the separation between the sensible, rule-governed world of spatio-temporal objects, within which human beings are just one more natural object, and the 'supersensible' world in which human freedom is thinkable. Although the apparent contradiction between determinism and freedom is dealt with in the famous resolution of the Third Antinomy of Pure Reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we are still left with the problem of what Kant calls the 'incalculable gulf' between the two worlds. We can't even begin to think how the world of freedom can have an influence on the world of nature, because that would seem to violate the strict laws of nature. But if morality is to have any reality or meaning at all then the world of freedom *should* have an influence on nature – which just means that we ought to be able to bring about in the real world the moral ends imposed by the moral law. For Kant the problem is also how to reconcile the faculties of reason and understanding, or the harmony between them, when their legislative powers seem to apply only to divergent domains.

Kant's solution to the problem rests on his justification of the application of the 'principle of purposiveness' to the domain of nature. This was introduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a subjective principle of pure reason. In the Third *Critique* it becomes a principle belonging to the 'reflecting' power of judgement. According to this principle, nature is – it must be – judged as purposive for the faculty of human judgement. In short, this means that all of nature must be judged, ultimately, as belonging to one system of

ends which harmonizes with the moral system of ends that is unique to human being.

Although the principle of purposiveness unifies the two parts of the Third *Critique*, commentators have tended to treat its two parts separately. The first part, the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, is where we find Kant's famous discussion of the beautiful and the sublime, and it is fair to say that this is the one of the most important texts – if not the most important text – in Western philosophical aesthetics. In the second part, the Critique of Teleological Judgement, we find Kant's lengthiest discussion of the special ontology of living beings – the idea that living beings (and especially the generation of living beings) cannot be understood in mechanical terms, and must be thought as natural ends, as internally purposive. In the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, Kant assigns a much more important role to the faculty of imagination, compared to the role it was allowed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In judgements of beauty the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful is the feeling of the 'free play' of the subject's faculties, which in this instance are not restricted by a determinate concept. Kant also says that in judgements of taste the faculty of imagination in particular is not restricted by the faculty of understanding, as it arguably is in the discussion of cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

In the 'continental' tradition it is this intimate link between aesthetics (in the sense of judgements of taste) and subjectivity that accounts for the relative privileging of the Third *Critique*. Many people would say that subjectivity is the main theme of modern 'continental' philosophy, and that it is in the experience of nature as beautiful and the experience of art that we can learn most about subjectivity or self-consciousness. It is worth noting, though, that in recent 'continental' philosophy there is a decided surge of interest in the Critique of Teleological Judgement and in the

questions of the systematicity of knowledge and experience that were always part of the Romantic reception of Kant.

There is a danger of caricature here, but more generally it could be said that the most important difference in the contemporary reception of Kant in the 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions boils down to this: the analytic approach to Kant seeks to extract and evaluate discrete philosophical arguments, testing them against each other for consistency and against the standards required of philosophical argument today, while the 'continental' approach tends to be more historical, is more interested in the philosophical genealogy of Kant's concepts and in his relation to his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries. Whereas the analytic approach might attempt to apply Kantian concepts to contemporary problems (one often sees article titles which include the phrase 'A Kantian approach to ...'), the 'continental' approach is that of transformative interpretation and constructive, dialectical synthesis. Perhaps the difference could also be stated in this way: an emphasis on analysis – picking apart – and application in the analytic tradition; an emphasis on interpretation – and often strong or violent interpretation – in the 'continental'. (Heidegger remains the best example of a strong or violent interpreter of Kant, particularly to the extent that he interprets the project of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in ontological (as opposed to epistemological) terms.)

**Would it be fair to say that the 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions are also marked by a difference of emphasis in their respective reception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself?**

Yes, that's certainly the case. The analytic tradition has pored ceaselessly over that part called the Transcendental Analytic, where the intellectual conditions of possibility for knowledge and experience are laid out. Philosophers in the

continental tradition (notably not Heidegger, though) have often been more excited by the possibilities and problems in the Transcendental Dialectic, where Kant discusses transcendental illusion, the antinomies of pure reason and the role of the Ideas of pure reason. Kant says that 'transcendental illusion', unlike empirical illusion or simply error, is a form of illusion from which it is impossible to free oneself, even when, rationally, we can see through it. For example, the famous First Paralogism of Pure Reason shows that we make a mistake when we treat the Idea of the soul as if it referred to an object determined by the category of substance, as if we could know anything about the soul, say what the properties of the soul are, and so on. But in the section on transcendental illusion he also says that even when we see this we cannot but help to continue to think of the soul in this way, as an object. Georg Lukács found the basis for a theory of ideology and reification here (Kant figures surprisingly strongly in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*). Kant's concept of critique, *mutatis mutandis*, also supplied the continental tradition (very broadly understood!) with its concept of criticism – that is, the idea of a criticism of prevailing ideas with emancipatory intent. Obviously, as mentioned above, this is clearest in Frankfurt School Critical Theory, which, in turn, has morphed into the 'critical theories' that have found their way into all manner of disciplines in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and so on.

**It seems that numerous histories of Kant and his legacy are currently circulating. One makes the strong claim that philosophers in the continental tradition not only bit the Kantian bullet much more firmly than those in the analytic tradition, but that in many ways the whole continental tradition *only makes sense* when seen in light of its adherence to some variety of transcendental reasoning, even as its aim, scope and structure is con-**

**stantly mutated and reinvented by thinkers from Hegel to Heidegger to Foucault to Derrida. Would you say that this is a fair picture?**

I think that is a fair picture of the part that Kant has played in continental philosophy, so long as we remember to stress that this has been a constant, critical grappling with Kant. Very few post-Kantian thinkers in the continental tradition would think of themselves as Kantians, so it is not a matter of any adherence to Kantian principles. But, as I said before, Kant's Copernican turn, the idea of transcendental critique and the whole recasting the problem of the subject-object (or subjectivity-objectivity) distinction did set the scene for much of what follows.

It is noticeable that twentieth-century continental philosophy is enormously popular and influential in many of the disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences, and even in other places where you might not expect it – for example in business and management schools and in the theoretical reflections that accompany practice disciplines, such as nursing studies. Analytical philosophy has nothing like a comparable influence in any of these or other disciplines. Because of the hostility to continental philosophy that still characterises most mainstream philosophy departments in the UK most study of continental philosophy takes place outside of philosophy departments.

I'm delighted to see the incredible scope of the influence of continental philosophy in UK intellectual life. But what tends to get lost in this carnival of philosophy is precisely its grounding in and critical, transformative reaction to the problems formulated by Kant. Although no one in philosophy has the right to legislate how people in other disciplines will use Foucault, for example, it does seem to me that one's appreciation of Foucault is very much enhanced with a solid understanding of Kant behind it. This is why studying con-

tinental philosophy in a philosophy department is different to studying it in other disciplinary contexts – basically, you will be forced to read Kant.

**For Kant, our cognitive architecture has not evolved in such a way as to accurately represent reality as it is in itself. Why does he have such faith that it has evolved in such a way as to accurately represent things as they appear to us? And even if we do manage to retain some element of objectivity through his empirical realism, is this not still a rather deflated notion of objectivity?**

I think Kant's position is that our cognitive apparatus *could not have* evolved in such a way as to represent things as they are in themselves – this is a logical impossibility for Kant. The representation of things as they are in themselves means the representation of things as they are independently of our human representations of them. So long as we remain human we represent things to ourselves via our human cognitive and perceptual apparatuses. Presumably, other animals, other worldly beings, may have different cognitive apparatuses and may represent things to themselves in different ways, but all finite worldly beings will have to have such an apparatus and represent things to themselves with it. Things could only be otherwise for God. This also means that things appear to us as they appear to us – I don't think that there is an epistemological problem about the veracity of appearances *qua* appearances for Kant.

As for the problem that things as they are in themselves might be quite heterogeneous to our representations of them – I suppose that that remains a possibility. But for Kant so long as we have secured the objectivity of appearances – which he thinks he has – this isn't really something we need to worry about. It is like saying: I wish I could know things, not as a human, but as they are completely outside of any human perspective. Why would I, as a human, want

that? Why would I, as a human, think that that would be possible? It is as if I wished that I could speak without using any specific language.

For Kant the objectivity of knowledge is secured by the a priori contribution to it of the faculties of sensibility (with space and time) and the understanding (with the pure concepts or the categories). As this means that objectivity is secured via subjectivity, it might look to some like a rather deflated notion of objectivity. But perhaps it only looks like that if we begin with an over-inflated sense of objectivity? This over-inflated sense of objectivity demands that there be absolutely no contribution from the knowing subject, or presumes that any contribution from the subject can only be a distorting one. Doesn't this position want to separate knowledge from the human completely? I think that Kant would think that this is (as he remarks in another context) a science for gods. One of the greatest challenges of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that it asks us to rethink what we mean by 'objectivity'.

This returns us to the idea of subjectivity itself, as well. 'Subjectivity' no longer means the variable or even fickle contribution of the particular individual that messes up the possibility of objective knowledge. It refers to the universal, hence shared, structures of subjectivity. So it is not just objectivity that Kant forces us to rethink.

**There is a clear sense in which Kant curtailed philosophy's metaphysical scope and ambitions, retrenching human knowledge to the confined sphere of appearances, thus forfeiting the realist ambition of grasping reality in itself. What can philosophy's metaphysical ambitions be in light of Kant and his legacy of transcendental idealism?**

I think what was said about objectivity could equally be said

of 'reality'. Kant's position (as you know) is that appearances just are 'reality' for us. He distinguishes between metaphysical and empirical realism. A metaphysical realist is effectively committed to the aim of knowing reality as it is in itself, independently of any subjective contribution to knowledge. For Kant it is metaphysical realism – not transcendental idealism – that inevitably leads to scepticism and relativism because we will never know reality as it is independently of our way of knowing reality. Appearances are real, they are not illusory – the distinction between appearance and illusion is very important for Kant and it is only the metaphysical realist who is forced to conflate them. Transcendental idealism (the doctrine of the transcendental ideality, i.e. mind-dependence, of space and time and of the origin of the pure concepts in the understanding itself) is equated with empirical realism because, together with the empirical contribution to knowledge via sensibility, the a priori contribution of the subject gives us real and objective knowledge of the world. This is very far from any kind of relativism or scepticism on Kant's part.

After this, metaphysical realism doesn't have a monopoly on the idea of reality. It is important that we are able to think about what might be called 'regional ontologies' of reality. Physical objects are real, but so are events, so are social structures. Of course this means that we have to think about the reality of different kinds of things in different ways – that is what I meant by 'regional ontologies'. For example, one of the most important discussions in contemporary philosophy and other disciplines concerns the 'reality' of race. Race is not 'real' in the sense that races are biological kinds, but 'race' is real to the extent that people are racialized into groups called 'races' that have a social reality. The social reality of 'race' is easily mistaken for a metaphysical reality; in fact racism generally relies on this kind of mistake.

Although I don't think that pre-Kantian metaphysics has survived or can survive, of course people still do practice what they call 'metaphysics'. Whatever metaphysical ambitions people may have these days, the meaning of 'metaphysics' will be different. It is worth recalling P.F. Strawson's distinction between 'descriptive' and 'revisionary' metaphysics. Strawson salvaged a descriptive metaphysical project from Kant, seeing him as attempting to describe the shared conceptual scheme that human beings just do have. Strawson had no truck with revisionary metaphysics, but if we accept that there is any historicity to our 'conceptual scheme' the revisionary project is back on the agenda. Post-Kantian revisionary metaphysics would have to be critical first, revealing the social and historical embeddedness of our conceptual presumptions, before attempting to think in alternative ways.

**Kant's work can often seem extremely abstract (in addition to frighteningly complex!), and it is easy for members of the general public (even those with philosophical leanings) to wonder why, for example, the question of conditions of possibility for knowledge of objects is of any significance to them. Can you say anything about how these esoteric-sounding philosophical issues may trickle down such that they become relevant to life outside of academic philosophy?**

It is true that the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, is difficult to read. But is also true that there is much pleasure and satisfaction to be had from the achievement of having read it and understood some of it. And the basic epistemological problem that Kant addresses can, I think, quite easily be distilled in a form that children can understand – in fact I've seen that done in a children's magazine (*Aquila*) for 8–12-year olds. But I'm glad that you ask this question because I think that philosophy has to be able to speak to the social and political present if it is not to with-

er away as an archaic or pointlessly abstract practice. Of course we have to do the leg work, studying and becoming knowledgeable about the discipline before we can come at it all guns blazing, but if we can't get philosophy out of the classroom and into the way we think about everyday issues of great importance then it may as well die. For philosophy to be relevant philosophers also have to know something about what is being said in other relevant disciplines too, or know something about what is happening in the arenas in which they would intervene. It is not clear what use philosophical aesthetics is, for example, if it has no relation to contemporary art and if it knows nothing about contemporary art theory. It would be merely arrogant if philosophers of language thought that they had nothing to learn from Translation Studies, or if people thinking about unconscious bias thought that a discipline founded on the concept of the unconscious – psychoanalysis – was not worth investigating.

I think we have to bear all this in mind when we want to know how Kant's difficult ideas have trickled down or may trickle down into public consciousness and into everyday life. I see Michel Foucault – *bête noire* of many a mainstream scholarly historian or philosopher – as a great example. Foucault learned about the transcendental from Kant. He saw, beyond Kant, that there were *historical* conditions of possibility for what counted as knowledge or as legitimate statements in various institutional discourses, notably psychiatry. He thought that the status of these conditions was such that they deserved the title of the historical a priori (which would be, for Kant, a contradiction in terms). Translated into everyday terms this historical transcendentalisation of epistemological norms explains to us why they stick so hard and fast but it also allows for the possibility that, by critically interrogating them, we might begin to think and thus live differently. Perhaps some historical transcendentals are illusions, in Kant's sense – illusions that we mistake

for necessities of thinking. Wouldn't it be relevant to our everyday lives if we could identify those?

I also think, however, that we can never know in advance how our becoming acquainted with a philosophical work will affect us. Often, it is not that particular doctrines rationally compel our assent and then inform our behaviour or understanding of things, according to a kind of Benthamite determinism. In her autobiography, when she reflects on being asked about the relationship between her philosophy and the everyday world, Simone de Beauvoir said that it was not a matter of bringing together two separate things, but that she had learned to see the world through philosophical eyes. Kant can teach us this, too. We don't have to exactly agree with Kant that space and time are transcendently ideal to have been provoked by his philosophy into a critical, reflective relation to the world which is immensely enriching, granted it is not always easy or comfortable.

**Although we have focused on Kant's transcendental philosophy, I was wondering if there were other aspects of his legacy you were interested in discussing?**

Well, in Kant studies these days there is a big, horrible elephant in the room – his theory of race and his racism. That Kant often made vile racist comments is undeniable. (He was also quite exceptionally sexist and never seemed to tire of saying perfectly stupid things about women, too.) People will say that he was a man of his time (of course he was; we are all people of our time) but in fact he was racist even by the standards of his day. In Kant's lectures on anthropology and physical geography, especially – lectures which were very popular and which were intended for the cultivation of the young men in his audience – he returned over and over to the topic of the natural history of the human races and the differences between the races.

He was a monogenesist; that is, he believed that all the different human races belonged to one human species and were descended from one creation. In order to explain how it was, then, that humans had come to be divided into four or five distinct 'races,' which he believed were now fixed, he developed a theory of biological development. He suggested that the original human race had contained within it various different germs or seeds and natural dispositions that did or did not develop in response to the environment and the climate as humans spread across the earth. The supreme principle in this theory is the principle of the purposiveness of nature. Nothing in nature is not purposive. The germs were placed in the original human race in order that the human might be fitted for whatever environment they found themselves in. Kant thought that the races had developed unevenly, that there was a racial hierarchy with – unsurprisingly – white Europeans at the top. The germs in the original human stock were internally purposive – there in order that the human being might populate the whole earth and develop all the capacities that a human being could develop. But in the context of the system of nature within which the races belong, a system that is ultimately a system of ends, Kant also speaks of the races as purposive in another sense – notably, suggesting that the black race is a slave race. And of course all of this is absolutely incompatible with his cosmopolitan universalism and his ethics, which has led people to criticise Kant's claims about race and his racism with arguments from his own philosophy.

More broadly, however, there can be no historical or programmatic separation between the Kant's theory of race and the critical philosophy, and indeed parts of the former are the direct and obvious initial development of the latter, especially concerning the role of teleological judgment. But it is still very difficult to say what the implications of the theory of race – if any – are for the critical philosophy. That is something that we need to keep thinking about, in my view.

**Kant is generally presented as a setter of limits to philosophy inquiry. But what (if any) do you feel are the limits of what can be placed, and performed, under the category of 'philosophy'?**

It depends whether we think that 'philosophy' is the name for a specific academic discipline practiced in the Universities and other dedicated disciplinary sites or whether we think it is – or should be – a broader practice of analysis, critique and construction. On the one hand, there is a disciplinary specificity to philosophy. I think that this disciplinary specificity has to do with the relation to the history of philosophy and with the practice of abstract thinking. The discipline is internally plural, but to study for a BA in Philosophy is still a specific undertaking that is different to studying for a BA in Literary Studies or BSc in Mathematics, for example. I don't think that just anything can be called 'philosophy', even if there is a popular usage of the term that does just this. But philosophy cannot maintain itself in a disciplinary silo. Disciplines are relatively recent historical inventions, and philosophy for most of its long history did not separate itself off from other areas of enquiry. Philosophy – 'continental' philosophy, at least – has burst the banks of the discipline and seeped into many others, as we discussed above. It may very well not be the discipline of philosophy, narrowly conceived, that gets to say what can be placed, and performed, under the title of 'philosophy' in the future.

**Part 2:**  
**Post-Kantian Philosophy**

## 4: Being-Towards-Death

### *A Conversation with Stephen Mulhall*

*In this conversation, Stephen Mulhall clarifies Martin Heidegger's Kantian inheritance, especially as it relates to his project in Being and Time in which we find a deepening and broadening of Kant's finitude of intuition. He offers an interpretation of Heidegger's notoriously confusing concept of being-towards-death in terms of our relation to nullity or nothingness, a vision of finitude that pushes us up against the very limits of that finitude. In this account, being-towards-death emerges as the point at which our ability to make sense of ourselves runs out as we find ourselves, as Mulhall puts it, "conditioned by a necessary relationship we have to that which essentially lies beyond our capacity to make sense."*

*Stephen Mulhall is professor of philosophy at the University of Oxford, specializing in post-Kantian philosophy, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of literature and film. He has published numerous books including The Routledge Guidebook to Heidegger's Being and Time and On Film.*

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**You position yourself within a framework called post-Kantian philosophy. Why is it post-Kantian rather than, say, post-Cartesian, given Descartes' monumental influence on modern philosophy?**

When I use that label I'm picking out a vast historical terrain. I suppose it's another way to describe all those aspects of modern philosophical work that don't count as analytic or don't count as fully-fledged parts of philosophy from the

point of view of the Anglo-American traditions. So it's not really a single thing, it's partly defined by negation (all the stuff that analytic philosophy doesn't take seriously), and in that sense it really picks out a lot of different traditions that interact with one another in all sorts of complicated ways. What the label brings out, and I think to this extent it's accurate, is that Kant was a pivotal figure in the history of modern European philosophy in a way that Descartes wasn't.

Kant *was* inherited by analytic philosophy, by Anglo-American, Anglophone traditions in philosophy, and there are a number of very significant commentators on Kant's work within this tradition, all of whom take Kant to be a serious philosopher, someone who deals with absolutely fundamental problems that any serious analytic philosopher ought to be taking seriously. So he's a present figure on the Anglophone side of this putative division between analytic and continental philosophy. But the most immediate ways in which Kant was taken up as a philosopher were through the German idealists: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. And then you get into Marx and a whole range of other 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century figures, all of whom take Kant to be an equally serious figure but they inherit him in a completely different way to the Anglophone tradition. So there's a sense in which Kant, unlike Descartes, is a point where what was previously a fundamentally single tradition in modern philosophy splits, although this is something you see more clearly in retrospect than you would have at the time, and if anything the immediate Kantian inheritance was in Germany rather than England or America.

Looking at it from the contemporary point of view, if you are an analytic Anglophone philosopher you are going to think that Kant is a serious figure in the history of philosophy, but you're going to think that the people in France and Germany who inherited him in their own way were,

in effect, at that point going off the rails. So there's a Kant for Anglophone philosophy, and there's a Kant for those who are interested in French and German philosophy. For both of them he's a serious figure in the history of the subject, but they see someone different when they look back at him. And you couldn't say that about Descartes – there's no sense in which the immediate post-Cartesian response to Descartes bifurcated in that kind of way. Whereas I think if most people tried to tell a story nowadays about what continental philosophy is, they would track it back to Kant, and it's the German idealist reaction to Kant and everything that followed in reaction to that idealism that they would think of as the origin of what gets called continental philosophy.

**Let's turn now to Heidegger as he has a fascinating and ambiguous relationship with Kant and the transcendental tradition.**

One thing that's worth making clear is that Heidegger's lifetime's work is absolutely vast and extremely heterogeneous. The early phase, the phase of his work that culminated in *Being and Time* which was published in the late 1920s, is in a certain way relatively self-sufficient and much more clearly relatable to Kantian themes, and also to Cartesian themes. In the context of *Being and Time* Heidegger has, in a certain way, much bigger fish to fry than Kant did in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which is the primary reference point here.

Heidegger was clear from the outset that the issue that really interested him was what he called the question of being, and the question of the meaning of being. And that was something he always understood to be in a certain way the most general and the most fundamental question there could be, but anyone who picks up *Being and Time* and reads it will find that it almost entirely consists of an analysis of a specific kind of being, the kind that Heidegger

called Dasein, by which he means to pick out the kind of being that you and I have, the distinctively human kind of being (although not necessarily restricted to members of the human species). So it would be very easy, and would not be wrong, to think about *Being and Time* as a systematic attempt to give a story about what it is to be a human being. So that means that Heidegger spends a lot of time talking about what's involved in the capacity of the human being to engage with, to encounter, to understand, comprehend and investigate the real, independently existing world. And to that extent the central problematic of *Being and Time* is plainly continuous with topic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

**So if Kant's looking for conditions of possibility for objective empirical knowledge about reality, Heidegger's looking for the conditions of possibility for the fact that reality shows up *at all*?**

Yes, you're right. Part of what Heidegger thinks is limiting or limited in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that it's explicitly about the possibility of theoretical knowledge. It's focusing on the human subject as a 'cognizer' of the world as opposed to an agent in that world, someone who has goals and purposes, and who pursues them. That's something that Kant also treats, but he treats it in the second *Critique* which is focused on moral matters. Part of the problem that Heidegger saw in the focus of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that he thought that a proper story about knowledge was actually inseparable from a broader conception of the human subject as essentially inhabiting or dwelling in the real world: not just present in it but engaged with it practically. So the story he tells in *Being and Time*, and one of the respects in which he tries to expand upon the Kantian conception of the matter is to *contextualise* the possibility of knowledge. More specifically, Heidegger says that knowledge is a deficient mode of being-in-the-world, where be-

ing-in-the-world is his general characterisation of Dasein's way of existing.

**By deficient, he means something like derivative?**

Yes, he doesn't mean that it's fundamentally flawed or lacking in any particular way, he means that what happens when we think about knowledge in the kind of way that Kant seems to, as a sort of theoretical enterprise, or the way in which Descartes seems to when he imagines his meditator just sitting in the study looking at a ball of wax on his palm, is that you're contemplating some independently existing object. And Heidegger is perfectly happy to admit that this is one of the ways in which we engage with reality, but he thinks about it as a kind of holding back from what one might think of as a more common and more full-blooded practical engagement with things. So Division One, the first half of *Being and Time*, pivots around a distinction Heidegger draws between objects understood as present-to-hand (the self-sufficient objects of theoretical cognition) and objects understood as ready-to-hand (available for practical activities of various kinds). And on the face of it he thinks that you will achieve a better understanding of the real nature of your relation to present-at-hand objects if you don't start there and then tell a story about practical activity as a kind of supplement to theoretical engagement, but actually do the reverse, starting with practical activity.

**So the practical precedes more theoretical questions about empirical knowledge?**

Well, one of the difficulties is what you mean by 'precede'. It could just be a chronological precedence, in other words you might think that as a matter of human history there would have been a lot of human beings just practically engaging with the world long before anyone stood back from it and started questioning why bits of stone work well as tools,

and then studying its properties. So reflection in that sense is uncontroversially a belated phenomenon in relation to practical engagement, but that's not really what Heidegger's interested in. It's not even that he wants to emphasise the fact that most of us still spend most of the time just getting on with things and doing things rather than stepping back and reflecting on the nature of the objects we're doing things with. Because that would be a kind of empirical point, a matter of fact about human life, and Heidegger really isn't interested in that level of analysis, any more than Kant was.

Kant's not interested in what an accurate theory of any bit of reality is – what he's interested in is how it's so much as *possible* for us to build such a theory, what has to be true of the subject and what has to be true of objects in order for that kind of theoretical grasp of them to be possible. And Heidegger in that respect is interested in exactly the same thing. So in my view, the point about him starting with practical engagement is not that he wants to say that it is more *fundamental* than theoretical knowledge, but rather that if you look at modes of practical engagement it's in a certain way easier for you to see what conditions the possibility of *both* practical engagement with the world *and* theoretical knowledge of it. After all, he does say that both of them are modes of being-in-the-world. So in his analysis of practical engagement, what he's fundamentally trying to bring out are what he calls the structure of worldhood without which it would not be possible to treat objects as pieces of equipment in relation to a practical goal, but also to show that those very same structures are conditions for the possibility of knowledge.

**Moods would seem to be one of the central structures or transcendental elements in *Being and Time*. In your own work you reject the idea that moods are simply subjective distortions, and argue instead that they are genuinely cognitive achievements.**

It's not so much that Heidegger wants to say that moods are fundamentally cognitive, as that he wants to say that human modes of inhabitation of the world, the structure of being-in-the-world (to use the vocabulary I've already been using), are always structured by a certain kind of understanding *and* a certain kind of affectivity. So he tells a story according to which understanding is a kind of active, projective capacity of Dasein, but he wants to argue that there's no such thing as that kind of projective capacity that doesn't also come with a more receptive aspect and structure to it. So the point about moods is that they are what you might call empirical manifestations of a more ontological structure, which is that of being *attuned* to the world that you're acting in and comprehending.

Heidegger is saying that moods show the respect in which the world is always manifest to us as *mattering* in a certain way to us, so we always find ourselves in a situation in which certain things are salient, certain things are fading into the background, in which we have certain concerns and interests that permeate our mode of response to that world, and indeed without that kind of attunement to the world the possibility of projective understanding wouldn't itself be coherent. And of course it works the other way round. So the thought is more that there is no such thing as a mode of understanding that doesn't also involve a mode of attunement, and vice versa. Because in order for the world to matter to you in any particular way then it must be showing up as having a significance of some kind.

So one way you might think about this relationship between attunement and understanding is that there is a kind of ambiguity or dual aspect in the notion of things having a meaning. One way of taking the notion of meaning is as something to do with sense or intelligibility, and that takes you towards the idea of understanding; but meaning also evokes something like meaningfulness or significance, the

fact that something *matters* to you in a certain way, and that aspect takes you more towards the idea of attunement. And the claim Heidegger is making is that the way in which we inhabit the world *always* has both of those aspects to it, so in terms of the history of philosophy he is opposing the idea that you can draw a sharp conceptual distinction between the cognitive and the affective, between reason and the passions, if you like. So on the model of someone like Hume, we have these two essentially distinct faculties – when it's action, passion is what drives you, and when it's knowledge, reason's in the driving seat, but they're really completely distinct from one another. So then you have a problem of getting them to engage with one another. What Heidegger is saying in effect is that if you really look closely at how this works, what you'll see is that they're internally related, that they're just two faces or aspects of an essentially unitary mode of being: we couldn't have understanding without moods, and we couldn't have moods without understanding.

**The link between moods and mattering is interesting, as Heidegger is famous for his analysis of angst, a mood in which our normal taken-for-granted sense of things mattering or being meaningful is profoundly ruptured.**

There's quite a complicated story here. So, in Division One of *Being and Time* the particular mood of angst is taken to be really important, and Heidegger tries to clarify what he means by angst by contrasting it with fear. Fear is something that Heidegger claims is object-directed, so when you're afraid you're always afraid of something in particular, so it might be a dog, a human being, or some natural phenomenon that looks like it might cause you a problem. And precisely because it's object-directed, the sort of affective response that you have to it is equally structured and specific, so if you see a rabid dog you'll look for the nearest tree to jump up; if it's a different kind of threat you'll respond in a different kind of way. And that's a good example of the way

in which moods structure and shape situations you're in so there are always certain channels of action that become immediately salient and certain other ones that drop away.

Heidegger thinks that angst is importantly different from that because it is object-*less* – there isn't any particular feature or aspect of the situation in which you find yourself that is provoking the angst; or rather if something specific is provoking it, what it provokes exceeds the object that is occasioning it. So what the feeling of angst is supposed to reveal is that, in a certain sense, there is a bigger question which lies behind the specific sorts of meaningfulness and mattering that you encounter when you feel fear or boredom or hatred, or whatever it might be. And the bigger question really is: what's the meaning of existence? Not just what's the meaning of the situation I'm in, but more what's the significance of the fact I'm *always* situated, that there's always some structure of meaning that's informing my existence, and yet that structure of meaning doesn't itself seem to be beyond question or objectively grounded or authorised by anything beyond my mode of grasping it or making sense of it.

**This sense of the fragility of the structure of meaning does not seem to be present in Kant's philosophy.**

This goes back to the earlier point that in Kant's critical philosophy, the architecture of it separates out the issue of practical agency and that kind of significance to the Second *Critique*, whereas the First *Critique* is exclusively concerned with cognition. Once he's built that separation into the structure of his theory, then the idea of meaning as mattering and the loss of that kind of significance doesn't even arise in the context of the theoretical philosophy, and when it does arise in the context of the practical philosophy, there's the question of how ethical significance relates to God. But one thing that Heidegger certainly isn't in a posi-

tion to invoke at this point, even as a postulate of practical reason, is a belief in the existence of God. And I think this is a point in Heidegger's analysis where he makes contact with what someone like Nietzsche would call the problem of nihilism: the idea that in a culture where faith in God is a great deal more dubious and crumbling than it was in Kant's day, the question of meaning in the sense of mattering becomes much more pressing, because of the absence of what people take to be a theological narrative where meaning is authorised by the fact that God is the creator of everything and whatever he says goes, and that gives you an objectively authoritative sense for your life.

Lacking that framework, structures of meaning seem to be on the one hand absolutely ineradicable and fundamental to our existence, but they also seem to be fundamentally rooted in *us*, rather than in some wholly external reality. And then the question of what authority those structures of meaning might exercise becomes impossible to avoid but at the same time impossible to answer satisfactorily, because if in the end one way or the other it's me individually or us collectively who establish and maintain these structures of meaning, then it sounds as if really they're subjective, and that means that we could choose to restructure them or we could lose faith in them, and then what?

But actually with respect to angst, that's not Heidegger's primary reason for talking about it. In Division One, the reason for talking about angst is that when you are in a condition of angst, he thinks that your own nature becomes much more transparent to you *as a whole*, that you stop focusing on the particular situation that you're in and you just come to an apprehension of yourself *as situated*, and therefore as in some way responsible for the kind of existence you're leading and indeed the fact that you're continuing to lead it as opposed to ending it.

**This idea of meaning not being objectively grounded or guaranteed opens up questions concerning finitude, which is one of the most controversial elements of Kant's legacy, with the poet Kleist famously committing suicide in part due to the despair induced by Kant apparently erecting an insurmountable barrier separating us from the thing-in-itself. Finitude is a central topic that you address in your work, so I was hoping you could say a few things about it.**

You're right that there's a certain kind of Kantian ancestry to this, because one of the ways in which one could try to summarise the *Critique of Pure Reason* is by saying that Kant tells a story about knowledge which is an attempt to acknowledge the finitude of the human knower. And that finds expression in the fact that Kant says that while we have a spontaneous faculty for understanding it's completely useless unless it receives a manifold of intuition upon which it can work, upon which it can engage and activate its synthetic capacity. So he talks about intuitions without concepts being blind, but concepts without intuitions being empty. So you need both: you need the capacity to organise, but you need something to be given to you to organise, and human beings are essentially split or doubled in that particular way. So the acknowledgement of finitude comes in the fact that something has to be given or received by the knower before genuine knowledge can be achieved.

### **So what would infinite intuition look like?**

This is where the contrast with God comes in, because the alternative to a story about knowledge as finite would be the idea of someone who doesn't require something to be given from outside in order to achieve knowledge. Now, it's a moot point whether or not Kant does think that is a genuine possibility, whether he thinks he can make sense of it as a mode of knowledge, but he does offer non-human alterna-

tives as part of his attempt to make clear by contrast what's finite about human knowledge. And interestingly, going back to the post-Kantian phrase which you mentioned earlier, one of the ways in which some people understand the tradition of German idealism is as an attempt to overcome the dissatisfaction of the kind that Kleist expressed in this dispensation.

Because what Kant says in effect is that we are dependent for knowledge on something that is given to us, something that we cannot provide out of our own resources, and this shows the limits not just of our autonomy but also the limits of knowledge. It means that anything that cannot be conveyed to us through intuition cannot be a possible object of knowledge. Now obviously that would include God, it would include anything that lies beyond the limits of possible experience. And if genuine knowledge requires intuition, then there is no possibility of using our conceptual capacities to get a genuine substantial grip on anything that transcends the realm of intuition. So Kant is saying that if you do a proper critique of reason, what you'll see is that it has limits and that you have to respect them, and that a great deal of confusion has been sown in the history of philosophy by thinking you can transcend them and start talking about things that might or might not be the case beyond the limits of possible experience. And as you work your way through German idealism and get to Hegel, a familiar, if not uncontroversial, story about that process is that the German idealists are basically looking for ways of overcoming those limitations that Kant imposes.

**You refer both to limits and limitations, but in your work emphasise that these are not to be understood as interchangeable. Please can you say something about this?**

If we think about it in those Kantian or post-Kantian terms I was talking about, one way of hearing what Kant is say-

ing when he talks of the limits of possible experience, is to feel that you've just been deprived of something: here is this possibility of transcendent knowledge and Kant is telling us it's prohibited – you can't have it. Now, if you hear that as saying that there really is something out there to be known but you can't know it, then that's going to sound like not just a disappointment but a deprivation, like someone's just built a fence. One way of understanding that is as saying that there is something that could be done here, but you can't do it. And then you immediately feel that you've been prohibited from something.

But the other way of hearing what Kant was saying is there is *no such thing* as a transcendent field of knowledge – there aren't objects there that someone who isn't conditioned by our limits could conceivably know; we can't make any sense of a possible object of knowledge that transcends the limits of possible experience. That's not a coherent possibility, but a fantasy. It's something whose senselessness reveals itself if we reflect sufficiently carefully on what knowledge is and what an object of knowledge is.

If you hear it that way you're not being deprived of anything, you're not being prohibited from doing anything because something that can't conceivably be done isn't something you can be prevented from doing. So when Kant maps out the limits of possible knowledge you *can* hear that as him just saying that this is what knowledge *is*, and anything knowable you can know. So he's not depriving you of anything, he's just saying that this is what knowing is and this is as far as it goes. The limits of possible knowledge are co-extensive with all that there is to know.

So if you tell the story with a certain kind of accent, it feels as if what we're dealing with here are limitations as if being merely human prevents us from doing something that God might do. The idea of a limitation presupposes something

beyond that at least it makes sense to talk about or imagine being an object of knowledge, whereas if you think about them as limits what you're basically saying is that there isn't a beyond.

**But it seems to be something we can't shake off, this feeling of limitation or inadequacy. And this is something you address in your work, this sense that we're always trying to push against these limits that have been set.**

Yes, that's something that Heidegger's interested in, Nietzsche's interested in, Wittgenstein's interested in – the feeling that no matter how many times you convince yourself philosophically that these are limits and not limitations, you end up beating your head against them.

**Rather than limits and limitations, you tend to talk about the finite and its relationship to the infinite. The way I understand your conception of this relationship is that the infinite is something like a veil or shadow behind our finite experience, and you generally describe it with terms like nullity, negation, and nothingness. But what can a philosopher do with that or say about that?**

Well, it has to do with whether you think about this idea of that which is beyond the finite as a positive or negative notion. In the field of religion, there is something called negative theology where the argument, very roughly speaking, is that we can't possibly get a positive grasp of God's nature as He's transcendent, but what we *can* do is ward off misunderstandings, and further specify this void by saying what God is not. So when you say that God is omnipotent, that sounds like a positive characterisation of His nature but it can also be read simply as you saying that it never makes sense to say of God that he didn't do something because he couldn't do it; you're just excluding that possibility. That isn't a positive characterisation of God.

You can think about finitude in the same kind of way – that what makes us finite is certain kinds of negative qualification, or more specifically that we stand in relation to something that we can only specify in negative terms. And in the context of Heidegger, this becomes much clearer in the Second Division of *Being and Time*: not so much the way angst shows up in the First Division which we've already talked about, but the way it is related in the Second Division first of all to death and then more generally to a range of notions which Heidegger finds himself repeatedly having to characterise in terms of a relation to negation or nullity or nothingness.

If we take death as an example, Heidegger makes a claim at the beginning of Division Two that being-in-the-world is being-towards-death. A lot of commentators on this bit of Heidegger think that what he wants to do is to provide an alternative positive account of what it means that human beings die, whereas in my view what he's *actually* trying to do is to get us to see that what's specifically angst-inducing about death is that we have *no idea* what it means for us to die, for us to be dead. We can make sense of the possibility of dying and we can make sense of the possibility of other people being dead, in other words no longer existing in our world or our lives, but what we can't make any sense of is the idea that *we* will be dead. If you look at death from the first-person point of view, there's no possibility of you getting what Heidegger would call a phenomenological grasp of what that signifies because it's not a possible mode of existence for you. We can make sense of the possibility of being a premier league footballer or being a policeman or being a surgeon because we could in principle realise those possibilities in human existence, but death is not just a very peculiar kind of existential possibility, because when you're dead there's no *you* around to live it out, to project that possibility.

And given that on Heidegger's methodology we can only grasp things insofar as they present themselves to us as they are in themselves, then death is essentially ungraspable – we have no means of making sense of it. And *that's* what induces angst, or ought to induce angst. So, what we encounter when we think about the fact that we *will* all necessarily die – this aspect of our finitude – is actually the point at which our ability to make sense of ourselves runs out: it is essentially beyond us.

**So this is a deepening of what you might call Kant's finitude of intuition.**

Or perhaps his intuition of finitude. Kant sounds this note in the register of knowledge in the context of the First *Critique*, and what Heidegger is doing is broadening it. He is asking about what is involved in the kind of comprehending relation you have to yourself. Well, if you really want to take in your own nature as a unity then you can't avoid the fact that your life comes to an end – that it's finite rather than infinite (whatever that means), and the most obvious salient way in which that finitude shows up for us is that we all die, that we are all mortal. But what does that mean? At one level Heidegger is contesting a lot of familiar interpretations which he thinks are just wrong, for example he doesn't think it means that our life only lasts for a certain finite period; and at another level he wants to say that the truth about being mortal is that every moment of your life could be the last, and that if people thought about it that way they would have a *completely* different sense of its significance.

But in my view there's then a second step, which is to say that even when you say that every moment could be your last you don't *really* know what you mean because that idea of the moment being your last carries with it the idea: no more you. But what does *that* mean? How's it possible for

*you* to make sense of that possibility existentially (in his jargon)? And I think it's fundamental for him that we *can't* make sense of it. And what shows up there in my view is the idea that *all* of the particular ways in which we make sense of ourselves and our lives and hence of the world which we inhabit emerge from and are conditioned by a necessary relationship we have to that which *essentially* lies beyond our capacity to make sense.

**So that brings together the so-called existential side of *Being and Time* with his broader ontological project of investigating the question of being.**

Yes, I think if you work your way through Division Two of *Being and Time* then he goes back over *every* aspect of the analysis he provides in Division One, and he shows that if you push it hard enough you will find the same necessity to invoke nothingness or nullity. So you get the idea of being guilty which he defines as being the basis of a nullity; you get the voice of conscience which says...nothing; and you get a definition of temporality in terms of what he calls 'ecstases', a notion that literally invokes a kind of standing outside oneself. What it seems to mean is that the essential nature of the present lies in its relation to the future and the past, and the same is true of all three, which means in effect that the nature of each depends on its relationship to that which it is not, so the temporality of Dasein looks like a kind of threefold negation. This is partly why I think that Sartre's emphasis on nothingness is not a kind of radical alteration in the Heideggerian dispensation, but is making explicit something that is actually there if you look closely enough in *Being and Time*.

**We've been talking about limits and limitations, so where do you see the limits of what can be placed or performed under the category of 'philosophy'?**

I think philosophy is distinguished from most other subjects by the fact it has a kind of contradictory impulse that is right at the heart of what it does: one is the impulse to adopt a kind of God's eye view, to feel as if in order to fulfil itself as a subject it *has* to be capable of taking in everything, making sense of all the things there are to make sense of, and to understand how they relate to one another. And here what you get is the kind of thing that Kierkegaard satirises in the Hegelian philosopher, the idea that you can step outside of your limitations and conditions, and adopt the kind of perspective that God would have, taking in everything as if it were just a great big thing. That impulse is really deeply written into the nature of the subject, and I don't think it's removable, but I think it's paired with an equally fundamental recognition that anything you say and do as a philosopher is itself going to be situated and contextualised, and stand in relationship to an indefinite range of other disciplines – history, physics, linguistics, whatever it might be. And philosophy is constituted out of an oscillation between those two things: an impulse to get towards this God's eye view and the realisation that it's not just that you can't do it, but that there may be no such thing to be done. And that's the sense in which it seems to me that bumping our heads against the limits is just written into the DNA of doing philosophy.

When I talk about the way in which philosophy might be more productively aligned to literature or the arts more generally, that's an example of allowing one of those two impulses to predominate and do something fruitful: to recognise that philosophy is one discipline amongst others and it's engaged in a conversation with those disciplines, and it can learn from them just as much as they can learn from it. So it's a way of trying to exploit one aspect of that tension that makes up philosophy. But I think that if we ended up doing nothing other than that, adopting what you might call a kind of Rortyan picture of philosophy, then something

fundamental would be lost because there is a sense in which human finitude comes out most fully in running your heads up against those limits, that there's something fundamentally human about being dissatisfied with being human, and philosophy's way of registering that *is* its aspiration to take a step back and make sense of things as a whole. And it may well be that that's just an indefeasible aspiration.

**Certainly the idea of an inward-looking philosophy seems antithetical to the spirit of your work, for example your idea of philosophy as a way of realising conversation.**

I think that's partly because philosophy is in a way a very parasitic kind of enterprise. Most of the materials on which it works in its own distinctive way have to be, in Kantian terms, given to it. Philosophers don't come up with any genuine knowledge of their own – they're always interested in what a historian tells them or what a physicist tells them or what a novelist tells them. You have to have something to reflect philosophically on in order to do philosophy – we don't have an independent body of knowledge or source of insight. So in that sense we're always dependent on other disciplines, and I think in some moods we don't like that fact and we'd like to transcend it if we could. So it's the finitude of philosophy, I guess.

## 5: The Fragility of Finitude

### *A Conversation with Joseph Shear*

*In this conversation, Joseph Shear focuses on the idea of finitude or being-towards-death in Heidegger as a loss of intelligibility or a loss of meaning. It becomes clear that finitude for Heidegger runs deeper than it does for Kant, exposing as it does the riskiness and precariousness of our engagement not just with the objects which we encounter in the world (an idea that is present in Kant's account of the finitude of our intuition), but also of the very conceptual framework within which those objects are intelligible (an idea that cannot be accommodated within the terms of the project Kant sets for himself in the First Critique).*

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**Let's start with the Kantian transcendental framework. This is fixed and invulnerable, complete and certain. The framework doesn't fail. This can set us up to discuss the possibility of failure in Heidegger's account of death. Please can you say a few things about this?**

This is obviously a large question! The concepts of the understanding are depicted by Kant as a-historically binding, not susceptible to change, in no way potentially unviable in light of future experience or interaction with the world – at least if he can pull off his project. The idea that concepts like substance and cause could in any way fail or be shown to

be inadequate is not something he could be prepared to acknowledge, at least on his handling of them. This is part of what makes them *pure*. Of course there is a sense in which Kant was very alive to seeming threats to the legitimacy of these concepts coming from the empiricist tradition (e.g. Hume), so what I am attributing to Kant is something he felt he had to earn rather than take for granted in some kind of dogmatic slumber.

To come to Heidegger, he was not the first philosopher to note and take seriously the fact of wholesale historical change in our ways of conceptualising the world – Hegel, for example, is well known for introducing a more historicist picture of philosophy and the human relation to the world more generally. But early on in *Being and Time*, one of the first concrete reasons, indeed *the* first concrete reason, Heidegger gives for raising his question of the sense of being, has to do with the fact that there was massive conceptual fragility in the sciences of his time, in physics, in biology, in the human sciences, in theology (which in the broad sense of science counts as a science for him). The relationship between human inquiry and the objects or topics to which that inquiry devoted itself started to, as he put it, ‘totter’. The idea that the world and our relation to it is susceptible to change, is marked by a sense of fragility, is something that he thinks is central to the very idea of being related to the world. He takes it much more seriously than Kant ever did, and arguably more seriously than Hegel ever did as well (though that would take some showing).

Now the idea that concepts with the kind of pure status that Kant ascribed to them, what Heidegger would call ontological concepts, are in any way vulnerable gives rise to lots of questions and puzzles – many that Heidegger himself neglected to address. And indeed there was a kind of Kantian a-historical strain to Heidegger’s thought around *Being and Time* such that these questions were largely, though not en-

tirely, closed off. But Heidegger opened the way for these questions, questions that would come to take on more urgency in his own (later) thought and some of his successors.

**I was hoping you could briefly outline the distinction between infinite and finite intuition as Kant described it because for Heidegger this finitude of our intuition was central to the deeper vision of finitude that he lays out.**

Another softball; thanks Anthony! For Heidegger this contrast between a finite and an infinite intellect was a cornerstone of Kant’s thought in his First *Critique*. For a finite intellect, objects are given, they are already there, and they populate a world into which we are thrown and about which we could, at least in particular cases, be wrong. Contrast, if only notionally, an infinite intellect (traditionally God) whose relationship to its objects is different in form. God says ‘let there be light’ and, lo, there is light. There is accordingly a guarantee of success built into an infinite intellect, a guaranteed harmony of thought and being. What is contemplated and what is actual coincide – not so much a perfect fit as a unity in which the very idea of ‘fitting’ doesn’t really make sense. Who knows if such a form of intellect ultimately makes sense when really thought through (I have some doubts), but the importance of it, at least for Heidegger, is to throw into relief the core features of the contrasting condition, our condition.

So for Heidegger the key lies in the fact that for the finite intellect there is not this guaranteed sense of harmony. And this is true for Kant as well which is why his project took the shape that it did. He set out to describe and vindicate a finite rapport with the world that is not divinely guaranteed but is nonetheless not arbitrary. The idea that the condition of finitude in the sense above generates for philosophy a constructive project is something that Heidegger inherits from Kant, and so in that sense Heidegger is a deeply

post-Kantian philosopher. He thinks that our finitude, the fact of our finite existence, is the starting point for our sense of what philosophy is about.

Now the sense in which Heidegger's conception of existential death deepens this Kantian inheritance of the finitude of intuition starts with the initial thought that we are beholden to something beyond us in our project of making sense of the world; we are responsive to a world of which we are a part but is not of our own making, introducing the idea of *risk*. And once you have that on the table, the deepening of that sense of risk is to apply it not just to our particular empirical relations to objects (e.g. false empirical judgments), but also to the most basic conceptualisations of objects in terms in which they are intelligible as objects at all (e.g. faulty conceptual schemes or forms of life). This is the idea that the possibilities in terms of which we comprehend the real could themselves be shown up in some sense through the course of our interaction with the real. For Heidegger, living with this sense of risk is at once an historical fact that was particularly salient in the 1920s and an essential possibility of Dasein's being.

**In your work you distinguish Kant's conception of human understanding from Heidegger's, with Kant focusing primarily on our capacity for judgement linked to acquisition of knowledge, and Heidegger on sense making which is clearly a much broader category than judgement. Could you clarify the scope of what Heidegger means by sense-making?**

Heidegger thinks Kant's focus on our relationship to the world in the First *Critique* is narrow, which is not to say that it's flawed – it is simply a narrower topic than what Heidegger would call understanding or what we might call sense-making, which includes the capacity for judgement but is not exhausted by it. Heidegger agrees with Kant that

some kind of framework of intelligibility is prerequisite to particular forms of empirical relationship to the world, but he thinks that these forms extend far beyond judgement to include all manner of practical engagement with things and with other people, of things mattering or not mattering, and so on. So judgement is just one form of the myriad ways in which we comport towards things in the world. But it's also the case that all those variegated intentional relationships presuppose the capacity to render intelligible *what is*, they are all different ways of actualising this basic capacity, which is Heidegger's overarching conception of what Dasein is – the one that understands being, that makes sense of what is. Kant and contemporary neo-Kantians take their lead from judgement in their accounts of making sense of what is. Heidegger, on my view, thinks a Dasein without the capacity for judgment is no Dasein at all, but he does not privilege judgment in his account of understanding being.

**Could you offer some examples of how sense-making can fail?**

As we just discussed, Heidegger was very impressed by the sorts of wholesale conceptual changes that he found in the sciences of his time. There are also more practically-inflected cases such as the one Jonathan Lear narrates in his book *Radical Hope*. According to the story as he tells it, a fundamental loss of meaning occurs amongst the members of Crow Nation because the basic concepts by which they made sense of their lives and their world no longer found application because of change in their historical circumstances ('After that, nothing happened!'). That is one kind of failure or loss. You could also look at some psychopathological phenomena. These are of interest in phenomenology, for they can help us understand by way of contrast some of the basic structures of non-pathological being in the world that we often take for granted but which can somehow be compromised: the pathological cases help shine a light on

the non-pathological cases. But, on the other hand, these cases are no less of interest because we at one and the same time recognise them as instances of being in the world – more extreme or accentuated ways in which non-pathological ways of being in the world are vulnerable.

So these all point to the fact of vulnerability, the fact of fragility, the fact that meaning and intelligibility and all that it involves is an ongoing, sometimes fraught, project rather than a settled *fait accompli*. Of course while we go about our business on some humdrum ordinary day, sitting down, drinking coffee and so forth, things can seem exceedingly familiar and unproblematic but this shouldn't blind us to the possibility that this very sense of familiarity is informed by the possibility of unfamiliarity or what you might call the not-at-home. The idea that to live in the world as an intelligible place is to be alive to the possibility of failures or breakdowns in that intelligibility is a core Heideggerian thought – something that Sartre certainly inherited from Heidegger. The Heideggerian notion of existential death, as interpreted by John Haugeland and those influenced by him, is supposed to mark this fragility or possibility of breakdown. A philosophical theorisation of ways in which one can lose one's concepts, ways in which sense and intelligibility can fall apart, strikes me as a worthy and difficult project.

### **So is existential death the same as being-towards-death?**

This in an area of interpretative dispute, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that what Heidegger wants out of his conception of existential death is to understand what being-towards-death means. Heidegger's most fundamental characterisation of Dasein is as the being whose very being is an issue for itself, and this idea would not make any real sense without the idea that this way of being is in some sense vulnerable or at risk. So the idea that Heidegger is simply

interested in what you might call the logic of meaning or the logic of meaningful engagement, and that as a kind of afterthought there are these derivative anthropological or psychological cases of loss of meaning is clearly wrong. On Heidegger's view, if you think through what it takes to engage meaningfully with the world, this is informed by the possibility of the loss of that meaningful engagement with the world, which is why he also thinks that our relationship to the world is a kind of ongoing achievement, a project, a vocation. And for that to make sense, and I think this fits in with a lot of our experience, it's got to be the case, unlike for an infinite intellect, that there can be gaps, there can be blips, there can be privations, there can be losses.

So on this kind of view the fundamental sense of Heideggerian death is something like a loss of intelligibility or a loss of meaning. And that's a broad genus that can include different species. 'World collapse' is one consummate species of this genus. Others read the notion of a loss of meaning in terms of something like depression which is a more individual psychological phenomenon. And then there are of course the more traditional readings which think of it as roughly the end of a life, what Heidegger calls demise, but taken seriously as a distinctively personal possibility appropriated by individual human beings rather than merely an occasion for an obituary. This too can be thought of as the prospect of a loss of meaning, yet another species of the genus. But as I read Heidegger, this is not first and foremost what he's interested in when he's interested in losses of meaning or breakdowns of sense making. I think he would consider mortality to be a privative or perhaps even degenerate sense of the loss of meaning. Whatever one's views about what Heidegger means by death, one criterion for adequacy in this area is to show how it (death) is a condition on or playing a role in the main project, taking on the question of the sense of being. Readers who think of Heideggerian death in terms of mortality, it seems to me, haven't

explained, at least yet, how it is that mortality is playing a role in the very idea of a world that makes sense. How is keeping the thought in mind in a serious and ongoing way that an air-conditioner could fall out of the sky and crush me at anytime playing any significant role in the possibility of a comprehensible world?

**I can understand loss of intelligibility or meaning in terms of depression or collapse of a whole way of life like the Crow-Indians you mentioned, but surely these are exceptions or aberrations? People get on with, for example, being a doctor, and this, despite some historical changes, is a role that seems to have some degree of stability attached to it, to be fairly immune to this fragility that you describe. People have been caring and curing since time immemorial.**

Ok, let's take your example of being a doctor. That involves a certain way of making sense of things that is structured by basic concepts and standards. So commitment to the Hippocratic oath, for example, is one essential feature of what it is to be a doctor and what it is to understand the objects of one's practice, namely other people and their wellbeing. So imagine a doctor in a well-functioning society with a rich institutional framework supporting their practice. Now imagine that framework starting somehow or other to become impoverished, perhaps due to economic norms that start putting pressure on a doctor's commitment to the indiscriminate application of the Hippocratic Oath. Suppose doctors start being trained in such a way that they are encouraged to make distinctions between those who deserve the full respect of the Hippocratic Oath and those who don't. (Of course this is hardly unheard of in many parts of the world, including our own.) It would not be hard to imagine at least some doctors wondering not only if this profession is right for them, but finding themselves asking a more fundamental question: is *this* what it is *to be* a doctor?

At any rate, from the fact that things can tend to run relatively smoothly in everyday life, at least much of the time, it hardly follows that people who participate in those forms of life aren't alive to the ways in which the basic understanding of what they're up to is potentially under threat or wouldn't come alive if it *were* under threat. Now of course it's not always clear what's wrong or where it's going wrong, but the notion of care and the related notions of mattering and anxiety are not supposed to depict an over-rationalised subject who is constantly asking why; it's rather a certain sensitivity to a background condition without which they would not be engaged in the familiar smooth unthinking activity that they do engage in.

**I'd like to press this further. It's the US election today. We could imagine Donald Trump saying something like: "Our greatness, our being as a nation, has been eclipsed, and we must take responsibility for the situation in which we find ourselves and we must make America great again." And so on. Now one may suspect a certain demagoguery lying beneath these assertions, but nonetheless on the face of it he is speaking Heidegger's language.**

The Heidegger-Trump relation, if you will, is in fact a rich and difficult topic. I can't do justice to it here, other than to offer this no doubt naïve train of thought. A question that both supporters and opponents of Trump may be asking, having been inspired or horrified by him, is something like 'What is it to be an American?' While this is clearly a narrower ontological question than the kind Heidegger is interested in, nonetheless insofar as this kind of question is finding a grip in this particular election, Trump can be considered a charismatic ontological leader: his antics, such as they are, are prompting the ontological self-interrogation of a nation. This is obviously a charitable reading of current events!

### So Heidegger's not preaching a kind of morality then?

Absolutely not. Or at least I don't think so. Heidegger's very ambitious about the place of philosophy's topics (as he sees them) in everyday life. So he thinks that political elections, to take the current example, are shot through with commitments about what it is to be – what it is to be an American, a citizen, indeed what it is to be at all. And insofar as we engage in activities like political elections or going to the grocery store, we are, on his view, mired in these questions. So in this sense all of us, whether we are philosophers or not, are implicit ontologists. Heidegger takes himself to be doing what we all do, for better or for worse, but in an intensified and more generalised manner of reflection.

**I would like to turn to the question of responsibility, specifically to what kind of responsibility is possible for us. We have established the finitude of our intuition – we come up against a world that we did not create, that outstrips our attempts to control it and the concepts we use to describe it, and so on. We are *thrown* into the world, to use Heidegger's lingo. Is trying to take ownership of our thrownness not simply an attempt to transcend or overcome the finitude of our intuition?**

I can see how the form of words 'taking responsibility' can lead one to think that there is some kind of tension between taking responsibility and being in a world that's beyond our control. But I don't think there has to be this tension. Heidegger's notion of thrownness is not at all in tension with the broader notion that he develops, particularly in Division Two of *Being and Time*, of owning up to or taking responsibility for our understanding of being.

If you think of taking responsibility in terms of being an absolute source or creator of intelligibility, meaning or sense, then I can see how there would be a tension between being

thrown into a world and taking responsibility. But if you think of taking responsibility instead as living one's life in such a way that one realises that the intelligibility of things is not taken care of independently of you but rather that you yourself, along with others, play an ineliminable role in that project – that you bear responsibility as a kind of ongoing collaborator rather than an *ex nihilo* creator – then the sense of tension between being thrown and taking responsibility starts to disappear. Think of the most important relationships you find yourself in – for example, your relationship with your mother. You are thrown into it. Are you thereby relieved of any responsibility for it, of 'owning' it?

Indeed I think Heidegger would think that the very notion of taking responsibility would not make much sense if you weren't a being that was in some sense thrown. Go back to the infinite intellect to bring our condition into relief by way of contrast: it is not called upon to take responsibility for anything because intelligibility is always already taken care of, always already guaranteed. But for the being that is thrown into a world that is other than it, that is therewith charged with making sense of a world, an inherently risky business, the notion of taking responsibility for one's ways of making sense of things actually makes sense – one has to look after those ways of sense-making, sustain them, possibly give them up if they are unsustainable.

So to take responsibility for a failing way of life is not to adopt the fantasy of mastering it; it could very well mean rather acknowledging one's powerlessness and letting that way of life go. That's not a vision of a master who imposes its sense of things on a world that is subjected to that master. Dasein as being-in-the-world as a unitary phenomenon is the centrepiece of Heidegger's thought, so any attempt to prise apart the subject from the world to place it in a kind of superior masterly position vis-a-vis the world would be something that he would strongly resist.

**I'm interested in the role philosophy plays in all this, as it seems to me that the way you are presenting Heidegger's conception of death and being-towards-death is not just an attack on the ideas of necessity secured by Kant's transcendental framework, but also by extension on philosophy itself. It seems that all we have left is contingency, and if this is the case it's difficult not to conclude that philosophy has failed. Is this an unfair interpretation?**

Starting (at least) in 1929, Heidegger begins mounting an attack on philosophy, at least as we have known it. What he thinks we are 'left with,' needless to say, is not easy to make out.

As for the reading I have been sketching drawn from *Being and Time*, the idea of meaning breakdown or loss of meaning comes in not as some sort of brute, perhaps regrettable, fact to which we just have to face up (one way of hearing your 'all we have left is contingency') but rather as a possibility that serves as a positive condition on being in the world at all, on sustaining an intelligible sense of what is.

The basic claim would accordingly be that without being alive to the possibility of a breakdown in meaning, we would be in no position to enjoy cases of meaning. So the idea of breakdown is here playing the role of a transcendental condition. So this claim could hardly serve to challenge the very idea of transcendental philosophy or indeed philosophy more generally.

Of course whether or not there are in actuality cases of breakdowns is contingent. But the *possibility* of breakdown is essential to actually relating to the world, akin to the way in which the 'I think' is for Kant a necessary possibility for rational cognition. At which point, you would predictably ask me whether this new transcendental condition Heide-

gger is introducing is itself vulnerable to being 'overturned' by our intercourse with the world, the way in which other ontological concepts, as I have presented Heidegger's view, are so vulnerable. This would be one of the good questions I mentioned earlier that Heidegger's ontology must address.

**But what about the all-encompassing scope of death in Heidegger's account? For example he writes about death as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence *at all*. Your account doesn't seem to allow for the possibility of this total world collapse.**

You've put your finger on an interesting and difficult question. Earlier when we were discussing what I was characterising as species of the genus 'loss of meaning or intelligibility,' we saw some variation in the scope – one having to do with an individual's life, other broader cases having to do with whole historical ways of life, like the science case or the Crow-Nation case. But the formulation you just picked on suggests something even broader in scope. One way to think about Heidegger's project of, as he puts it at the beginning of *Being and Time*, reawakening the question of the sense of being, is that he thinks this question has been forgotten – in fact he thinks that we've even forgotten that we've forgotten it, so we're not even perplexed by the fact that we've forgotten it. One way to hear this is an expression of Heidegger's sense that he is living in a time when there was a threatened loss of Dasein, not just a loss of intelligibility in physics or theology – not just a kind of tottering between those specific regimes of making sense of objects and the objects about which they make sense – but some sort of threat to the *very idea* of life in a world where sense is made. I don't have a settled exegetical view about whether something like this was going on, or felt to be going on – and it is no easy task to try and get clear on what would this dramatic possibility would look like – but it sounds like the kind of totalising world-collapse that you ask about.

### Is this not a continuation of Nietzsche's idea of the death of God?

If we can make sense of this idea of the threatened loss of Dasein, the idea of sense *at all* being lost, I think of that as much more radical and harder to make sense of than the idea of the death of God, at least on a certain fairly standard reading.

On one way of hearing it you have the idea of God who served the role of giving a kind of focus and shape and value to people's lives, so when God dies (or is killed off) what happens is that a source of authority for us, *the* source of authority for us, is no longer there for us to rely on. This gives rise to the question of what *is* going to play the role of having authority for us. Now for that question to arise for people, the distinction between a meaningful life (historically a life in the service of God) versus a meaningless life (a life without that God-given focus), already has a purchase – only so could someone ask what our source of value is to be after the death of God. Someone living through the death of God is *suffering*, and for them to be intelligibly suffering is for the distinction between meaningfulness and meaninglessness to already have a grip on them in order for there to be so much as a *threat* of meaninglessness. So in that sense the death of God is within the circle of meaning.

What Heidegger might be worried about in terms of the loss of Dasein is a loss of that very distinction so people won't even suffer when faced with the question of the loss of their central authority. So in this sense the worry about the loss of Dasein is more fundamental – it is the cessation of the very distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless. So I think there's a very plausible way of reading *Being and Time* as a response to Nietzsche's challenge in the sense that it articulates the conditions that must be in place for us to be able to draw the distinction between the

meaningful and the meaningless where the very drawing of that distinction is somehow under threat.

Certainly this idea of a more fundamental notion of a loss of meaning is not easy to get one's head around, but I do think that if you look at the examples Heidegger offers of radical conceptual change at the beginning of *Being and Time*, the sense in which losing an entire way of making sense of things that's embodied in a form of life is experienced as a kind of death, you can extrapolate from these more local examples to the loss of the very idea of making sense of things. This would be a loss of Dasein, a kind of loss of the human such that there is no longer much of a distinction between us and lizards, for example. And I think that Heidegger thinks this could happen: there's certainly nothing guaranteed about Homo sapiens, currently our best empirical example of Dasein, continuing to be Dasein. Dasein is not co-extensive with Homo sapiens. There could be other kinds of beings that instantiate the existential structures that make up what it is to be Dasein. It could be that there is some future on the Earth in which there are still Homo sapiens around but there's no longer any Dasein. What this looks like is a difficult question to ponder but it may be that Heidegger thought he had a glimpse of that when he was writing *Being and Time*, and that the book was responsive to that glimpse.

## 6: The Analytic of Finitude

### *A Conversation with Béatrice Han-Pile*

*In this conversation, Béatrice Han-Pile discusses Michel Foucault's fascinating and constantly evolving relationship to Kant and the transcendental tradition. She focuses on the idea of the historical a priori as the central element of his Kantian inheritance. For Foucault, each historical a priori lays out the conditions under which particular discourses are considered items of knowledge at a given time and in a given area. She also explains the unstable relationship between the transcendental and the empirical that Foucault identified at the heart of Kant's Copernican revolution, a tension which generated what Foucault calls in *The Order of Things* the 'analytic of finitude': for him, the analytic of finitude is the post-Kantian historical a priori and the reason for the 'anthropological sleep' in which modernity found itself entrapped.*

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**I was hoping you could begin by saying a few things about Foucault specifically as a philosopher, given that he is often seen more as an historian than a philosopher. Some would even argue that he is not a philosopher *at all*.**

One of the key notions in Foucault's early work is the historical a priori, which is an implicit reference to Kant

and Husserl. It was this that started me looking into the relation between Foucault, Kant and Husserl. And the more I thought about it, the clearer it became to me that the notion of the historical a priori remains operative in Foucault's later work, as 'conditions of acceptability', 'regimes of truth' or 'problematizations'. I tried to trace these avatars of the historical a priori through various moments in Foucault's thought, and realised that the best way to make sense of these concepts was to examine Foucault's explicit or implicit dialogue with other philosophers, in particular Nietzsche, on whom he wrote directly, and Heidegger, whom he acknowledged in a late interview as the main philosophical influence on his work. So it is Foucault's interest in the historical a priori, and the ways in which he used Nietzschean and Heideggerian ideas and methods to reinterpret the concept away from Kant and Husserl, which mark him as a philosopher. Even though he is clearly not a Kantian, he belongs to the critical tradition which starts with Kant.

**There seem to be many elements of Foucault's historical a priori that do not satisfy standard Kantian criteria for transcendental philosophy, for example it is, as I understand it, not universal, not binding across all historical eras, and not even rooted in a transcendental subject. How much can you modify the Kantian framework before you eliminate it completely?**

I think the key in this respect is the persistence in Foucault's work of a particular approach that goes from the post hoc to the a priori: you start with a state of affairs, then you inquire into its conditions of possibility. Of course you could understand such conditions in a causal way: if I was to ask 'what are the (causal) conditions of possibility on your existence?', the obvious and most immediate answer would be your parents, their parents and so forth. But this is not Foucault's approach: in his archaeological work he

wants to analyse what he calls conditions of 'acceptability', conditions which are not causal but epistemic: they do not account for how things come into being, but for how things come to be understood in this or that way. These conditions are normative: they set constraints on what can be considered as an item of knowledge at a given time and place. So the relevant question for Foucault is not: 'what are the causal conditions that resulted in the existence of X' but rather 'if X counts as knowledge, what are (or were) the epistemic conditions required for this to be the case?'

If you were a Kantian and X was experience, you would seek to provide an answer that would be universal and necessary, on the modality of apodicticity. Foucault has the same movement from the post hoc to the a priori: he starts from a particular body of knowledge and asks something like: 'what are the epistemic conditions under which this was considered knowledge at a given time, in a given geographical area?' But while Kant wants to identify the universal and necessary epistemic conditions under which *all* experience can be known, Foucault wants to identify the *contingent* epistemic conditions under which particular discourses are (or have been) considered items of knowledge.

**Please could you give an example of a specific body of knowledge that Foucault addresses?**

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault expressed puzzlement at the fact that the work of the naturalist Aldrovandi, preeminent during the Renaissance, could be so summarily dismissed a century or so later by Buffon as '*legenda*' (things to say), a heteroclite collection of observations, mythical tales, and hearsay. How is it possible that something which was accepted as knowledge at a given time should come to be rejected as not 'in the true' anymore – not even as false but as irrelevant to knowledge? Although Foucault does

not develop this line of inquiry, the same could be said of astrology – once considered a science, with royal astrologers systematically consulted over important decisions, and later dismissed not even as mistaken, but as charlatanism. Foucault holds that the reason for such radical change(s) is a fundamental modification of the historical a priori. During the Renaissance, to know something meant to spell out the very complex ways in which this thing was connected to other entities in the world (by analogy, resemblance, sympathy, antipathy etc.): and this is what Aldrovandi had done by weaving together all the sources he could find into a network in which they could echo each other. By contrast, during the Classical age to know a thing meant to analyse it into its simplest elements, to recompose it logically and to find its place in the well-ordered space of the table ('tableau'): it meant identifying and ranking differences. The Renaissance historical a priori of Sameness, as Foucault puts it, was replaced by that of Difference. Consequently, building a complex network of resemblances was now seen as confused and confusing – hence Buffon's rejection of Aldrovandi's work from the field of knowledge.

The same interest for deep modifications in what counts as knowledge, and the epistemic conditions of possibility of such modifications, drives Foucault's early work on madness. He sees the Renaissance understanding of madness as characterised by a reversibility between reason and madness: King Lear is never as lucid and wise as when he is officially mad. But then you get to the Classical Age, and madness is not the reverse of reason anymore, a form of inverted wisdom: it is unreason, the opposite of reason, what happens when you lose reason – so you can't be wise *and* mad, it's just not possible anymore. And for us now madness is neither wisdom in disguise nor unreason but a pathology – a mental disorder for which there are various medical treatments.

So the key question for the early Foucault is something like: 'Why did something count as knowledge at one point and not at another?' Or rather than 'why', which seems to invite the causal answers that Foucault always tried to avoid, it's more a question of how, of the epistemic conditions that need to be in place for something to be counted as knowledge at a particular time and place. *That's* the transcendental inheritance in Foucault's work. You find something very similar in the early Heidegger when he asks about the *existentiale*, the conditions of possibility of existence as a mode of being. These existentials (such as being-in, being-with etc.) are also non-causal conditions that determine the ways we understand ourselves and the world.

So what locates Foucault's work within the post-Kantian transcendental inheritance is the thought that rather than explaining why things come into being causally, one must ask how it is possible for something to count as knowledge. This type of enquiry is a constant throughout Foucault's work: he asks 'how possible' questions in relation to madness, in relation to what he calls 'the medical gaze' (he talks in the *Birth of the Clinic* of the a priori of medicine), about various bodies of discourse such as natural history or economics, about specific practices such as imprisonment, and in the late work about such concepts as sexuality or the self. The same questions persist: How was this or that understood? What epistemic conditions must be in place for it to be understood in that way? And how do we analyse these conditions without reading back into them (inasmuch as we can avoid it) our current understanding of the 'same' things? For example, how do you recover previous understandings of madness (inasmuch as possible) without reading back all you think you know about psychoanalysis, mental disorders, and so forth?

**So where's the strong break with the Kantian framework?**

It's not so much on necessity, because Foucault does claim in *The Order of Things* that each historical a priori is necessarily binding when and where it holds sway. It is rather a question of scope: the historical a priori is only binding for a certain time and in a certain geographical area. What counts as knowledge is subject to historical change. That's obviously a huge difference with Kant. Another big difference with Kant is that for Foucault historical a priori themselves change, an idea which for Kant would have no meaning as by definition the a priori is immune to empirical change.

**So a universal a-historical grounding for knowledge was seen by Foucault as impossible?**

Yes, and not just impossible but also a pernicious thing to look for because it makes one blind to the contingency of history. By contrast, Foucault believed that it is important to investigate historical epistemic conditions because otherwise we would be blind to the fact that what looks like the same concept, say madness, comes with very different understandings depending on the historical a priori considered. When he describes himself to the historian Paul Veyne as a nominalist, Foucault implicitly denies that there are any fixed referents for concepts: for him madness is not something like a natural kind waiting to be picked out and given different conceptual understandings, some of which will be true and others, false. Rather, he is a constructivist: he thinks that at least some referents (such as 'madness' or 'sexuality') are constituted by the practices and concepts that are attached to it.

So, necessity in Foucault's work – yes, but limited in scope; a-historicity – no; foundations in the Kantian sense – no, but still the Kantian inheritance of looking for epistemic conditions. Ultimately, I think that what drives Foucault's enquiries is a concern for freedom: if you can understand

what makes you think the way you think, then you are in a better position to try to disengage from your own conditions of intelligibility so as to think differently. That's actually one of the things that drew me to Foucault in the first place – the preface to *The Use of Pleasures* where he describes his own project as trying to be 'at the vertical of oneself' ('à la verticale de soi-même'), as learning how one thinks so that one can learn to think otherwise. Although you can never escape your historical a priori, you can nonetheless borrow the eyes of another time or place, so to speak, through this archeo-genealogical work of tracing concepts back to the practices that gave rise to them: then you begin to acquire some emancipatory distance from your own concepts and practices.

**I was hoping we could now turn to one of the most compelling aspects of Foucault's work, and one which you have written about extensively, namely the transition from the Copernican revolution to the anthropological sleep. Foucault referred to the *peril* of an anthropology lurking within Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the peril of the birth of Man. Please can you clarify what he means by this?**

Perhaps the first thing worth clarifying is that in Foucault's lingo 'Man' does not mean 'human being', a member of the species *Homo sapiens*. That's the mistake that Sartre made when he attacked the early Foucault as an anti-humanist. Conversely when Foucault speaks of the 'death of Man' at the end of *The Order of Things* he is not heralding some kind of mass extinction. For him 'Man' is a term of art: it means a particular configuration of the historical a priori which he calls the empirico-transcendental double. The manner in which this configuration ties into the Copernican turn is (roughly put) this: the Copernican turn stemmed from a key idea which was that if you want to account for the possibility of knowledge you might have a better chance

starting from the subject of knowledge rather than from its object(s), as was previously done. This key insight led Kant to investigate the conditions under which empirical objects could be known, and as we know he gave an answer in terms of the transcendental analysis of the faculties.

The way the Copernican turn worked was by distinguishing between two perspectives, empirical and transcendental. The empirical perspective yields the world as we know it, entities such as this chair here, or the objects that surround us in this office. By contrast, shifting to the transcendental perspective allows you to investigate the conditions under which such entities can be known: in the case of the chair, perceptual conditions (such as my perceiving the chair as being in time and space) and conceptual conditions (such as my perceiving this chair as a single extended object). For Kant you would also need to take into account the role of the imagination in relating perceptual to conceptual conditions but the upshot is that unless you distinguish between the two perspectives you can't give empirical cognition a secure foundation.

In *The Order of Things* Foucault holds (somewhat uncontroversially) that the introduction of the empirico-transcendental distinction is at the heart of the Copernican turn. Now, that's all very well, Foucault thinks, when it comes to objects like chairs, but there is one particular being that is problematic: the knowing subject, because it can occupy both perspectives. This is where 'Man' comes into play: contrary to the chair, Man is both an object in experience *and* a locus for transcendental conditions to instantiate themselves so that experience can be known. It is the only being that has this peculiar, dual structure. And because of the Copernican turn, Man, and not objects in the world, is now the necessary starting point for accounting for the possibility of knowledge.

### **Presumably Kant must have been aware of this and integrated this anomaly into his framework?**

Yes, absolutely. He was keen to keep the two dimensions of Man separate. That's why he distinguished between the noumenal self and the empirical ego: the empirical ego is a person's character as given in experience, as an object for psychology, while the noumenal self is that same person considered from a transcendental perspective and therefore as a noumenal agent potentially bound by the moral law. Kant distinguishes the two carefully. For Foucault, however, things go wrong both in Kant's work and in the post-Kantian tradition. He thinks that in Kant the place where things go wrong is the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, which was developed over thirty years, and so overlaps with the critical works.

Foucault claims that the *Anthropology* undermines the *Critique*. Whereas the *Critique of Pure Reason* was written from a synchronic standpoint (or perhaps more aptly, from an a priori and thus non-chronological standpoint), the *Anthropology* is diachronic: it introduces a genetic perspective, asking for example not about the transcendental ego or the empirical self separately from each other, but about the relationship between the two, in particular in the emergence of the 'spoken I' in the development of children. Foucault holds that because of this new genetic angle the two dimensions of Man as both transcendental subject and empirical object start to overlap and to merge: the newly appeared knowing subject, who can say 'I', is disclosed to itself as '*already* there', pre-existing its own capacity to know itself and the world. And yet without the emergence of the knowing subject the very concept of an empirical object cannot make sense.

Foucault calls this the paradox of the 'originary': as an empirical object, the subject pre-exists the transcendental

framework which comes to instantiate itself in her; and yet without this transcendental framework the very idea of an empirical object is not intelligible. The circular structure of this movement is what Foucault calls 'the analytic of finitude' in *The Order of Things*.

### **Can you explain more about the 'analytic of finitude'?**

Well, you have to look at it from both aspects of Man, transcendental and empirical: it's not a one way ticket. If you look at the analytic of finitude from the transcendental perspective, the Kantian conditions of possibility of knowledge are (as we have seen) reinterpreted as an historical a priori.

In chapter 9 of *The Order of Things* Foucault explains that since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century these conditions have formed a tripartite set: language, life, and labour, all instantiated in Man as a speaking, living and working being. It is only through language that we can know anything about anything, because knowledge as we understand it is discursive. It is only through life (understood broadly), through the fact that we have/are a perceiving body, that we can get acquainted with the world: the body is our interface with the world, and the condition of possibility of our knowing objects in the world. Finally, it is only through labour in the sense of the economic conditions that shape our various understandings of things that we can come to know anything.

So for Foucault, Man as a speaking, living and working being is the condition of possibility of anything being given as an object of knowledge: it is the historical a priori for post-Kantians. From this 'quasi-transcendental' perspective, as Foucault puts it ('quasi-transcendental' because as we saw these conditions are understood as historical and subject to change), Man's finitude is not an obstacle to the possibility

of knowing the world: it is reinterpreted as an epistemic condition of possibility on knowing the world. It is both limiting (because knowledge has to conform to it in order to count as knowledge) and enabling (because so long as it conforms to it knowledge is secure).

But now you've got to look at the other side of the analytic of finitude, the empirical side. Man is *also* an object within the very field that is opened up by the quasi-transcendental analysis of language, life and labour. So the body is not just our interface with the world, it is an empirical object that can be analysed through disciplines like biology, medicine and so forth; language does not provide an a-temporal conceptual framework so that we can get to grips with the world – it has a history, there are different languages the evolution of which can be analysed. Further, we can see how much a particular historical linguistic form will influence the way in which you think (consider as an example Nietzsche's claim that the notion of a 'subject' is derived from the active grammatical voice); and the same with labour – socio-historical conditions have their history, their laws, and so on. From this empirical perspective, Man's finitude appears as a set of contingent historical determinants which render any claims to universal and necessary knowledge vacuous.

### **So Man's duality turns against itself?**

Yes, exactly. On the one hand, Man's finitude is (in line with the Copernican turn) understood quasi-transcendentally, as a set of enabling epistemic conditions whereby the determinants of empirical finitude (life, language and labour) can be known; yet on the other hand these very determinants, now taken as the main forms of empirical finitude that bear on Man as an empirical object, put causal constraints on transcendental finitude and so invalidate its foundational ambitions. This is why Foucault says (in very condensed form) that in the analytic of finitude, 'the

[quasi-transcendental] forms under which Man learns that he is finite turn out to be [empirically] finite themselves.' Consequently the analytic of finitude gives rise to various paradoxes: it is through life, language and labour that Man can know the world, and without these forms knowledge would be impossible. Yet 'as soon as' Man starts knowing the world, the very conditions that allow him to know the world are disclosed as pre-dating him chronologically: life, language and labour are 'already' there, bearing upon him as an empirical entity. This is something which would have been radically impossible for the Kant of the *Critique* but which (according to Foucault) is introduced by the genetic perspective of the *Anthropology* and carries through most post-Kantian movements, in particular phenomenology.

So for Foucault 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century thought is characterised by this circle whereby Man is both the epistemic condition of possibility of knowledge on the one hand, and a causally determined object within the epistemic field thus opened on the other. Without Man nothing can be known, but as soon as there is knowledge Man appears to itself as empirically pre-existing his very opening of the epistemic field, in a sort of paradoxical pre-history that Derrida called (in relation to Husserl) 'primitivity'. Foucault thinks that this is a very pernicious structure. He remains agnostic on the question of whether the analytic of finitude was a necessary development of the Copernican turn but he thinks that contingently this is the way that both Kant's and then post-Kantian thought have unfolded. And because the analytic of finitude is inextricably linked to the figure of Man as both a giver of experience and given in experience, Foucault's view is that you've got the slice through the Gordian knot – you're not going to purify the figure of Man, you have to find another starting point.

**So is this what Foucault meant by 'the anthropological sleep' – that the paradoxical structure of the figure**

**of Man necessarily leads to impossibilities such that philosophical thought itself is destined to fail?**

I think it's more the fact that the historical a priori of Man has been so dominant that its influence can't even be seen, so reason stops being vigilant. You know that Kant said that Hume woke him up from his dogmatic sleep, and this particular dogmatic sleep was basically that of rationalism spinning in the void. Along the same lines, I think that what Foucault means by the 'anthropological sleep' is that phenomenology in particular, which was at his time and remains one of the dominant movements on the continent, was put to sleep by the dominance of Man as a structure. For him the phenomenologists (Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in particular, perhaps with the exception of Heidegger) still carry on working in their anthropological sleep obviously, and refining both sides of the empirico-transcendental double more and more, but they are unable to gain – to go back to what we talked about earlier – this 'vertical of oneself' which gives you a chance to see what it is you are doing, and to start doing something else, hopefully better.

**So the sleep refers to the dominance of one perspective over all others to such an extent that the dominance itself becomes invisible?**

Yes. In the case of modernity, it's the dominance of Man as the contemporary historical a priori. And conversely, the reason why structuralism appeared to Foucault as possibly heralding a new historical a priori was the fact that it completely bypasses Man as a necessary starting point for knowledge by focusing on objective structures (in language, kinship, etc.).

**Could we say that Foucault's later turn to the Greeks and the divorce of philosophy from spirituality – what**

**he called the ‘Cartesian moment’ in philosophy – were attempts to free himself from Man, the analytic of finitude, Kant, the transcendental framework, and so on?**

I wouldn’t say that. There are connections between the turn to spirituality and Foucault’s critique of Kant, if only because the transcendental subject is a thoroughly de-spiritualised subject (more about this in a minute), but I don’t think that the turn to spirituality was directly motivated by Foucault’s critique of Kant. I also think that Foucault’s commitment to the critical tradition remained firm throughout his work. The main figure Foucault is opposing in his later work on spirituality is not Kant but Descartes, and what is now at stake is the relation between self-transformation and the ability to know the truth.

What Foucault calls ‘spirituality’ is a particular understanding of the relation between knowledge and the knowing subject according to which in order to be capable of knowing the truth, one has to transform oneself through, for example, ascetic practices. Truth is not given to you just by virtue of your being a human being with a mind in decent order: you have to make yourself worthy of it (for example by practicing meditation and the kind of exercises described by Xenophon in relation to Socrates, and later by the *Stoa*). You can’t be an appropriate subject of knowledge without undergoing a long and difficult ethical transformation.

By contrast, the reason why Descartes is painted by Foucault (somewhat unfairly in my view) as the villain of that particular story is that at the beginning of the *Discourse on Method* Descartes claims that anyone can be a subject of knowledge so long as they follow the appropriate method: ‘le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée’ (loosely: ‘common sense is the best shared thing in the world’). You don’t need to transform yourself, you’re already equipped for knowledge by virtue of being human: you

just have to adopt the right heuristic tool. Foucault thinks that with Descartes spirituality begins to be ruled out as a pre-condition of knowledge while philosophy begins to be modelled on science, and something of great value is lost in this process: the idea of an intimate connection between who you are and what you write about, and the thought that unless you seek to understand the first then your comprehension of the second will remain superficial.

The extreme version of the Cartesian de-spiritualised subject, who sees knowledge as a readymade set of concepts and theories that anyone can assimilate without the need for self-knowledge and self-transformation, would be what Nietzsche calls ‘the scholar’: a disembodied researcher who endeavours to have no personal views, to achieve a third-person perspective on everything, who is obsessed with objectivity, and so forth – that’s the caricature.

Foucault opposes this Cartesian tradition which he feels has become both dominant and deleterious in philosophy, even though there are exceptions (he mentions Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard would be another good example). In his own writings he tries to revive spirituality as a requirement for philosophy, and to put into practice an understanding of what it means to be a philosopher that departs from the dominant scientific model: not to seek a disembodied, third-person point of view on what there is to understand, not to emulate the methods of the natural sciences, but to express one’s character through one’s writings while seeking *at the same time* to be as self-aware of this expressive process as possible, through the movement of self-distance and critique we talked about earlier (striving to be ‘at the vertical’ of oneself). Foucault sees this return to spirituality as a return to an older tradition in which the connection between the thinker and their thought was a vital aspect of such thought (think of Augustine and the *Confessions*, for example): unless you do this transformative work

on yourself you can't see deep enough into what you are investigating.

**So is it fair to say that in his later work Foucault just threw out the critical tradition and felt that our best bet was to look back to the Ancient Greeks?**

No, I think it's completely the opposite actually. There is a great emphasis in the later work on the notion of critique as a condition of possibility on an appropriately spiritual understanding of the knowing self, and more generally on freedom. In his later work Foucault brings together the emphasis on spirituality central to Ancient philosophy on the one hand, and the Kantian critical tradition on the other. He thinks that in order of to be a good philosopher you don't 'simply' need to acquire a deeper understanding of the subject matter; you also need to acquire a deeper, reflective understanding of yourself as a subject of knowledge, and this is a matter of establishing a critical relation to both the historical conditions under which you write on the one hand, and to yourself and your own writing processes on the other.

Critique, both of the historical tradition and of the self that belongs to the latter, is the tool whereby the self-awareness central to spiritual practices can be developed. It is a powerful tool of self-transformation. This is where the later Foucault's work links back to his early interest in the critical tradition and conditions of possibility of knowledge: for him critique is the reflective movement which allows you to be inasmuch as possible at the vertical of yourself by becoming aware both of your own thought processes and of the historical tradition you are immersed in, and of how the second shapes the first. It is what allows you, by looking at the difference between how you think and how people of the past thought, between how you think now and how you thought before, to acquire the self-

knowledge and self-distance that are central to the practice of spirituality.

**So is this a de-transcendentalized critique? A critique separated from the transcendental tradition?**

No, because the interest in epistemic conditions, non-causal conditions of possibility of knowledge, remains. Foucault's final trajectory is a movement that takes critique from a purely epistemic context and emphasises its ethical dimension and implications, both for the writer and for the reader of philosophy. Inquiring into the conditions of possibility of one's own thought so as to learn how to think otherwise, to paraphrase Foucault, is not just something that a person who writes philosophy has to do in order to write better philosophy: it is also required from us all as readers if we are to understand the work of the writer appropriately, not just what is said but how and why it is said, and sometimes the discrepancies between the two. Like Nietzsche, Foucault seeks readers who 'ruminate', who are capable of using his writings to initiate the transformative work of critique on themselves in the process of trying to understand what he writes about.

Foucault's understanding of critique in the later work is de-transcendentalized in the sense that it is not about conditions of possibility of knowledge in general, nor about securing a foundation for knowledge nor about universality. But he still takes critique to be about non-causal conditions of possibility on what you think and who you take yourself to be. For him critique is about understanding the limits of what you think, of what makes you think what you think, and also about understanding your own personal limits as a thinker. And even though you can never step out of your own skin and see what you think from the outside, focusing on the limits of your own thinking means focusing on the bits where you begin to feel that there might be something

else you could say, or that there might actually be something else you *are* saying but you can't see it clearly yet – this is what the patient work of critical self-distance is meant to enable you to do. And for Foucault that is the defining characteristic of freedom as the ability to see, disclose and embrace new life possibilities.

## 7: The Speculative Turn

### *A Conversation with Tom Sparrow*

*In this conversation, Tom Sparrow begins by exploring Edmund Husserl's Kantian inheritance in formulating his phenomenological method. He then goes on to discuss the various ways in which both Kant and phenomenology have been challenged by philosophers loosely grouped under the title of 'speculative realists,' who have opened up new and previously forbidden vistas of exploration for philosophy by placing realism, materialism, and metaphysics centre stage in matters philosophical once again after their Kantian and post-Kantian dethronement.*

*Tom Sparrow is assistant professor of philosophy at Slippery Rock University, Pennsylvania, specializing in continental philosophy and phenomenology. His books include *The End of Phenomenology and Plastic Bodies*, and, in fitting with the speculative realist penchant for the splintered, nihilistic, and apocalyptic, he is co-editor of a forthcoming philosophical study of *True Detective* (a TV show inspired in no small part by *Nihil Unbound*, a book by Ray Brassier, the final interviewee in this collection).*

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**Let's begin by talking about your book *The End of Phenomenology*. Could you start by giving a brief outline of Edmund Husserl's phenomenological project in relation to Kantian transcendental philosophy?**

That's an immense question, but I can speak to a few points of similarity and difference that I think are relevant to understanding my own work and the contemporary think-

ing I'm working alongside, namely, speculative realism, object-oriented philosophy, and so forth. Husserl, as I understand him, is an extension of Kantianism insofar as Husserlian phenomenology is focused almost exclusively on investigating the correlation of subject and object, and, more specifically, on developing a method of investigation – phenomenology – that can reveal the conditions of appearance of objects and the structure of human experience in all of its variety.

Like Kant, Husserl sees that subjects actively construct the objects (phenomena) that appear to them, and that we can use philosophy to get to the bottom of this construction to reveal its dynamics. But Husserl is not interested in discussing whether or not the object of phenomenology, the object as it is revealed in phenomenological investigation or reflection, accurately represents the object as such or the so-called thing in itself, understood as a mind-independent entity. As with Hegel, the distinction between the in-itself and the for-us, or the noumenon and phenomenon, is collapsed or set aside. The phenomenal object, for Husserl, *just is* the object in-itself. Which is not to say that we can only access appearances or imperfect representations of real objects; phenomenology is meant to get us to real objects, to reveal the essence of objects, as well as the structure of consciousness and its role in the construction of our experience of objects.

The primary point of similarity between Husserlian phenomenology and Kantian transcendentalism, it seems to me, is their shared concern with uncovering the way in which human consciousness constructs or conditions, as it were, our experience of objects. If we understand this construction as an obstacle to ever truly knowing the thing in itself, then we are closer to Kant. If we understand this construction as the means by which we know the thing in itself, then we are closer to Husserl – with the important caveat

that this 'thing in itself,' for the phenomenologist, is nothing other than the thing in itself *for us*.

**You are associated with an increasingly prominent collective of thinkers loosely categorised under the term 'speculative realists'. I was hoping you could say a bit about some of the prominent critiques of Kant that have emerged within the speculative realist movement.**

Speculative realism has rallied around the affirmation that contemporary and future work in continental philosophy can develop on a foundation other than the one laid by Kant and his descendants – phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, and so on. This affirmation falls short of proper criticism, but captures the kind of critical attitude toward Kant that you see in many different strands of speculative realism. This is an important distinction, I think, because it shows that speculative realism is not first and foremost a reactionary movement, but one that is optimistic, even liberating. That's how I experienced it, in any case: it provided me in graduate school with hope that philosophy might proceed along trails that are not already blazed with Kantian markers. This is not to say that speculative realism ignores, rejects, or discounts the Kantian legacy or the transcendental approach. By no means; that would be foolish. It is merely to say that speculative realism has turned away from the obsession with the limits of knowledge and related Kantian concerns, and unapologetically focused its efforts on producing thinking about objects and the reality of objects, in every sense that 'reality' can be taken in this context. It's a risky proposition, but one that regards risk as a virtue, that regards risky thinking as something to be promoted, not something to be reined in. Perhaps that is a kind of Kantian heresy, but there it is.

Graham Harman has distilled Kantianism down to two fundamental theses. The first, that human knowledge is fi-

nite, is shared with Harman's brand of speculative realism. Things in themselves cannot be known, they always 'withdraw' from our epistemological grasp. They can be thought, however. Harman adamantly resists the second Kantian thesis: that the relation between humans and the world is a privileged relation; or, that philosophy is primarily an investigation into human access to the world. When we privilege the human relation to reality, in Harman's view, we regard human experience as a full *half* of reality. Humans become the centre of existence, the hub around which being spins. Every other thing, all of the innumerable (infinite?) nonhuman relations, inanimate and animate, are left to share the other half of reality. This, in Harman's view, is a disproportionate partitioning of reality, and one that is generated by the inflated role assigned to human experience by humans obsessed with how humans shape the world. The problem with Kantianism, as it were, is that it's ontologically disproportionate. Those are my words, not Harman's.

Like Harman, Quentin Meillassoux launched a now-famous critique of Kant in his book *After Finitude*. In a nutshell, Meillassoux diagnoses Kantianism as a species of what he calls 'weak' correlationism, or the view that, given that human knowledge can only access the correlation between thought and being, things in themselves can only ever be thought; they can never be known. The problem with this view, according to Meillassoux, is that it misses an important fact: that the in itself *can* be known and, furthermore, with the instrument demarcated by Kant in the first *Critique*: reason. In a manner reminiscent of early modern rationalism, Meillassoux's book unfolds a deductive argument which concludes that the laws of nature are necessarily contingent. This is knowledge of the in itself, which Kant believes to be impossible. Meillassoux's book concomitantly levels a harsh indictment of the kinds of fanatical dogmatism that are enabled by the Kantian critique and the limits it places on reason's reach. In Meillassoux's view, the limits

placed on knowledge by Kant's critical philosophy open the door for religious and political-theological fundamentalism and their legitimation. *After Finitude* seeks to unsettle the ground of this legitimation. This requires a direct challenge to the Kantian foundation of contemporary epistemology and, by extension, metaphysics. Meillassoux's book is, therefore, not merely an exercise in deft metaphysical argumentation or epistemological criticism, but a sort of prolegomenon to further political or practical work in contemporary speculative metaphysics.

I'll mention one more player in the arena of speculative realism, Maurizio Ferraris, whose work is more preoccupied with epistemological questions and the problem of relativism than Harman's or Meillassoux's, although of course there are many collateral points of convergence. In 2004 he published a very successful book, in Italian, now translated as *Goodbye, Kant! What Still Stands of the Critique of Pure Reason*. In fact, it was a bestseller. It's a straightforward look at Kant's magnum opus that challenges Kant's critique of reason from the perspective of the philosophy and science that has emerged since Kant's day. In effect, it casts a dubious glance at Kantian constructivism and its complicity with the kind of epistemological relativism that, in Ferraris's view, characterizes so-called postmodern philosophy, while at the same time challenging any constructivism that claims Kant as its predecessor, and that aims to reduce, all too quickly and easily, the real world to mere conceptual schemes or frameworks. For Ferraris, it may very well be the case that we only ever experience or construct the world through our specifically human lens, but it is nevertheless the same world that other perceiving creatures experience or construct through theirs. This means that knowledge has an objective basis, and it's simply not true that anything goes where knowledge claims are concerned.

**The idea of the *end* of phenomenology is quite a strong**

**one. Given that you have mainly trained as a phenomenologist, where do you see the limitations of this method to lie, and what philosophical tools do we have for overcoming these limitations?**

Recently I was invited to run a two-day workshop at the Institute of Philosophy in Prague and this question of the 'end of phenomenology' rankled some of the committed phenomenologists in the workshop, and I'm glad it did. What came out of our discussion was that my book might have just as easily been titled *The Edge of Phenomenology* because its critical focus, which is in many ways also the critical focus of my book *Plastic Bodies*, is the limit of phenomenology, or the limit of what phenomenology investigates and what it can say, given its methodological stance. Admittedly, I ended up calling my book *The End of Phenomenology* because that title is both provocative and ambiguous. Both of these traits, I am convinced, have helped gain the book a broader readership than it might have with a more innocuous title.

As far as the limits of phenomenology, the basic limitation comes from the fact that phenomenology is focused on the human-world correlation, and in a broader sense on human experience of the world. The world of phenomenology is a profoundly and essentially human world. Its profundity yields rich, incomparable, and, arguably, innumerable insights into human experience and the world as it reveals itself to human experience. But, like Kantianism, it seems to reduce the totality of reality to human reality. The researchers I met in Prague suggested to me that a phenomenology of animal experience is possible; the truth of this hypothesis would falsify what I just said about phenomenology's reductionism. I am sceptical about this prospect, but remain open-minded to the possibility of a phenomenology of animal consciousness. Whether or not a phenomenology of animal or nonhuman experience is possible depends on what we mean by 'phenomenology', which is

basically the question posed by my book. That's another part of phenomenology's limitation, I think: it's not clear what phenomenology is, what counts as phenomenological research, or what it takes to practice phenomenology. Phenomenologists are reluctant to be specific in their answers to these questions, I have found. I think the future of phenomenology requires its practitioners to get clear on what is and what is not phenomenology, to take a firm stand on this issue at the risk of being exclusionary, rather than taking a liberal, ecumenical attitude toward its practice.

The tools we have for overcoming the limits of phenomenology are the same tools we've always had on hand: logic, reason, speculation, imagination, poetry, invention. There are moments in speculative realism where philosophical argumentation travels very close to, or becomes, philosophical fiction or something akin to it. All but the most sterile formal philosophy trades in aesthetic devices that allow philosophy to think the unthinkable, to say the unsayable. Heidegger is not the only one to have shown this, but it's Heidegger who made this clear to me. He's often identified as a phenomenologist, but I think it's obvious to anyone who has read widely in his oeuvre that his thinking expands beyond what can be called, without losing coherence, phenomenology. His thinking about poetry, in particular, which often draws upon poetry's resources itself, displays for us the way one can reckon with phenomenology while at the same time exceeding its limitations.

**Philosophical movements never emerge from a social vacuum. Why do you think the speculative realism movement has emerged and gained such popularity at this time? What contemporary concerns, ethical or otherwise, do you think it is responding to?**

When I think about what drew me to speculative realism – and I can only speak from personal experience here – I

think about how in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when I was a graduate student, I was reading a lot of primary and secondary literature in continental philosophy that was produced in the 1980s and 1990s. So much of this was either deeply influenced by, or merely some kind of commentary on, Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida. A spell had been cast over American scholars of continental philosophy; their writing was possessed by European ghosts, their voices hijacked. The framework for thinking was set by Kant, while Heidegger and Derrida (phenomenology and deconstruction, respectively) were read as the most significant heirs to and innovators of Kantianism. That brand of transcendental philosophy seemed to me, and I suspect to others who were drawn into speculative realism's orbit, inescapable. Early on in my graduate years I believed that it would be impossible *not* to write about Heidegger and/or deconstruction and its offshoots; that the history of continental philosophy was unfolding with a kind of Hegelian inevitability; that attempting to write about anything outside of this trajectory would be naïve, unfashionable, suicidal.

But then I discovered Harman's brand of speculative realism, object-oriented philosophy, and it gave me hope that I could pursue my interest in phenomenology without inevitably landing on Derrida's doorstep. The internet enabled me to find other folks who also desired to avoid this fate, many of whom were blogging and collaborating online. It's true that the advent of speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy was encouraged by blog culture, and it would be a mistake to see this as a strike against them. Just the opposite. It was one of the tools deployed in these niches to invigorate continental philosophy, in particular those interested in breaking loose from the grip of Kant, phenomenology, and deconstruction. The internet not only enabled this nascent post-Kantianism's productivity, it certainly helped it gain in popularity by making it widely accessible and transparent. You could watch the

discussion unfold and the ideas generated in real time. It was inviting.

The attraction to speculative realism and related corners of inquiry, as I've begun to say, was and is driven less by ethical or political concerns, and more by a desire – I would venture – to investigate wonders that seem to have been forbidden by Kant and his successors in the continental tradition. By this I mean that the dominance, real or perceived, of Kantianism resulted in a kind of frustration in continental circles and could not but manifest, eventually, in a turn toward realism, materiality, corporeality, and all of the things that appear to be absent from or mitigated in the Kantian landscape. If philosophy begins in wonder, it also persists in wonder. And when we are told or made to believe that some wonders are not worth exploring or that they are impossible to explore, this only intensifies our curiosity and drives us to fabricate the means necessary to satisfy it.

**You talk of a turn towards realism and materialism. However, one consequence of this turn towards a reality unmediated by the human seems to be a tendency towards nihilism, misanthropy, and 'apocalyptic' affect. At the very least it would seem difficult to build an ethics or politics from the ontologies favoured by the speculative realists. What do you think of this kind of perspective?**

It's true that there's a pessimistic, nihilistic, even misanthropic vibe to some of this work, but it's not a necessary consequence of either realism or materialism. The misanthropic part especially doesn't fit. The turn toward objects in recent years doesn't flow from a hatred of humans or even a dislike of them. It's just an attempt to give objects their due, to take the spotlight off human experience and human concern for a little while, which is unequivocally a good thing insofar as it is an exercise in humility. At least, I believe it is.

What realism points to is a certain acknowledgement of the otherness of the real, its ability to elude, surprise, shock, attack, and ignore us. I never thought to put it this way, but one of the lessons that has come out of the collective move toward realism and materialism is that the real doesn't care about humans. It effectively ignores us, lacks all concern for us. This is not to say that it doesn't have value (in fact, there's a rich history of moral realism, for example, that wagers on the human-independent reality of value), but that whatever value exists is part of *human* reality. It's a human invention, a human concern. This doesn't make it any less real. It just says that value isn't found outside the human sphere. This kind of thinking leads a person to consider more seriously the vulnerability and lack of control that humans have over their lives, the lives of others, and the direction of history. Rather than discouraging ethical and political reflection, the realization of our vulnerability and the deep alterity of the real should encourage us to generate new forms of ethical and political thought. For me, these forms will be fundamentally ecological, where 'ecology' is understood as the basic interconnectedness and interdependence of things animate and inanimate.

So the ethical aspect of my thinking always takes an ecological form. That is, if we are interested in ethics, then we have to begin by recognizing this vulnerability and dependency at the heart of our interconnectedness. We should see that our identities and our security is contingent upon other bodies, both animate and inanimate, and that our well-being and chance at flourishing is equally contingent upon the health of the ecological community or communities we find ourselves woven into. Here is the incentive for caring for the other, however one wishes to interpret that idea. I find inspiration here in Spinoza, Levinas, and also Judith Butler, who draws deeply from both Spinoza and Levinas in *Precarious Life*. Life, indeed, is precarious and that must be the starting point of ethical reflection, in my view.

What speculative realism and object-oriented philosophy reveal, or at least revealed to me, is that this precariousness extends *all the way down* to the laws of nature. Even those can't be relied upon to remain stable, and yet we have no other choice than to rely on them, just as we have no other choice but to rely on other persons, other objects, other infrastructures. Our condition is one of what I call 'ecological trust.' But this is not a trust that is earned or measured. It's one that is necessary to assume if one wishes to live and it renders our lives essentially vulnerable to all manner of betrayal, failure, violence, and yet it is the condition of possibility of our community and our shared struggle to safeguard against all of the ways that communities can render themselves and their constituents untenable.

As for the apocalyptic/nihilistic perspective in general? I'm all for it; I embrace it. That's a personal preference, however. I like when philosophy gets dark and when it paints a picture of the darker side of the real because it doesn't often do that. Philosophers are always searching for the light at the end of the tunnel, or the way forward. But what if neither of these exist? What if failure is the inevitable outcome of the human endeavour? Say everything is meaningless. What then? Then we make our own meaning. If philosophy is interested in truth-seeking, then it needs to embrace the truth no matter how scary, depressing, cold, sad, hopeless, or disappointing the truth turns out to be. But I'm not a hopeful person!

**One can discern something of a move amongst prominent continental philosophers towards mathematics, science, naturalism, and those areas that, generally speaking, have traditionally been the province of the 'analytic' tradition, rather than the more humanities-oriented leanings of the 'continental' tradition. Do you have any thoughts about the prospects opened up by this analytic-continental dialogue/convergence, as**

**well as about the future for continental philosophy and the humanities in general?**

This is a really timely and important question. In my view, any move to bridge these historically disparate camps of philosophy is a good one. It's good not only because it helps each camp avoid their own tendencies toward tribalism and reductionism, but it's quite simply the only way to pursue the arguments where they lead and to do so with respect for all the ways that truth can surprise us. I saw a paper recently that explored the historical and sociological reasons for the dominance of analytic philosophy and analytic departments of philosophy in the Anglophone world. The paper is compelling because it immediately got me thinking of alternative histories of Anglophone philosophy, histories that might have been but did not come to pass. Today, more and more researchers and students are finding that the future of philosophy is wide open and that the possibilities for thinking are countless, especially if you cross the analytic and continental wires. I guess what I'm saying is that, if it's truth we really want, then we have to be open to finding that truth wherever it exists. We only do ourselves favours toward this end if we gather as many tools as possible for exploring all the corners of reality where truth might be lurking. I only wish I'd have been a better maths and science student!

**As a final question, what (if any) do you feel are the limits of what can be placed, and performed, under the category of 'philosophy'?**

My view of philosophy is a rather old one, I think: I believe that a philosopher is someone who is willing to follow an argument wherever it leads and does so in practice. Philosophy, then, is something enacted when thinking succumbs to the twists and turns of argument, of the exchange and evaluation of reasons for subscribing to this or that belief. This means that philosophy can be performed and found in

a number of media. It requires no credentials or training, but it does demand a willingness to tarry within uncertainty, questioning, fumbling around with ideas, concepts, and reasons. The anti-philosophical gesture is the one that says, "I will not follow that line of reasoning because I am unwilling to give up my belief in X." Once the pursuit of argument is halted by commitment and affirmation, by a dogmatic affiliation to X, in the form of belief or action, it seems to me that philosophy ceases to exist. Affiliation is, in a sense, antithetical to the *philia* required of philosophy, but only when this affiliation is irrational, that is, placed beyond the space of reason. All of this is to say that philosophy has a very broad domain, but entails a quite narrow practice.

## 8: The Task of a Finite Thinking

### *A Conversation with Marie-Eve Morin*

*In this conversation, Marie-Eve Morin situates Jean-Luc Nancy's thinking within the frameworks of finitude offered by Kant and Heidegger, noting his indebtedness to Heidegger's idea of finitude as existence at the limit rather than limited existence in relation to a hypothetical infinite being (as in Kant). She then goes on to clarify some of Nancy's paradoxical formulations, such as the 'infinitely finite' or 'in-finitude,' in which there seems to be a blurring of boundaries at play, a constant straining at the limits of finitude.*

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**Jean-Luc Nancy has been referred to by Bruno Bosteels as “without a doubt the clearest exponent of the doctrine of finitude.” I am interested in situating him within this ‘doctrine of finitude,’ especially in relation to 1) Kant and 2) Heidegger, both of them thinkers of finitude but in very different ways.**

The relation of Nancy to Kant, and especially Heidegger, is very complex. But schematically, we could say that Kant insists on the finitude of the human being's cognitive capacities. Human beings are deprived of intellectual intuition. We can only cognize what can be given to us, and the forms

of intuition condition what can be given to us. But, while Kant insists on the limits of our ability to know, and unearth the conditions of possibility of experience (and hence of knowledge), his thinking of finitude is still profiled against a thinking of the infinite. In short: human intuition is contrasted with intellectual intuition (how we would intuit if we were God), and the phenomenon is contrasted with the noumenon (the world as it is, or as it would be experienced by an infinite intellect). This is why Kant, despite his insistence on finitude and the limits of the power of knowing, could so easily give rise to the German idealists, who re-asserted intellectual intuition and our power to access the Absolute.

Now with Heidegger, we see an attempt to think finitude on its own terms. In this sense, Nancy is closer to Heidegger than to Kant. The finitude of Dasein, for Heidegger, is not a flaw or a limitation. Rather, finitude is possibilizing. It allows for disclosure, or for what Heidegger calls 'the clearing of Being,' which is the reason things appear, or make sense to us. Very schematically again: To exist for Dasein means to be exposed to limits that cannot be reappropriated. We cannot get back 'under' or 'beyond' the limits that are our thrownness (birth) and our death and integrate them in our being. At the same time, we are exposed to these limits; they are part of our existence as limits. Because they are not ours, or rather because they are essentially the other in us, we have to relate to them, to own up to them. We exist as a finite 'There' (*Da*) where things make sense. Though we are the ones who make sense, that we make sense, or that things disclose meaningfully, is not of our choosing. All we can do is own up to our finitude, exist authentically as finite, and take responsibility for our sense-making ability.

**What are the kinds of questions in which Nancy is most interested and for which the concept of finitude is a useful philosophical tool? And how does this pick up on,**

**critique, radicalise, move beyond, and so on, the various ways in which finitude has been understood within the post-Kantian tradition?**

It's easy to see how Nancy's thinking is indebted to Heidegger's thinking of finitude. First, for Nancy, to be finite does not mean to be limited or deficient, but to exist at the limit, to be affected by one's own end. In other words, finite is not the opposite of infinite. In English we could say that to be finite is the opposite of being finished (or being able to be finished): that the finite being is exposed at its limits means that it is never finished once and for all, never closed off or enclosed. It is always arriving, or coming to presence. This does not mean that we do not die (or demise to use Heidegger's technical vocabulary) but death does not complete or finish anything and, as long as we exist, we remain open and exposed to ourselves and to others. It is true that while Heidegger's primary focus when thinking of exposure to a limit was death, Nancy does shift this focus toward birth: to exist is to come to presence, to come to the world in the sense of being exposed to others and to oneself. But I would say that Nancy's model for thinking limits is neither death nor birth but the skin: the place where existing happens because it is the place where the contact between myself and another (even this other that I am for myself, for example when one of my hands touches the other) happens. At the same time, this does not mean that Nancy is merely a philosopher of the sensuous. Rather, for him, thinking is also a form of touching/sensing of something other at the limit.

As a result, to be finite also means to be fully engaged in existing here and now. Nancy's thinking of finitude goes against the model of history as the actualization of a potentiality, or as the unfolding of a given essence (be it its accomplishment or decay). On that model, the truth of the existent lies in its origin or end, and its existence or history is the process in which this truth is achieved or lost. But to

exist as a finite being means not to have a given essence, not to have a beginning or end that would explain or ground existence itself. So the truth or sense of the existent must be sought nowhere other than in its existence, and that means, in its exposure to all there is.

We can see now how Nancy adopts what we could call Heidegger's 'post-metaphysical' thinking. Rather than looking for a ground or cause for what exists in another realm, the focus is placed squarely on this world, on the plurality of beings or the 'explosion of being,' on what happens in-between existents, at their limits. Nancy's thinking of finitude is truly a thinking of this world. Though we can hear this as a lament (we are stuck with 'this world,' there is nothing else and nowhere else, no escape), Nancy's whole thinking of finitude attempts to displace this nihilistic implication and think this world as opening and as sense.

**There seem to be a few crossovers with Sartrean existentialism in your account of Nancy's thinking of finitude, for example no transcendence, no essence, and no ground to existence. However, Heidegger famously accused Sartre of nihilism in his 'Letter on Humanism' insofar as Sartre believed that we humans must be the source of meaning and value in a world that was essentially meaningless. So even if Nancy manages to sidestep one kind of nihilism (the 'lament' of being stuck with this world), does he not then stand accused of the kind of nihilism that Heidegger levels at Sartre?**

That's a good point. And it's important to differentiate Nancy's approach from Sartre's. It is true that for Nancy, there is no transcendence, no essence, and no ground, but this lack of ground leads Nancy not to a thinking of the absolute freedom of the subject but to a thinking of the 'creation of the world.' For Sartre, the disappearance of transcendence means that the human being is absolutely free. In this posi-

tion of absolute freedom, the subject can will whatever she wants in the sense that she can impose whatever meaning she wants on the meaningless in-itself. In that sense, the freedom of the subject consists in her ability to fully and completely detach herself from the world into which she is thrown (in Sartre's vocabulary, from her facticity).

For Nancy, it is the world, and each existent within the world, that is free. Nancy really means that. For example, in *The Experience of Freedom*, he says that the stone is free. He acknowledges that this is a difficult thought and that it's hard for us to know exactly what that means. But one thing that is clear is that it requires that we undo the dichotomy free human being vs. un-free nature. Something is at stake in the 'being-there' of the stone, and that has nothing to do with 'us humans,' how we represent, handle, or value the stone. By contrast, for Sartre, the meaning of the mountain, its value (as good for skiing or an obstacle to be crossed, for example), exists only in relation to my freely chosen projects.

#### **How does that help us answer the charge of nihilism?**

This is a complicated issue. If we start with the presupposition that the meaning of the world lies outside of the world, that is, that meaning can only come from a transcendent position, then of course, the disappearance of that transcendent position is experienced as nihilism. This is the death of God, or the end of the epoch of metaphysics (where metaphysics is defined, very generally, as the attempt to ground what is as a whole in something that is first and that is preeminently fully present). But it's not that simple. In fact, the transcendent position that was previously occupied by God can be occupied by other 'first principles.' And 'Man,' the 'man' of humanism, including Sartrean humanism, is one of these principles. So humanism is not nihilistic enough! It has not truly done away with the transcendent

position; it has just changed who occupies the chair. Humanism still thinks that the world has no meaning of its own, and that meaning must be bestowed unto the world from the outside. Only now it is 'Man', in the freedom of 'his' will, who decides what things mean, what their value is.

True nihilism would be the destruction of the transcendent/immanent distinction so that there would be only this world, and nothing beyond or above it. (This is what Nietzsche meant in 'How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable' when he says, and I paraphrase, that in doing away with the 'true world', we have also done away with the 'apparent world'). But again, it's important to understand this destruction in the right way. It needs to completely displace the 'logic of the principle' sketched above – where the world is dependent on a transcendent principle and hence is meaningless, needing to receive its sense from elsewhere – or else the absence of a transcendent principle will only lead to meaninglessness. Nancy calls this meaninglessness 'general equivalence'. It is his name for our world, the one where there is no absolute value and everything is exchangeable for everything. Against this nihilism, what we need is a new thinking of the world, where transcendence is at play right in the world. Nancy has used the word 'trans-immanence' to name this world: this world is all there is, the world doesn't open onto a beyond, onto another world. At the same time, this world is opened because everything that exists in it is opened or exposed to each other.

So if we come back to freedom, for Nancy, the freedom of the world, the fact that the rose is without why, does not mean that it is there for me and that I can do what I want with it. Rather it means that its presence, its coming to the world, has absolute value in itself, not in relation to a ground or telos. Or we could say that this coming is infinite, provided that we understand this 'infinity' in the right way. The existence of the rose as infinite opening does not pro-

gress toward some goal. Rather, this existence is at play right here, right now, and as such it is infinitely open (open to what exists with or alongside it and hence open to what can happen to it by virtue of this opened co-belonging in the world).

**Now that you have touched on both finitude and infinity, I was hoping that you could clarify the interplay between the two terms within Nancy's work, given that the relationship he presents between the two can seem rather idiosyncratic at times. For example, what are we to make of his formulation 'infinitely finite' (from *A Finite Thinking*) or the idea of 'in-finitude'? There seems to be a blurring of the boundaries at play here!**

Yes, we should probably specify the relation between finitude and the infinite (or infinitude) in Nancy's work a little better. It is especially confusing because finitude for him is the true infinite! Clarifying this requires that we distinguish between two concepts of finitude, each implying a different concept of the infinite, as well as different ways of thinking what it means to be finished or to come to an end.

Normally, when we say that something is finite, we mean that it is limited. In doing so, we necessarily refer what is finite to an infinite beyond. Nancy calls this concept of finitude 'finiteness'. It is the concept of finitude we find for example in Descartes's third *Meditation* when the meditator understands that her own limitation and imperfection only makes sense on the background of infinite perfection. It is also in this framework that Kant thinks of the infinite or what we now call 'an idea in the Kantian sense', that is, an idea that can only be thought by positing a limit and then overstepping it, infinitely. Such an infinite is only given in an infinite process of illimitation; it's what we reach at the end of an infinite process, but since this process is never finished (only an infinite process could claim to reach the

infinite starting from some limit, just like we can reach the infinite in mathematics by adding 1 to 1 *ad infinitum*), this means that the infinite is never here, never given.

Nancy also links finitude to a limit, but he doesn't think this limit as a limitation to be overcome, as something pointing to a beyond and hence as something that would engage us in an infinite process of overcoming. Rather, as I said above, finitude means that something is affected by its limit or its end not as something external imposed on it but as something originary. Finitude is synonymous with 'existence': you feel yourself existing here and now because you are affected in your core by a certain otherness or strangeness, by a certain outside. This outside is of course the other things that you see or touch. But touching or seeing is only possible because you are already not glued to yourself but are in touch with yourself as something other, something strange. The limit or end, then, that essentially affects you, is not something to be reached at the end of a process and it is not something that would complete the finite being. Rather, the end or limit is the place where the existent feels itself existing. This can only be the case because the existent is exposed, is in touch with a limit that is its own but that it only has as its other.

This is why Nancy can say that finitude is the true or good infinite: not the infinite that can only be reached *ad infinitum*, but the one that is given here and now. The finite being is for Nancy never finished not because it doesn't have enough time and there's always something missing, but rather because it has no end that would finish or complete it. Hence it also lacks nothing with regard to this end; it can no more reach it than it can fail to achieve it.

So in 'The "There Is" of Sexual Relation' Nancy will write that finitude 'is the good infinite or the actual infinite – the infinitude in act (*in actu*) of the act itself insofar as it is the

act of exceeding oneself'. But this excess or this act of exceeding does not lead to any beyond: it stays on the limit, on the threshold. So even though Nancy's use of the term 'actual or effective infinite' or 'infinite in act' sounds a lot like Hegel's good infinite that is also only the act of self-relation, Nancy is here thinking something different than the Hegelian Subject. For Hegel, the model of the good infinite is the circle: finite yet unbounded. Like Nancy's finite being, the circle has no begin and no end. But the difference is that Nancy emphasizes the necessary exposition of the circle to its outside, rather than its closure.

So only absolute finitude – a thinking of finitude completely detached from any thought of limitation and completion – is truly infinite. But at the same time, only a finite being that is exposed to and at its limit can *be* infinite at all. Nancy explains this by outlining the contradiction in the concept of the Absolute. To be absolute, in the sense of completely detached, absolved from any contact with an outside, it is not enough that I be enclosed within a border; this border itself must also be detached from any contact. But then it doesn't make sense to say that I am enclosed within a limit. Or, to take the more concrete example Nancy uses in *The Inoperative Community*: 'to be absolutely alone, it is not enough that I be so; I must also be alone being alone – and this of course is contradictory'. Here's the contradiction: I can only *be* alone (or feel alone) in relation to something else. If I am truly alone, if I do not feel my own limit, then I am not alone, I am 'all there is', I'm the Hegelian Absolute infinitely circling around itself.

### **So, what is the task of a finite thinking?**

Before we talk about the task of a finite thinking, let's talk a little bit about what the phrase '*pensée finie*' means for Nancy. First, we should note that the phrase is ambiguous in French: it means both that a certain way of thinking is

finished and that there is a certain mode of thinking that is finite. The way of thinking that is finished is broadly the one I called metaphysical above, where the world, and all the finite beings that exist in the world, are referred to a beyond that holds the key to their meaning and existence. It's the framework of thought Nancy calls 'signification', which is essentially a certain way of thinking about sense and meaning. It's important to understand that this way of thinking is essentially self-defeating. The demand for meaning assumes that meaning is out there, 'present-at-a-distance', so that our job is to reach it, to capture it. The meaning of things does not lie in their sheer presence, but rather in their being oriented toward a given (but distant) meaning. While our desire for meaning necessarily represents signification as something to be captured or recaptured, the fulfilment of this desire is by necessity impossible. The desire for meaning (Nancy also calls it the 'will to meaning' like Nietzsche says 'will to power') is self-defeating because signification lies in the movement of the desire and not in the posited or desired end toward which the movement aims. If we were to capture meaning and make it present, then things would not signify or mean anymore.

In a sense, the thinking of signification has the form of the bad or spurious infinite, something we are infinitely stretched toward but that is only ever given at a distance, that always lies beyond what is and is always postponed to a later day. And if it were ever achieved, or given, then it would all be over, finished. So signification exhausts itself in the movement of its desire. And what happens today, according to Nancy, is exactly this exhaustion: the framework of signification that imbued the world with meaning from a distance by giving it a direction toward which it was itself stretched doesn't work anymore. This leaves us disoriented and puzzled: things don't seem to make sense anymore. But it also opens the way for another way of thinking. Although Nancy presents finite thinking as an event in

the history of philosophy (or thought more broadly), he also says that insofar as anything has ever been thought, it was in a finite thought, or that all thinking is really finite thinking. This means that metaphysical systems, those who grounded what is in another instance, in a founding, warranting presence beyond the world, didn't really think anything at all, or thought only insofar as they undid or unworked themselves.

Now the task of a finite thinking is to think finitude, that is, to think the sense that existence makes of itself and in itself. The thought of finitude, the thought of sense as what is at play in finite existence, must necessarily be a finite thought, that is, the thought of a single sense. But here 'single' does not mean that the thought is lacking or limited with regards to what can be thought. Rather, this thought captures a sense, in its singularity, as this or that, a sense that is fully there, but which at the same time doesn't exhaust sense once and for all.

### **So the thinking of finitude must also take on a finite form. What does it mean to think finitely?**

Thinking becomes finite when it remains aware (in touch with) its own conditionality and contingency: the fact that it thinks here and now, this or that singular sense. Thinking is an event: thinking surprises itself, a thought comes to me without me knowing where it comes from. So a finite thinking remains aware of its singularity, it always touches upon its own limit or exteriority and never pretends that it can close off upon itself, incorporating its own origin and end. To be engaged in a finite thinking then is nothing other than to exist and make sense as a finite being. It means to paint, to dance, to read, to write, to love, to dream... But this existing is a task because it demands that we overcome our desire for a final, complete Sense while avoiding falling prey to senselessness, as both of these (final Sense, sense-

lessness) remain caught up in the same framework of Signification. So to come back to the question above, the task of a finite thinking is nothing other than to overcome nihilism.

**Over the past decade or so we have seen the emergence of various strands of realism in continental philosophy, more often than not framed in reaction to Kant and the idealist/anti-realist leanings of post-Kantian philosophy. I was wondering if there were any notable contributions Nancy can make to this debate.**

The new 'realist turn' in continental philosophy is both a call to return to metaphysics and the thinking of the absolute (Meillassoux), and to pay renewed attention to things and objects (Harman). It is not clear that these two strands of 'realism' have much in common except their opposition to what they call 'correlationism': the view according to which what can be said of what is must be limited to what the human being can experience or think. In this sense, the new realist philosophies explicitly reject 'finitude' (hence the title of Meillassoux's book, *After Finitude*). They ask us to think what there is when there is no (human) thought, to liberate thinking from the categories of thought or from its own conditions of possibility.

This thinking takes very different forms in Meillassoux and Harman. Meillassoux is a rationalist metaphysician: he believes in the power of reason to know the Absolute, and he builds a metaphysical system based on principles deduced from the basic metaphysical commitments of strong correlationists like Heidegger, which he takes to be twofold: 1) the correlation between thought and being is contingent and 2) what is outside of the correlation between thought and being is not only unknowable for us but utterly unthinkable. Harman's object-oriented philosophy is more akin to phenomenology: it describes experiences, intentional relations, but without privileging human conscious-

ness as the bearer of intentionality. Everything is an object and any object can enter into meaningful relation with any other object. There is no privilege of the human encounter as somehow unlocking the truth of the object.

In this context, what can Nancy's thinking offer us? First it is clear that the appeal to go beyond finitude is very foreign to Nancy. One striking feature of Nancy's thinking is that it does not oppose finitude to the absolute. It proposes a rethinking of the absolute and of the 'outside' in terms of exposition and touch (contact/separation). For the new realists, an 'exposed' absolute is a contradiction in terms: the absolute they are after has to be completely detached from any contact. It cannot in any way be *for* us. For Nancy, it is a non-exposed absolute that is contradictory: in order to be absolute, it would have to absorb even its own edges and would collapse unto itself.

A second striking feature of Nancy's thinking is that it proposes a non-subjectivist, non-anthropocentric thinking of freedom and sense. Here, Nancy goes beyond phenomenology, and also beyond Heidegger, so it's not clear that he can be counted among the correlationists. Nancy's thinking is a thinking of the world in its essential plurality and dissemination, in its contingency, a world that makes sense on its own, or by itself, without being referred to a transcendent principle or a transcendental subject. This world without transcendent telos is as natural as it is 'technological'; it is eco-technical as Nancy sometimes says.

Finally, Nancy's thinking is materialist, but not in the sense that only matter would exist, and sense or meaning would be an illusion. Rather it pays attention to bodies, things, to their materiality and their weight. Hence all the enumeration in Nancy's corpus, which conjoins for example 'a stone, a tree, a ball, Pierre, a nail, salt, Jacques, a number, a trace, a lioness, a marguerite'. Furthermore, for Nancy, thought

itself is very much a material thing (but not in the way neuroscience thinks it is). Thought, a finite thought, is always a material event, and as such it always weighs on me in this or that particular way. There is no immaterial, weightless thought, a thought that would leave no traces in the world of bodies and things.

It is important to note that the realist turn is often presented as necessary today because of the pernicious effects of correlationism. It is not so much that correlationism is a false doctrine, but that it limits our ability to confront the events of our times: the looming ecological crisis, new discoveries in physics and cosmology, and the infiltration of technology into our everyday life, including our own 'living' bodies, etc. Now, I think that Nancy's thinking helps us confront these events (to give only two examples, consider his book on the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster or his collaboration with physicist Aurélien Barrau), and if we had more time I would even argue that it does so better than the new realisms proposed by Meillassoux or Harman. I want to conclude, therefore, by claiming that Nancy's thinking is very much a thinking for our times.

## 9: The Jargon of Finitude

### *A Conversation with Bruno Bosteels*

*In this conversation, Bruno Bosteels considers finitude from a more explicitly political angle than other contributors to this volume, arguing that the thinking of finitude is pre-emptively defeatist and serves to block in advance any transformation to the status quo. Taking Heidegger as his central reference point, Bosteels offers a critique of what he calls 'the jargon of finitude' through which both the essence and possibility of philosophy have increasingly become defined.*

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**Your forthcoming book has a very evocative title, *Philosophies of Defeat: The Jargon of Finitude*. Please can you situate your book in relation to what you refer to, in your 2009 paper in *Radical Philosophy*, as 'the doctrine of finitude,' and explain why you choose to link finitude with defeat when it may alternatively be linked with humility, modesty, and so on?**

This is obviously a big question and I cannot promise to

answer it in a few sentences! In a way, the whole book is meant to answer this question about the link between the philosophical notion of finitude and the historico-political experience of defeat. And even then, I anticipate that many readers will not be convinced. If this ends up being the case, however, it will be at least in part due to the absolute dominance of the doctrine of finitude, which ironically would prove my point after all.

Today, I believe, it is no exaggeration to say that acceptance of the principle of finitude has become so dominant that its doctrine seems self-evident, to the point of being irrefutable. To paraphrase Jorge Luis Borges's lines about nominalism, in an early essay of his titled 'History of Eternity,' we could say: Now, like the spontaneous and bewildered prose-speaker of comedy, we all practice finitism *sans le savoir*, as if it were a general premise of our thought, an acquired axiom. Useless, therefore, to comment on it. Or, to paraphrase the nearly identical words of a later essay by the same author: Finitude, which was formerly the specialty of a few, encompasses everyone today; its victory is so vast and fundamental that its name is unnecessary. No one says that he or she is a finitist, because nobody is anything else.

However, my argument is not limited to this prevalence of the notion of finitude in contemporary theory or philosophy. If, in addition, I also make the link with the notion of defeat, it is because the philosophers in question – I am talking mainly about Martin Heidegger and some of his most illustrious readers in France or Italy such as Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Giorgio Agamben – do in fact offer a thinking of defeat, in the double sense of the genitive. The post-Heideggerian style of philosophizing is both – objectively speaking – a reflection about the defeat of the radical socialist and communist Left since the 1960s and – subjectively – a way in which defeat itself in a sense becomes philosophical and

does all the thinking there is to do for us, as if in an inverted form of canned laughter.

Of course, you are right that finitude could be linked more easily with the other notions you mention: humility, modesty, and so on. In fact, several of the philosophers I discuss make this link quite explicitly. In his book *Heidegger, Art, and Politics*, for example, Lacoue-Labarthe begins his interpretive confrontation with Heidegger's Nazism with a chapter titled 'The Age's Modesty,' in which he pleads for the need of an attitude of modesty or humility on the part of the contemporary philosopher. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, this is not a purely personal or anecdotal question of temperament but reflects an epochal demand, that is, an exigency imposed by the age we live in after Auschwitz. Because of the political disasters provoked by philosophy's hegemonic desire for power, especially in the twentieth century, perhaps we should no longer have a desire for philosophy in the first place. But this call for modesty is only one example of a much broader trend, according to which respect for the law of finitude ought to protect us from what is often referred to in the vague moralizing terms of 'the worst.' This includes not only Nazism, or the various types of fascism, but also the doctrinaire excesses of Stalinism, or the politics of Soviet-style Communism, up to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

### **So in this sense defeat and humility are intimately linked?**

Yes. The affective disposition of humility, which I discuss in one chapter of the book in conjunction with the affect of shame as treated from Levinas to Agamben, offers one way of answering the historic defeat of the Left. Notions such as modesty or humility allow the contemporary philosopher to internalize the experience of defeat in a way that seeks to avoid the authoritarian excesses that would have been partly to blame for this defeat. More often than not, this means

that the defeat comes to be seen as a necessary failure, due to reasons that are not foreign but internal to the historical fate of the socialist and communist Left, in the West as well as in the East. Finitude, then, serves as a reminder that philosophy should never again push the political envelope that far. It is the mark of an attitude of respectful awe before a red line that should never have been crossed in the first place and over which the philosopher stands guard as an ever-vigilant night watch.

And yet, it is my sense that finitude, when it becomes mobilized in this way in the self-criticism of the political Left, also becomes actively defeatist, insofar as it blocks in advance any possibility to transform the status quo that resulted from this defeat. There is a logic of pre-emptive defeatism behind the thinking of finitude. The key to understanding this lies in the temporal loop by which the political diagnosis of past disasters gives way to a philosophical prognosis in which all the usual default positions, on the Left as much as on the Right, come to be seen as belonging to the same metaphysical tradition that would have been dominant for twenty-five centuries in the so-called West, that is to say, since at least the ancient Greeks. The general working hypothesis behind *Philosophies of Defeat*, then, holds that this renewed emphasis on finitude, as the absolute limit beyond which humanity supposedly reaches only at the risk of 'the worst,' marks both a symptom of the failure of our political imagination to cross the boundaries of what is given and an attempt to disguise the ensuing depoliticization under the cloak of a newfound philosophical radicalism that is actually not so different as it thinks it is from the older existentialist fantasies of authenticity.

**In a sense, the doctrine of finitude to which you refer began with Kant, but for you Heidegger is an immeasurably more important figure insofar as he instantiates what you call the modern interpretation of the notion of**

**finitude. Please can you say something about this transformation of the notion of finitude between Kant and Heidegger?**

Kant's critical project is undoubtedly the main reference linked to the doctrine of finitude. He is the modern thinker who gives this doctrine its noble philosophical pedigree. As one of Kant's fiercest critics, Hegel by contrast comes to be seen as the new villain, the thinker of the dialectical movement of the infinite, which would immanently contradict and transcend the limits of the finite all the way to the absolute. Today's turn or return to the tradition of finitude also reads as a tragicomic restaging of this gigantomachy between Kant and Hegel.

For the most part, today's finitists side with the critical project of the thinker from Königsberg against the author of *The Science of Logic*. Even when they are ready to accept a more charitable reading of Hegel, as in Derrida's own *Glas* or Nancy's *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, they do so out of the conviction that ultimately the dialectic is nothing less than a thinking of originary finitude.

Now, I am certainly not the first one to remark on the foundational role played in this regard by Heidegger's 1929 book, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (often referred to simply as the *Kantbuch*). It is here that Heidegger, as a way of beginning to take up the unfinished project of his 1927 magnum opus *Being and Time*, lays the groundwork for the interpretation of finitude in an ontological key, such that finitude is no longer limited to the epistemological question of the limits of what I can or cannot legitimately come to know (as in Kant), but is transposed onto being or existence itself. Incidentally, this argument for the displacement of finitude from the human being onto being as such, is homologous to the single most common gesture in all of Slavoj Žižek's work, that is, the transposition of an episte-

mological gap *between* the real and our limited knowledge of the real (we finite mortals cannot know the immortal God) onto an ontological gap or limitation *within* the order of being itself (God becomes finite and dies on the Cross).

In Heidegger's words, finitude becomes the baseless base or the abyssal ground from which we can first have an understanding of the meaning of being qua being. In his *Kantbuch* he still speaks in this regard about a new metaphysics, in a positive sense, whereas later on this term will be reserved for the tradition of the West that must be submitted to a thoroughgoing destruction or deconstruction. And in this process the notion of finitude too will lose much of its earlier centrality. The later Heidegger, by moving from the analysis of the human being to the history of the event of being, fulfils the programmatic potential already contained in the notion of finitude mobilized in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. At the same time, he renounces any lingering subjectivist or ethico-metaphysical connotations of the term, still present in *Being and Time*. Its explicit mention is no longer needed, once the focus has shifted from the human being to the thinking of the singular event of being itself.

**Foucault was very influenced by Heidegger's *Kantbuch*. Do you see him as following in Heidegger's footsteps in showing the epochal significance of the notion of finitude for the modern age?**

Yes, absolutely. Foucault, especially in his 1966 book *The Order of Things*, tries to unpack and explain the historical uniqueness of the use of finitude in the modern era. The system of modern thought, exemplified in the emergence of new human sciences such as philology and political economy in which 'man' makes himself the object of knowledge as a speaking, desiring, and labouring subject, can be described as an analytic of finitude. This means that the finite no longer stands opposed to the infinite, as in older the-

ological or dialectical modes of thinking. Instead, thought in the modern era, an era from which we have not yet escaped, can be defined as the thinking of finitude in a constant self-referencing or doubling back upon itself, and in this way breaks completely with the classical – Heidegger would say onto-theo-logical – metaphysics of infinity that preceded it.

At least three things are going on in Heidegger's and Foucault's retrievals of the notion of finitude. First, we witness a complete overthrow of the stubborn pejorative connotations that usually cling to this notion, understood as deficiency or lack, limitation, or shortcoming. For Heidegger as well as for Foucault, finitude alone first opens up the possibility of asking the questions of being, of truth, and of knowing as such. Second, the jettisoning of all dialectical and theological references to the infinite carries over into another major aspect of the paradigm of finite thinking, that is, its critical or anti-metaphysical leverage. Finally, if the analytic of finitude in its various scenarios limits itself to offering a repetition of what is always already given in the originary receptivity of human intuition, in the fundamental dispositions of the body, or in the positive contents of life, language, and labour, it can always lay claim to yet another feature, which is that of offering a materialist rebuttal of all idealist vagaries. It is only when we come to terms with the fact that being *is* time that we are also able to accept our limitations as possible chances and positive conditions for any experience whatsoever; that we can unmask the onto-theo-logical dogmatism of the tradition of metaphysics; and that we may hope to bring down all the idealist flights of fancy to the earthy this-sidedness of the finite. In fact, only a Heideggerian thinking of time, death, and finitude would be able to call itself truly materialist – more materialist even than the still metaphysical tradition of Marxism.

By contrast, in an effort to put my cards on the table, I propose that it is time to argue *against* time understood in this sense, against the idea that we are not *in* time so much as our innermost being *is* time. This would require that we begin to tackle what constitutes the minimal common denominator behind the pre-eminence given to time as an a priori form of our finite or non-creative intuition, namely, the underlying assumption, which today has become an irrefutable dogma, that the task of thinking – whether it is called critique, analysis, or deconstruction – consists ultimately in nothing less but also nothing more than our exposure to temporal finitude. Because it is my claim that for all its subversive ambitions, this thinking of finitude today has become one of the dominant forms of a new idealism, parading in the guise of a post-metaphysical, anti-dialectical, and hyper-ethical form of materialism.

**In your book, you move from the fairly neutral ‘doctrine’ of finitude to the more charged descriptions of the ‘dogma’ of finitude, the ‘law’ of finitude, even the ‘tragic law’ of finitude. There is a sense in which finitude has increasingly become an all-encompassing framework within which philosophy operates. Is this fair?**

If you mean to ask whether this is a fair description of the fundamental assumption behind my interpretation of the role of finitude in contemporary philosophy, my answer already should be obvious: Yes, I do believe that finitude has become much more than a neutral doctrine and today constitutes something like a dogma that can hardly even be questioned anymore. If I also speak of the law, and even of the tragic law of finitude to which we have to submit, this is first of all in reference to Lacoue-Labarthe’s reading, still in *Heidegger, Art and Politics*. The greatest temptation, according to his interpretation of the law of finitude, is to seek out a form of untrammelled immediacy or authenticity. To strive for the immediate self-presence of the truth to

itself – without the intrusion of any mediation, difference, or alterity – would mean doing violence to the tragic law of finitude. Inversely, as the principal leverage for a radical critique or deconstruction, not only of Heidegger’s possible links to Nazism but also, and perhaps even more significantly, of all hitherto existing forms of militant politics and hegemonic desires, the law of finitude serves as a constant reminder that we should renounce the misguided hopes placed in philosophy’s ability to provide spiritual guidance or leadership to the political guide or leader.

Finitude also becomes the rigorous law in another sense, which is that of imposing an ethico-political duty or imperative: what in the older parlance would have been called a moral law. We find ourselves forever owing under the law of finitude, to which we must submit. What does this law, duty, or imperative tell us? In the end, there is no way to fill in the law with concrete contents, beyond the respect that is due to the originary finitude of being or existence as such. If we want to avoid repeating the disasters of the twentieth century, this is the law of finitude to which we have to bow.

So yes, it is certainly fair to say that, for me, post-Heideggerian philosophizing amounts to an ethico-political thinking of finitude as law. If, on the other hand, you mean to ask whether my description is fair toward these contemporary thinkers, I must leave the answer to future readers of the actual book. It is they who will have to decide if and to what extent my interpretation is fair. But, as I said, insofar as the doctrine of finitude has become strictly speaking irrefutable today, I may have painted myself into an extremely narrow corner, where to left-leaning readers I may appear to give too much credence to the heavy-handed critique or deconstruction of metaphysics, while to those self-proclaimed progressives who remain loyal to the project of deconstruction to this day I will no doubt appear as an ignorant outsider who will have been

proven wrong in advance by everything that their favourite authors wrote.

**Your reference to the ‘jargon of finitude’ builds on Theodor Adorno’s *The Jargon of Authenticity*. I was hoping you could say something both about the function of jargon in philosophy, and about the ways in which you feel finitude has taken over from authenticity as a kind of paradigm shift in the nature of our self-understanding, both as humans but also in the socio-political sphere.**

Here perhaps a disclaimer is in order. In speaking of a ‘jargon’ to describe the philosophies of finitude, I do not intend by way of contrast to offer a plea in favour of plain speech, as if there could be a use of language in any working or non-working environment free of all technical jargon. Whatever one’s preferred universe of reference may be, from artisanal bookbinding to competitive contact sports, some degree of technical language is always inevitable, as is the drawing of an invisible line of demarcation separating those who are ‘in’ from those who are ‘out,’ based on such coded language.

When I speak of ‘the jargon of finitude’ in the book’s subtitle, this is because I take this to be the latest version of what Adorno in 1964 labelled the ‘jargon of authenticity.’ In fact, if we want to bring Adorno’s polemic up to date with the contemporary moment, there is no better place to start out from than by studying the conceptual shift marked by this move: from authenticity to finitude. Whereas the former ideal, with its presuppositions of self-possession, transcendence, and resoluteness, is now seen as too steeped in a metaphysical understanding of the subject’s decisive appropriation of its innermost destiny, the latter idea promises to open up a space for difference, alterity, and singularity in ways that supposedly would no longer be metaphysical, or at least point to an outer edge on this side or the far side of Western metaphysics. Consequently, a deconstructive

approach could show that the critique of the jargon of authenticity mistakenly assumes the continued prevalence of a set of presuppositions – summed up in the metaphysical category of the subject – whose validity is radically put into question by this same approach, precisely in the name of finitude.

More than as a radical break, however, I propose that we think of this change of perspective from authenticity to finitude as offering different intonations of a similar theme, along the lines of a Borgesian idea of which Derrida was always fond, namely, the idea that perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors. In its present intonation, the metaphor of ‘finitude’ is, as we saw, a technical term borrowed primarily from Heidegger’s own work, especially in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. This reading is certainly an important stepping stone on the way to the so-called *Kehre*, that is, the ‘turn’ or ‘reversal’ in Heidegger’s work, from the existential analytic of *Being and Time* to the thinking of the event undertaken in works such as the posthumously published *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, all the way to his lecture *On Time and Being*. But there are also numerous topics and concepts that remain constant from one end of this spectrum to the other, beginning with a basic disposition of endurance, steadfastness, and a capacity for taking things in one’s stride, which in the newer jargon will become transcoded into an irrefutable sense of ethical responsibility and political radicalism. Both the reasons for the turn and the underlying continuity therefore need to be taken into account at one and the same time. Finitude, then, will reveal itself as the new authenticity: its implicit continuation and the becoming explicit of some of its most blatant limitations.

**So it is the extent to which this jargon of finitude that you identify reaches out into our moral, political, spiritual, and ideological landscapes (one may even**

**say has taken over our whole lives...)) that you wish to challenge?**

Yes. Today's consensus holds that to think is to be finite and all there is to think is, in turn, nothing but finite being. Heidegger, once again, makes this quite explicit in his *Kantbuch*, when he says that the sheer fact of thinking as such is already the mark of finitude, so that 'finite thinking' is a tautology, after the fashion of a round circle. From the point of view of my polemical engagement with the jargon of finitude, this is the tautology to be disrupted and the circle to be broken. The point is not recklessly to argue against time or finitude as such. Rather, what I propose to disturb is the specific chain of equivalences according to which finitude would be to infinity what time is to eternity and materialism to idealism.

**You link finitude's defeat of metaphysics with the downfall of the subject, and this is especially true in the trajectory of Heidegger's thought which appears progressively to try and eviscerate any lingering vestiges of the willing autonomous subject (a move that may be traced in no small way to his never explicitly stated but always somehow implicit philosophical apology for his alliance with Nazism). I was hoping you could say a few things about this thinning out or defeat of the subject by the philosophers of finitude?**

I can make two references to try and answer this question. But first it might be good to remember that in French the word for 'defeat,' *défaite*, can also be read as the past participle of the verb *défaire*, 'to undo' or 'to dismantle.' It comes very close to the various meanings of *déconstruction*, which Derrida first proposed in his 1964-1965 seminar, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, as a translation for Heidegger's *Abbau* and *Destruktion*. In fact, in a beautiful preface, titled 'Desistance,' written for the English trans-

lation of Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typographies*, Derrida quotes a few lines from his friend's 1973 book review of Heidegger's *Nietzsche* course, which had just appeared in Pierre Klossowski's French translation. From these lines, we can catch a glimpse of the sense in which deconstruction also amounts to a thinking of defeat. Lacoue-Labarthe indeed proposes that what interests him in Heidegger's lecture course is not the subject or the author, but rather something that deserts, or always already has deserted the subject, something that Derrida will call desistance, as opposed to resistance, namely, the moment when the subject, as the culmination of Western metaphysics, desists or deserts. For me, what is most striking in this portrayal is the moment when Lacoue-Labarthe calls this the defeat of the subject. From here it is indeed possible to conclude that the subject of the various philosophies of defeat is none other than the defeat of the subject – the defeat of the subject *in* or *as* the subject of philosophy. An updated version of Lenin's question nowadays would come to read: 'What is to be undone?' The answer to this last question is not difficult to surmise. What is to be undone is the metaphysics of the subject believed to be capable of making or doing history.

Now, given all the catastrophes caused by the self-affirmation of the subject over the course of modern history, there is certainly much to be said for adopting a stance of defeat and defection from all subject-based philosophies. In any case, the resulting impasse is not something that can be remedied with the moral outrage of traditional humanists who, in response to the deconstruction of metaphysics, demand a return to the good old subject of inalienable rights and corresponding duties. My polemic with the jargon of finitude, therefore, should not be confused with what neo-conservatives in France have pejoratively called *la pensée '68*. This is because the call to think *in* and *of* the defeat of the subject means to pursue to the end the undoing or unmaking of precisely this figure of the liberal-humanist

subject with which neoconservatives propose to counter the critique and deconstruction of Western metaphysics. However, in my eyes there also comes a point in the different analytics of finitude where what may well be irrefutable because of the way in which the history of metaphysics is framed, at the same time turns out to be actively defeatist. This happens when the white banner that is waved so frantically from left to right in front of our eyes as an admission of necessary defeat reduces all figures of subjectivization to that same history and crosses them out in the name of a bottomless sense of philosophical radicalism.

But Lacoue-Labarthe and Derrida are not the only ones in this sense to play on the double meaning of defeat or defection in French. In fact, the defeat or defection of the metaphysical privilege of presence and self-possession, united in the consciousness of a free subject, should be understood as a full-scale philosophical program for all post-Heideggerian thought. Far from constituting a shortcoming to be superseded with the perfection of some infinite power, for the philosophies of finitude an attitude of humble defeatism is the only possible safeguard against the continued glorification of truth as the manifestation of a luminous and domineering subjectivity.

**You identify five key terms in the jargon of finitude: difference, retreat, inoperativity, affect, and community. I was hoping you could say a bit why you chose these specific terms for the focus of your critique?**

I see these terms as examples of what with Heidegger we could call 'guiding terms' or *Leitworte* and what Adorno called 'catchwords' or *Stichworte*. I am following Adorno's lead, when he focused on the function of words like 'command,' 'mission,' 'task' and so on, as well as the aura of 'authenticity' or 'property' with which they presumably are imbued. For Adorno, such idiomatic uses clearly perform

a double function. On the one hand, these terms and allusions are meant to send philosophy back to the concreteness of ordinary life, seemingly accessible to the many; on the other, they accrue a charge of exceptionality that invests the average banality of everydayness with a decisive flavour of heroic resolve, available only to the rare and few. However, the jargon does not function merely by assigning a hyperbolic value to a selection of otherwise common nouns so as to endow them with a numinous and quasi-sacred aura. Rather, it is the constellation among these words – today we would say the word cloud – as well as the chain of possible substitutions between them that are key to understanding the ideological function of the jargon.

Something similar applies to the terms I discuss in the jargon of finitude: these five keywords also form a kind of chain, both conceptually and chronologically speaking. Just as in the work of Heidegger and Derrida we can observe a gradual shift from finitude to difference, so too we can find a comparable transfer of conceptual energies from difference to retreat, from retreat to inoperativity (as opposed to the foundational desire for the setting to work of truth), from inoperativity to the affective dispositions of anxiety and shame that confront us with the ultimate finitude of existence, and, finally, underneath all these displacements, a never-ending concern for the community of those who have nothing in common, other than their mortality or their being-onto-death.

Of course, I could have chosen a different set of terms. Any selection was going to be arbitrary. But as a general rule I wanted to avoid notions that would have been either too idiosyncratic or too generic. Terms such as 'arche-writing,' 'typography,' or 'impotentiality' nowadays would have been all too readily associated with the unique trademark of this or that individual philosopher whereas 'event,' 'sharing,' 'singularity,' 'equivocality' or 'multiplicity' would have been

overly broad, since these terms cover uses by a wide range of thinkers who hardly can be said to belong to the tradition of finitude. No doubt this last argument could also be made about 'difference,' 'affect' and 'community,' which I do take up in separate chapters of the book even though they may seem exceedingly generic as well, but the first term is too pivotal to the tradition of finitude to be left out, while the last two have received such original – finitist – inflections in recent years so as to have become recognizable as integral parts of this same tradition.

**In much of your work you distinguish theory from philosophy. I was hoping you could clarify your distinction between the two, as well as exploring where you think the limits to what can be carried out within the categories of theory and philosophy lie.**

The fact that we are dealing with 'philosophies' in my eyes is not foreign to the effect of defeatism produced in the jargon of finitude. When cast in an ontological, quasi-transcendental, or aporetic light, the philosophical interrogation of some of the most fundamental questions of our time – questions about justice and community, freedom and equality, the state and revolution, difference and emancipation – always runs the risk of beating down any unruly attempt at rebellion a second time around, after the historic defeat in the streets, at the more profound level of the conditions of possibility and impossibility to which all such attempts supposedly would remain blind. For reasons that are intrinsic to the nature of the discipline as developed out of Kantian idealism, however, this has always been the level at which philosophy is most at home, even when it pretends to undo the comfort of the home in the name of an always more fundamental uncanniness or unhomeliness (*Unheimlichkeit*). All this emphatic disrupting, moreover, merely intensifies the paralyzing effects of the defeatism built into the nature of post-Heideggerian philosophy.

For similar reasons, I would argue that the passage from 'theory' to 'philosophy' that we have witnessed since the early 1980s, aside from entailing a decidedly Eurocentric regression, is a symptomatic expression of a historical trend toward the restoration of the institutional status quo. Along these lines we could consider, for example, how Althusser's different 'groups of theoretical reflection' from the mid-1960s in Paris were succeeded two decades later by public entities such as the 'Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political' that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe founded in the same elite space of the Ecole Normale Supérieure in rue d'Ulm. Their famous 1980 colloquium on *The Ends of Man* in this sense could be said to have been inaugural, insofar as the two organizers – much to the chagrin of several participants and contrary to what had been announced to them in the letter of invitation – felt the need to remark that in spite of the inclusion of seminars on politics, psychoanalysis, literature, art, translation, and education, it belonged to philosophy alone to provide the point of departure for the interrogation of these other fields. Participants in the colloquium also took umbrage at the privilege that seemed to be assigned to 'the philosophical,' when Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy explained that for them the departure was necessarily philosophical along the path first opened up by Heidegger and re-opened in the writing of Derrida.

At least at the level of thought's self-image, the effects of this turn (or re-turn) to philosophy are very different from what can be obtained on the basis of what I see as the inherent disciplinary instability and increasing globality of the category of theory. While some form or other of theoretical work happens in all fields and disciplines, 'theory' as such has never been able to establish itself as firmly as philosophy in the knowledge apparatuses of the modern university, based on the 'conflict of faculties' of its eighteenth-century German model. But this should be considered one of theory's strengths, rather than a weakness, and potentially en-

ables it to cut across its uneven geopolitical distribution. By contrast, when contemporary thinkers in France or Italy for the first time (or once again) describe themselves as philosophers, whether proudly or humbly, are they not also dragging behind their backs the heavy institutional ballast that comes with the dubious prestige of this name, at least in the so-called West as compared to the rest of the world?

To be sure, in the wake of Heidegger's solemn pronouncements in texts such as 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,' his post-war interlocutors in Europe from time to time also with great eloquence argue against philosophy's hegemonic role in the Western tradition. The rise of the jargon of finitude, in this sense, coincides with the end of at least a certain self-understanding of philosophy – its unworking, defection, or deconstruction from the margins. For the most part, though, the jargon of finitude remains within the bounds of a self-questioning of the tradition of philosophy. The latter's suppression or realization is still and always an eminently philosophical affair; and the margins from where deconstruction speaks remain those of philosophy.

Of course, insofar as I propose almost obsessively to dwell within the confines of the jargon of finitude, my book too inevitably opens itself up to the predictable reproach of being overly if not despairingly philosophical and Eurocentric. As someone whose life and work has been divided for over two decades between Europe and the Americas, my only hope is that a sustained polemical engagement with the philosophies of defeat in the Old World might reopen some of the paths that these philosophies tell us should have been submitted to a forceful closure.

## 10: Transcendental Materialism

### *A Conversation with Adrian Johnston*

*In this conversation, Adrian Johnston begins by considering Hegel's dialectical response to Kant's critical philosophy that served to reconnect philosophy with the ontological concerns of pre-Kantian metaphysics while at the same time not side-stepping the epistemological demands of Kantian critique. He then goes on to outline why engagement with the natural sciences, and especially the life sciences, is necessary for a continental philosophy that has become increasingly interested in questions of realism and materialism, while at the same time struggling to shed its staunch and often dogmatic anti-naturalism.*

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**Let's start with Kant. To what extent do you agree with Slavoj Žižek's statement that philosophy *as such* is Kantian insofar as it should be read from the vantage point of Kant's 'Copernican revolution'?**

This is one of a number of points where Žižek and I are in profound agreement. To borrow some phrasing from Nietzsche, I see Kant as breaking the history of Western philosophy in two. What can and should count as properly philosophical fundamentally changes in the wake of Kantian critique.

Kant's self-styled 'Copernican revolution' operates first and foremost in the philosophical sub-discipline of epistemology. Specifically, the *Critique of Pure Reason* raises objections and imposes restrictions *vis-à-vis* pre-Kantian forms of metaphysics making ostensible knowledge claims about supersensible entities such as the soul, the cosmos, and God (i.e. Kant's three 'ideas of reason'). Many philosophers prior to Kant, especially his seventeenth-century rationalist predecessors (Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, and Leibniz), purport to enjoy some epistemological capacity for direct cognitive insight into experience-transcending metaphysical beings. Kant's 'Transcendental Dialectic' in particular reveals the unavoidable, irresolvable conflicts and impasses such specious metaphysical speculations generate. In so doing, this second half of Kant's first *Critique* demonstrates the epistemological indefensibility of varieties of metaphysics assuming or asserting themselves to possess a mystical, magical power (i.e., a faculty of 'pure reason') to intuit intellectually the absolute reality of things in and of themselves apart from any and every knower.

However, for both Žižek and me, the story only begins with Kant; it is far from ending with him. Fichte and the young Schelling, Kant's two immediate German idealist successors, try to help themselves to permutations of intellectual intuition in the teeth of Kantian critique. However, one of Hegel's key breakthroughs in the early 1800s is his forging of dialectics precisely as a means of undoing the subjectivism of Kant's transcendental idealism (i.e. its restriction of possible knowledge to the field of subjective experience)

without recourse to the pure reason (i.e. intellectual intuition) fatally problematized by Kant. More exactly, Hegelian dialectics, by working in and through contradictions and inconsistencies internal to subjects' thoughts and experiences, allows for reconnecting with the ontological dimensions of concern to much of pre-Kantian metaphysics while simultaneously meeting the stringent epistemological demands of Kantian critique. In short, Hegel, via his dialectical paths, passes through, rather than bypasses, Kant.

Hence, Hegel's dialectical philosophy is ambivalently post-Kantian in both senses of the prefix 'post-'. On the one hand, there is 'post-' as signaling faithfulness, fidelity, inheritance, and the like: Hegel's dialectical philosophy celebrates the genuinely revolutionary character of Kant's Copernican revolution and sees itself as obligated to rise to the philosophical requirements imposed by Kantian critique. On the other hand, there is 'post-' as signaling abandonment, overcoming, supersession, and the like: Hegel is convinced that the ancient art of dialectics reactivated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* leads to the conclusion that Kant himself cannot, as he attempts to do, imprison knowledge within transcendental subjectivity's limits of possible experience. Kant's epistemological enclosure relies upon his absolutization of binary oppositions situated along a mind-world divide: phenomenal objects-as-appearances versus noumenal things-in-themselves, subjective thinking versus asubjective being, and so on. Hegel shows that this divide and its offshoots are dialectical *qua* self-subverting, undermining themselves from within and by their own standards. In showing this, Hegelian dialectics dissolves the limitations erected by Kantian critique – or, rather, reveals these limitations to dissolve themselves.

Simply put in Hegel's own terms, he sublates (*als Aufhebung*) Kantian critical philosophy. Thereby, Hegel, like Kant and Fichte, begins philosophizing from within the confines

of subjectivity and its (self-)consciousness. But, by contrast with the subjectivism of Kant's and Fichte's transcendental idealism, Hegel proceeds to demonstrate how and why this beginning leads beyond itself, proceeding from subject to substance (to borrow language from the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*). In this manner, as well as others, Žižek and I both are specifically Hegelian post-Kantians (with there being, obviously, many ways to be post-Kantian).

**Here are three central elements in Kant's critical philosophy: 1) subject as irreducibly split (contra Descartes), 2) prohibition of the construction of an ontology through his boundary-line partitioning of phenomena and noumena, and 3) positing of an idealist philosophy. I was hoping you could say a few things about where you stand on these central Kantian concerns?**

I embrace 1) and reject both 2) and 3). As regards 1), I am not alone in identifying Kant's splitting of subjectivity, epitomized by his assault on Cartesian rational psychology in the first *Critique's* 'Paralogisms of Pure Reason,' as a crucial anticipation of the psychoanalytic subject (particularly as per Lacan). Both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the Kantian critical apparatus, as reflected in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* respectively, rely upon a division between the transcendental and empirical tiers of the subject. In the first *Critique*, this results in the idea of a structural discrepancy between the phenomenal subject-for-itself and the noumenal subject-in-itself, with the latter as an inherently unknowable *Ding an sich*. In the practical philosophy's 'metaphysics of morals,' this split surfaces in the guise of Kant's admission that the self-conscious willing subject cannot ever be certain whether or not hidden subterranean influences have compromised or tainted his/her conscious intentions. Thereby, Kant is a crucial ancestor of the theory of the unconscious, of the subject of (or as) the unconscious. More-

over, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel radicalize, each in his own way, this aspect of Kant's critical philosophy. Marx, under the commingling influences of Hegel and Feuerbach, arguably pushes this Kant-initiated trajectory even further.

Still apropos 1), this link between German idealism and psychoanalysis sometimes is ignored, discounted, or under-appreciated in part because it seems the former champions rational self-consciousness while the latter foregrounds the irrational unconscious. However, this apparent chasm is bridged from both sides. For German idealism, there is something in rationality more than rationality itself (to paraphrase Lacan), an unconscious dimension generated precisely in and through the configurations and operations of self-conscious subjectivity. For psychoanalysis, the unconscious, by contrast with the id envisioned as a roiling depth of dark animalistic impulses, is thoroughly enmeshed and of a piece with the cognitive, linguistic, and social constellations of distinctively human mindedness. German idealism and psychoanalysis overlap exactly along these lines.

My answer to your first question already provides the reasons informing my rejection of 2) and 3). Assuming that by 3) 'idealist philosophy' you mean specifically subjective idealism, with its anti-realist opposition to traditional ontologies, this once again brings us back to the history of German idealism. Whereas Kant and (pre-1804) Fichte are subjective idealists, Schelling and Hegel are not. In particular, and as I mentioned earlier, Hegel's turning of dialectics against Kantian critical philosophy results in the liquidation of this philosophy's partitioning of phenomenal objects-as-appearances within subjective experience from noumenal things-in-themselves beyond subjective experience. In liquidating this partition, Hegel liquidates along with it the subjectivism of Kant's transcendental idealism. The load-bearing distinction between the epistemological dimension of subjective thinking and the ontological di-

mension of objective-*qua*-non-subjective being is swept away (or, from Hegel's dialectical perspective, sweeps itself away).

In the wake of Jacobi's, Fichte's, Schelling's, and his own objections to Kant's thing-in-itself, Hegel immanently critiques the Kantian noumenal-phenomenal opposition such that real beings *an sich* become knowable again in the aftermath of the critical-transcendental turn's Copernican revolution. Ontology is no longer prohibited by epistemology. Needless to say at this point, I am sympathetic to Hegel's ambivalent engagement with Kant.

Relatedly, what Hegel identifies as his own 'absolute idealism' is not idealist in the same (subjectivist) manner as the transcendental idealism of Kant and Fichte. The 'absolute' in 'absolute idealism' refers to Hegel's robustly realist ontology/metaphysics, namely, his philosophy of the Absolute. What makes this philosophy idealist is not an anti-realist separation and prioritization of subjective mind *vis-à-vis* objective world; instead, idealism as per absolute idealism entails, for Hegel, that each and every thing is what it is partly through its relations with other things (i.e. via 'mediations'). Idealism here means that nothing existent is 'immediate' (i.e. un-mediated) in the sense of an atomic, monad-like self-sufficiency. If idealism *à la* Kant involves an anti-ontological fundamental non-relation between subjects and things, idealism *à la* Hegel involves a proliferation of relations within and between subjects and objects. Perhaps Hegel did himself a disservice by holding onto the idealist label, since 'idealism' persistently has tended to connote privileging or absolutizing the mental. Hegel definitely does not do this, despite much commentary and criticism to the contrary.

**While Alain Badiou attacks Kant for inventing the motif of finitude, you write that Žižek considers Kant's idea of**

**the finitude of the subject to be absolutely foundational to philosophical thought. Where do you stand on the question of finitude?**

I can begin answering this question by drawing a parallel between, on the one hand, Schelling's and Hegel's criticisms of Spinoza and, on the other hand, Žižek's and my criticisms of Badiou. Spinoza and Badiou, despite the multiple major differences between these two philosophers, both make versions of the category of the infinite ontologically foundational. Spinoza's fundamental ontology is grounded on a pre-Cantorian infinity in the guise of the singular, seamless totality of substance as God/Nature. Badiou's fundamental ontology is (un)grounded on a post-Cantorian infinitized infinity of pure, one-less multiplicities (in)consisting of neither atoms (i.e. micro-unities, little ones) nor wholes (i.e. macro-unities, big Ones). Obviously, Cantor's nineteenth-century transformation of the very nature of the rational infinite makes for an opposition between Spinoza's unique, unified infinity and Badiou's proliferating, detotalized infinity of infinities. Nonetheless, Spinoza and Badiou at least could be said to agree that philosophy can and should start with an ontology of infinity, with a theory of infinite being.

Jacobi unintentionally reignited intense interest in Spinoza when he brandished a Spinozism equated with deterministic 'nihilism' in his 1780s polemicizing against Kant and the legacy of the German Enlightenment. Schelling and Hegel, in their intellectual youths, became fascinated by Spinoza's philosophy in no small part thanks to Jacobi's religion-infused scaremongering. However, both of them quickly arrived at similar objections to the system elaborated in 1677's *Ethics*. For these two giants of post-Kantian idealism, Spinoza seems unable to ask and answer questions about why and how, in Spinoza's own terms, infinite substance manifests itself as the finite entities and events of attributes

and their modes. Why and how does the infinity of being give rise out of itself to limited, determinate appearances? In Schelling's and Hegel's eyes, Spinozism tries to start from infinity, but ends up unable to explain and traverse a yawning chasm between the infinite and the finite, between being and appearing (or, in Hegel's Spinoza-inspired language, between substance and subject).

Žižek and I each voice variations of similar complaints against Badiou. In Badiou's philosophy, this problem of illuminating and spanning the divide between the infinite and the finite occurs at the levels of both his ontology and theory of subjects: first, in terms of the rapport between a discrete, non-relational ontology (tied to set theory and outlined in 1988's *Being and Event*) and a continuous, relational phenomenology (tied to category theory and outlined in 2006's *Logics of Worlds*); and, second, in terms of the distinction between the pre- or non-evental animal of finite interests and the (post-)evental subject of infinite truth. Echoing Schelling's and Hegel's critical interrogations of Spinoza, how and why do the infinite multiplicities of being *qua* being (*l'être en tant qu'être*) collapse into circumscribed worlds of appearances? How does an event transform the finitude of human (all too human) animality into the infinitude of inhuman subjectivity? What in this animality makes possible its openness to and transubstantiation by events and truths? Badiou, arguably paying a price for his outright dismissal of Kant, seems just as bereft of answers to these sorts of queries as Spinoza seemed to Schelling and Hegel.

With the immediately preceding now in view, I can refer back once more to some of the content of my response to your first question. Specifically, I have in mind the idea I mentioned earlier of proceeding from subject to substance as per Hegel's post-Kantian dialectics. More precisely, I believe that the only way to avoid running up against the

obstacle of the gap Spinoza and Badiou encounter is to opt for reverse-engineering infinite objective being starting from finite subjective appearing (instead of the other way around). In this vein, one can be a methodological or procedural finitist while also simultaneously being an ontological or metaphysical infinitist. As I will contend below, the same also holds for the idealism-materialism distinction. I am tempted to self-identify as an idealist in method/procedure and, at the same time, a materialist in ontology/metaphysics. Marx could be similarly identified, particularly in his maturity as the Hegel-inspired historical materialist critic of political economy.

In whatever sense it is construed, the finite is not nothing. It has some ontological standing or weight. What is more, it is not enough merely to acquiesce to the inevitable and simply acknowledge the existence of things finite. Philosophical rigour and thoroughness dictate that any viable, defensible ontology incorporate and account for these beings and appearances. If and when an ontological approach collides with insurmountable barriers to its ability to move from being to appearing, it must go back to the drawing board or else be rendered philosophically null and void.

**In Žižek's *Ontology*, you note that Žižek radicalises Kant's epistemological finitude (of the transcendental subject) by positing an ontological finitude (at the level of material being/reality itself). Please could you say something about what this shift of registers entails?**

At least here and now, I would speak of dialectics rather than finitude along the lines of your question. If I could be said to engage in a 'positing' of 'an ontological finitude (at the level of material being/reality itself)', it would be in the sense of proposing the existence of dialectical processes within asubjective realities, thereby negating the sort of ontological infinite epitomized by Spinoza's metaphysics of

God/Nature (as decidedly non-dialectical). Neither Žižek nor I finitizes ontology in the fashion of Kantian transcendental idealism by imprisoning a theory of being within the limits of possible experience.

The Žižekian move you refer to is a Hegelian one. For Kant, whenever thinking becomes dialectical, finding itself in the midst of stubborn categorial or conceptual contradictions, this means that it has failed to gain epistemological access to whatever being(s) it is attempting to know in a given instance. The entire second half of Kant's first *Critique*, the 'Transcendental Dialectic' delineating the inconsistencies, tensions, etc. thought creates for itself when taking aim at such ostensible metaphysical objects as the soul, the cosmos, and God, presumes that the dialectical is always a feature of thinking and never a feature of being. That is to say, the demonstrative force of the 'Transcendental Dialectic' for transcendental idealism arises from the presumption that dialectics invariably is a matter of subjective-epistemological ignorance and not objective-ontological insight.

One of Hegel's key critical gestures *vis-à-vis* Kant is his conversion of ignorance into insight. To be more precise, Hegel challenges as uncritical and dogmatic Kant's assumption that being *an sich*, the realm of things-in-themselves apart from subjective cognition, is free of dialectics as contradictions, antinomies, and so on. Combined with Hegel's logical analyses of the interrelationships of core philosophical categories and concepts, this challenge translates into an ontologization of what Kant treats as strictly epistemological. In other words, whereas Kantian transcendental idealism views dialectics as at play within thinking but not being, Hegelian absolute idealism views dialectics as at work within being as well as thinking. This drastically transforms certain basic ideas about being.

Both Žižek and I consider this Hegelian move to be very

powerful and productive. However, I have come to worry about whether and in what instances one should qualify or refrain altogether from specific deployments of the ontologization of the epistemological. Hegelian dialectics can be abused as well as used.

**Žižek considers Kant's abstract and ornate philosophical system to be offering a "gentrified-domesticated reality of representations" understood as an elaborate defense mechanism against an actual experience of the real. What kind of real is this such that this idea makes sense?**

This is, of course, an instance of Žižek's psychoanalytic commitments colouring his renditions of the history of philosophy. Obviously, I am not someone who is against such analytic inflections – quite the contrary. I too work at the intersection of philosophy and psychoanalysis, finding them to be, more often than not, mutually enriching.

At the source of what you are asking about is a marked recasting of the character of consciousness carried out by Freud. For much of both the history of philosophy and still-prevailing common sense, the conscious mind is associated with or pictured as a receptive openness to the world. More often than not, consciousness's primary function is assumed to consist in registering and embracing reality.

Freud's discovery of the unconscious has consequences for ideas about consciousness (among its countless other consequences). One of them, according to Freud, involves a reversal of the motif of the conscious mind as an expansive receptivity. From the Freudian perspective, consciousness is about narrowing down rather than opening up, about blocking instead of embracing. For psychoanalysis, consciousness functions first and foremost as a filter screening out the vast bulk of internal/endogenous and external/

exogenous stimuli alike. Throughout his corpus, Freud consistently depicts conscious organizations as defensive shields against both intra-psychical as well as extra-psychical Reals, against the unconscious/repressed and the outside world respectively. Lacan's theory of the ego takes up this line of Freud's thinking. The Lacanian ego is itself nothing more than an ensemble of defense mechanisms animated by what Lacan describes as a 'passion for ignorance.'

Žižek and I both recognize Kant as a forerunner of certain aspects of psychoanalysis. Neither of us simply plays off Freud/Lacan against Kant. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, Kant's theoretical and practical philosophies contain acknowledgements of versions of an intra-subjective, unconscious Real. What is more, Kant even occasionally indicates that were certain things-in-themselves impossibly to be made accessible as phenomena, they would be horrifying, overwhelming, terrifying, traumatizing, and the like. Žižek is not engaged in a heavy-handed external critique of Kant arbitrarily superimposing analytic interpretations onto a philosophy entirely foreign to what analysis conceptualizes.

Of course, Kant is not Freud. Transcendental idealism is not analytic metapsychology. Nevertheless, making Kant and Freud cross-resonate in the ways Lacan and Žižek do brings up the notion that, for consciousness, there is a 'too muchness' to some of the things that lie beyond its highly circumscribed spheres. From the Lacanian standpoint Žižek and I share, these excessive externalities would include *jouissance*, alterity, and mortality.

**I am fascinated by what we might call 'the silences of philosophy'. Kant is silent about the genesis of his transcendental categories (as you have written, "the transcendental subject appears to be left frictionlessly spinning in a deontologized void, mysteriously floating in an unexplained vacuum"), while you refer to 'a mysticism**

**of negativity' surrounding the philosophies of, to take a few examples, Lacan, Sartre, and Heidegger. Paraphrasing Wilfrid Sellars, you refer to this as 'the myth of the non-given.' Please can you explain your antipathy to this kind of move in Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy?**

Negativity, nothingness, void, and so on often end up playing the role of ultimate unexplained explainer in certain Continental discourses. Invocations of one or more members of this family of notions typically have the lamentable effect of deterring the further pursuit of given trajectories of questioning. When the philosophical going gets rough and one encounters a question seemingly without an answer, one can stop short by performing the cheap and easy trick of abruptly converting the apparent lack of an answer into the answer of lack (as negativity, etc.). Is it hard to grasp how and why certain historical mutations happened when and where they did? Just appeal to the enigmatic 'sendings' of a God-like Being that itself is difficult to discern from Nothing(ness). Does it look dauntingly tough to account for the genesis of a more-than-bodily subject out of the body itself? Just posit an underived negative 'x' as mysteriously always-already there. Is the origin of language a tricky, fraught issue? Just treat its rise as an instance of creation *ex nihilo*. Abracadabra!

By my lights, such question-stopping trump cards are instances of abuse of dialectics that have a deleterious influence on philosophical inquiry, bringing a halt to investigations and snuffing out curiosity. If, as per Aristotle, philosophy begins in wonder, this is philosophy narcotizing and euthanizing itself.

Other disciplines apart from (Continental) philosophy/theory do not avail themselves of these mysticisms of negativity and myths of the non-given. Correspondingly and not by coincidence, they indeed do ask and (try to) an-

swer many of the vexing questions prematurely silenced by the sorts of unexplained explainers of which I am critical along these lines. Such extra-philosophical fields as history, economics, anthropology, and the range of the natural sciences have a lot to say about the questions stopped short by certain philosophers/theorists with talk about negativity, nothingness, void, etc. Philosophy impoverishes and starves itself if it cuts itself off from these other bodies of knowledge.

Additionally, I strongly suspect that a good number of certain types of philosophers, especially Continentally inclined ones, are stuck between, on the one hand, being too intellectually honest consciously to believe in traditional religions/theologies but, on the other hand, remaining firmly in the grip of an overwhelming need for smoke and incense, magic and mystery. For those trapped in this dilemma, negative-theology-like theoretical constructs operate as Freudian compromise formations in which belief triumphs in (thin) disguise in its conflict with disbelief. What I call 'mysticism of negativity' or 'myth of the non-given' are symptoms of the return of the spiritualist repressed wherein terms such as Being, Other, Difference, and so on substitute for God and sustain narratives that are just as anti-materialistically and anti-scientifically obscurantist as any supernaturalist religion or theology.

All of the above having been said, I by no means whatsoever try to get rid of a great deal of what is associated with philosophical/theoretical frameworks centrally featuring aspects of negativity. My Hegelian, Marxian, and Lacanian commitments should signal as much. However, not only am I convinced of the need to be significantly more selective and restrained in deploying instances of the negative – I am inclined to construe various negativities, whose existences I acknowledge, more as effects than causes, more as secondary outgrowths or by-products than primary origins

or sources. By contrast with cases of the mysticism of negativity or the myth of the non-given, I believe that many occurrences of the negative can be explanatorily gotten back behind, that these occurrences are not, as would be said in German, *unhintergebar*.

**We are undeniably witnessing a return of 1) the real, 2) the material, and 3) the biological in contemporary theory of philosophy after the dominance of language and discourse. Please can you say something about how these three terms operate within your work?**

Indeed, references to the real and the material are very much to the fore in contemporary Continental metaphysics and political theory – so much so that they are at risk of being rendered almost meaningless. But I do not see that being the case with the biological. For Catherine Malabou and me, yes, the life sciences are central to our overlapping endeavours. But, for many others who nowadays self-identify as realists and/or materialists, this does not hold. For some, physics or chemistry, rather than biology, are the key fields of natural scientific reference. Then there are those who shun the sciences of nature altogether, sticking to a staunch anti-naturalist position. For me, unqualified anti-naturalism cannot qualify as materialism. What is more, I am convinced that any viable materialist theory of subjectivity cannot avoid broadly and deeply engaging with the life sciences in particular.

That said, all three terms you list in your question are knotted together in my work. The biological is the layer of nature most immediately preceding the strata of more-than-natural subjects. Given this, I ask: How must organic nature be such that it can and does allow for the emergence out of itself of denaturalized structures and dynamics? My answer, in a nutshell, is that this nature must itself lack the unity, harmony, cohesiveness, and consistency so often projected

onto it by a multitude of philosophical and non-philosophical worldviews past and present.

Lacan's idea of the Real, the one to which I adhere, involves both materiality and negativity. On the one hand, this Real is associated (especially by the earlier Lacan) with entirely asubjective, extra-psychical matter. On the other hand, it generates out of itself the negativities of intra-material clashes, tensions, and the like. At certain key moments in his teachings, Lacan himself explicitly weaves together these aspects of the Real so as to suggest what I have come to call, echoing Hegel, 'weak nature.' I expand upon these moments in Lacan's *oeuvre* so as to form a model of a conflict-ridden bio-material Real. This Real is an ontological condition of possibility for the theories of subjectivity associated with both German idealism and psychoanalysis.

**For all the problems associated with it, there is something intuitively plausible about the idea of a (Kantian) transcendental idealism which, by your own admission is not the case with a transcendental materialism of the kind that you are developing (you have referred to the label 'transcendental materialism' as 'an oxymoronic absurdity'). Please could you say a few words about why idealism is a seemingly happier bedfellow for the transcendental than materialism?**

Because of Kant being the inventor of the transcendental, we have remained ever since in the habit of associating it with idealism. One of Kant's motivations for pinpointing and delineating the dimension of the transcendental is his desire to put to rest Humean-style skepticism. But he seeks to accomplish this while simultaneously continuing to accept the basic parameters of a dubitable mind-world divide taken for granted by Hume and a long line of other pre-Kantian figures. This leads Kant to restrict the transcendental within the confines of ideal thinking (i.e. mind as subjec-

tive) as absolutely independent of real being (i.e. world as asubjective). This restriction is the (subjective) idealism of transcendental idealism.

Starting in the mid-1790s, Schelling and Hegel, inspired by their mutual friend Hölderlin, begin contesting the subjective idealism to which Kant (as well as the Fichte of this same period) tethers the entirety of the transcendental. Schelling's and Hegel's pursuits, from early on in their intellectual itineraries, seek to subvert this idealism in various ways. Without diving into these details, suffice it to say that I utilize Schellingian and Hegelian arguments and concepts to expand the framework of transcendentalism beyond the limits of a strictly ideal subjectivity (so as to encompass materialities both natural and historical). Moreover, and again in line with Schelling and Hegel, I seek to ground this very subjectivity in pre- and non-subjective conditions for its own possibility. Therefore, what I am after here is a meta-transcendental, namely, the pre/non-subjective possibility conditions ignored by Kant for the subjective possibility conditions exclusively highlighted by Kant.

My efforts along these lines partially overlap with discussions of transcendentalism amongst Anglo-American Analytic epistemologists, metaphysicians, and Kant scholars. There is a not-insignificant body of literature in these circles, initially stimulated at the end of the 1960s by Barry Stroud's critical intervention regarding transcendental argumentative strategies, addressing the bond (or lack thereof) between the transcendental and the ideal. Authors such as Quassim Cassam, Ross Harrison, and Jay Rosenberg, for instance, offer suggestions to the effect that one can and should decouple the transcendental from the ideal. Some in this literature even propose interfacing transcendentalism with naturalism (as I do too).

Kant's fusing of the transcendental and the ideal in his tran-

scendental idealism rests upon a web of posits and presuppositions reflective of his eighteenth-century, early-modern background. As such, many elements of this web have since come to require substantial revision or even outright abandonment. A mass of philosophical and empirical developments over the course of the past two centuries raises questions for and poses objections to both Kant's subjective idealism generally as well as his insistence on the strict ideality of possibility conditions specifically.

**Roughly speaking, idealism versus materialism is seen to equate to infinite versus finite, with materialists arguing that bodily materiality and concrete existence lead to an end of speculation about infinity, eternity, immortality, and so on, while idealists counter by suggesting that we have an eternal soul, contact with the infinite, and so on. Do you manage to incorporate ideas like infinity and eternity into your transcendental materialist framework?**

As a materialist, I indeed repudiate speculations about traditional religious-spiritualist notions of immortality and eternal souls in their literal superstitious guises. But, as a non-traditional, anti-reductive materialist, I seek to preserve as metaphysically valid certain idealist references such as the infinite, the eternal, and the non-natural (so long as these references are qualified with sufficient care). Marx's historical materialism, in several of its own ways, already tries to accomplish this. Furthermore, on this set of issues, my transcendental materialism is quite close to Badiou's materialist dialectic as per *Logics of Worlds* and related texts (with Marx as a common ancestor between Badiou and me).

At the end of the 1857 'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*, Marx brings up the example of Homer's *Iliad* so as to insist upon a historical materialism that can acknowledge and ex-

plain the inextinguishable, history-traversing appeal of certain works and products. For instance, the literature, philosophy, and mathematics that emerge in ancient Greece, like all works and products, are created in specific times and places by specific human agents. That is to say, they have finite, determinate sites of historical origin. But, examples such as Homer's *Iliad*, Plato's *Republic*, and Euclid's *Elements* show that at least certain creations arising within history can and do come to exhibit a power to transcend the contexts of their births, displaying a capacity to survive repeated decontextualizations and recontextualizations across the arc of subsequent history. As instances of transhistorical dimensions emerging bottom-up out of historical loci, they could be said to show that, if only occasionally, material finitude gives rise to more-than-material infinitude, time gives birth to eternity. Although transcendental materialism insists upon the immanent temporal-historical-material roots of all things, it does not limit all things after they emerge to the temporalities-historicities-materialities of these roots. In fact, it adamantly opposes the genetic fallacies of crude historicisms and vulgar contextualisms.

As perhaps goes without saying, I do not believe that individual sentient and sapient human minds are immortal souls. Yet, at the same time, I do not maintain that everything really concrete is nothing more than the fleeting transience of perishable flesh. Human beings generate and participate in systems and movements that themselves are not bound up with the cycles of generation and corruption associated with natural organisms.

**Clearly one of the goals of your theory of transcendental materialism is to maintain a robust conception of the subject. But what is a subject, and what is an object? And how is a subject not just another object?**

The sense of this line of questioning depends in no small

part upon how one understands the term 'object.' Both in the history of philosophy as well as contemporary philosophical/theoretical developments, this term is defined in a plethora of different and sometimes incompatible ways. Given both this as well as my own focus on a theory of subjectivity, I feel that the easiest manner in which I can respond is by starting from the subject instead of the object.

Summarily stated, I attribute to subjectivity in its distinctiveness a number of features: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mindedness; like-mindedness as both inter- and trans-subjectivity; reflexive and recursive logics and patterns; spontaneity and self-determination; mediation by categories, concepts, syntax, semantics, society, history, etc. Much of this is quite philosophically traditional. Indeed, I wish to absorb the best of the idealist tradition into an anti-reductive materialism doing justice to the subjects typically better captured by idealisms.

Whatever else objects might be, I consider them to be non-subjects. Most of the natural and artificial entities one might label 'objects' do not exhibit many or any of the features of subjectivity I just listed. Hence, I have trouble seeing how a subject could be 'just another object,' unless one renders the notion of object-hood so all-encompassing that it becomes vacuous and useless. If everything is an object, then identifying something as an object is utterly uninformative and adds nothing whatsoever to one's grasp of it.

**As I understand it, you aim to generate a materialist ontology reverse engineered from a theory of the subject – one is a symptom of the other. But is this not a form of idealism insofar as it works from subjectivity to the real?**

I foreshadowed my response to this question in my answer to your third question. Marx, already in the first of his elev-

en 'Theses on Feuerbach' of 1845, calls for developing a materialism that can and does assimilate idealist insights into the agency and activities of subjects. Then, in the 1857 'Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*, with its well-known remarks on Hegel, Marx puts forward his historical materialist critique of political economy as a type of hybrid of idealism and materialism. Marx's method, avowedly inspired by Hegel's dialectical-speculative logic, is procedurally idealist. It progresses within the order of thinking starting from abstract categories and concepts, moving gradually towards increasingly close contact with the concrete real of the order of being. This methodological procedure is idealist insofar as it puts thinking before being.

But, the materialist side of Marx's historical materialism simultaneously insists on the priority and autonomy of being *vis-à-vis* thinking. In this context, the real order of social history is distinct and largely different from the ideal order of this history's categorial-conceptual reconstruction. The crucial upshot of this as regards your question is that Marx presents the possibility of combining in one's philosophical/theoretical apparatus an idealist method with a materialist content.

In this fashion, I see myself as following in Marx's footsteps. In terms of my methodological order of thinking, I proceed from denaturalized subjectivity to pre- and non-subjective nature. But, in terms of the content of the resulting materialist theory of subjectivity, I correlatively but conversely affirm a real order of being in which things unfold moving from pre- and non-subjective nature to denaturalized subjectivity (albeit, as for both Marx and Darwin, without this movement being guided by any pre-existent teleology). This theory of subjectivity not only involves a materialist ontological content, but also a philosophical integration of, among other things, Darwinian and post-Darwinian evolutionary theory as implicitly antithetical to subjective idealisms.

Anyhow, if this makes me an idealist, then Marx is an idealist too. Admittedly, a vehemently anti-reductionistic materialism that recognizes features of value in idealism might be in danger of appearing idealistic to some. But, this is a risk I am willing to run. Similarly, I am tempted to invoke the Lenin of his *Philosophical Notebooks*: better an intelligent (dialectical) idealism than a stupid materialism.

**You have referred to your work as an ‘existential materialism,’ while others have referred to it as a ‘materialist humanism.’ Please can you say something about this interplay between materialism, existentialism, and humanism? Is this closely related to your defense of the freedom of the subject against the dominance of deterministic models?**

The founding document of Renaissance humanism, Pico Della Mirandola’s 1489 ‘On the Dignity of Man,’ already anticipates existentialism as encapsulated in the early Sartre’s dictum according to which ‘existence precedes essence.’ For Pico Della Mirandola, what is distinctive about specifically human nature is that this is a peculiar natureless nature; humanity is distinguished by its essenceless essence. Hence, humanism at its very beginning hypothesizes a human nature that is not a fullness as the presence of positive features, but, by sharp contrast instead, an emptiness as the absence of such features. So too with Sartrean humanist existentialism: a first nature(lessness) *qua* an essenceless existence comes before and makes possible any and every second nature as produced rather than given. Sartre is right to situate his existentialist humanism within an orientation tracing back to Pico Della Mirandola.

‘Existential materialism’ and ‘materialist humanism’ are appropriate labels for my position insofar as I strive to naturalize in biological terms this existence-preceding-essence. Philosophically and psychoanalytically (re)interpret-

ing present-best biology, I see human bodies and brains as not-so-systematic material systems. These kludge-like, hodgepodge assemblages of incompletely harmonized (and sometimes discrepant or colliding) bits and pieces precipitated out of diverse stretches of natural history are what just so happened to have cleared the low evolutionary bar of being merely good enough to survive long enough to reproduce. This material Real of bodies-and-brains-in-pieces, to paraphrase Lacan, would be a biologically naturalized rendition of the natureless natures or essenceless existences of humanism and/or existentialism.

Admittedly, such natureless natures and essenceless existences are not enough by themselves for a thorough account of spontaneous subjects in their full-fledged freedom. Indetermination alone is not sufficient for self-determination. Nonetheless, the former is necessary for the latter.

All of this indeed involves fighting against deeply-engrained images of nature as an airtight unity in which an ironclad network of causal laws reigns supreme. Combating scientific determinisms, and doing so on scientific as well as philosophical and psychoanalytic grounds, is a crucial part of my theoretical program. Under Hegel’s shadow, I have opted for the phrase ‘weak nature’ to designate these aspects of my ontological agenda.

**Darwin is a key figure in your work, operating as it does at the interface of philosophy and the life sciences. Would it be fair to say that philosophers, or scientists for that matter, have not even begun to work out the real implications of Darwin as yet?**

Scientists have done a lot over the past one-hundred-fifty-plus years exploring the consequences of the Darwinian revolution. I would not want to downplay the vast amount of labour that already has been accomplished by them.

Likewise, Analytic philosophers also have contributed a good deal to assessing the wider conceptual ramifications of evolutionary theory.

However, the same cannot be said of Continental philosophers. So-called Continental philosophy, after Kant and Hegel as its twin fountainheads, anchors itself in a nineteenth/early-twentieth-century (un)holy trinity formed by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Whereas each member of this triumvirate registers the magnitude of Darwin's discoveries, their Continental philosophical self-declared heirs tend not to, excluding Darwin from the Marx-Nietzsche-Freud constellation. This exclusion is symptomatic of the rampant anti-naturalism of Continental philosophy – a mental affliction tracing back to German Pietism's and Romanticism's backlashes against the Enlightenment and continuing into the phenomenologies, existentialisms, critical theories, and so on of the twentieth century. Consistent with a larger tendency carelessly to collapse the scientific into the scientific, Darwin often is equated with social Darwinism and biology identified with bio-politics.

Badiou repeatedly points out that, after Kant, European philosophy loses its historically close contact with the formal sciences of pure mathematics. Badiou's work reveals many fascinating philosophical implications that come to light through engaging with some of the mathematical findings of the past two centuries. For me, the same holds for modern Darwinian and post-Darwinian biology: Continental philosophy, as it has with formal science, likewise has insisted on stubbornly neglecting life science, thereby depriving itself of opportunities to reckon with the wider theoretical reverberations of things biological.

Continentalists leaving only Analytics to explore and spell out the philosophical upshots of evolutionary biology in particular and the life sciences overall is a real pity.

Despite certain virtues of Analytic philosophy, one of its vices is its (sometimes deliberate, sometimes unknowing) neglect of the rich resources of post-Kantian dialectics. I am convinced that historical and dialectical materialism (of which transcendental materialism is a permutation) are uniquely well-suited to facilitate the philosophical digestion of numerous aspects of the life sciences.

Currently, one of my ideas for an eventual project is a book on Darwin. In the near-term future, I have a few other projects to finish. But, I anticipate a little further down the road getting around to carrying out a detailed, focused examination of Darwinian evolutionary theory. This might turn out to provide the phylogenetic complement to my current focus on the ontogeny of subjects.

## 11: The Finite-Infinite Relation

### *A Conversation with Simon O'Sullivan*

*In this conversation, Simon O'Sullivan explores the aesthetic (as opposed to epistemic) 'catastrophe' touched on in the introduction via a longstanding philosophical tradition that he unites under the title 'production of subjectivity' which resists the strong Kantian separation of phenomena and noumena, positing instead a continuum between the finite and the infinite. Kant may have kept the noumenon at arm's length from reason, but O'Sullivan explores the other philosophical resources that have been utilized to access it, and in doing so questions the very idea of neatly definable limits to philosophical enquiry.*

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**You wrote a book called *On the Production of Subjectivity*. I was hoping you could give an outline of what you mean by the production of subjectivity.**

The phrase itself comes from Félix Guattari, a psychoanalyst and writer who collaborated extensively with Gilles Deleuze. For him the 'production of subjectivity' concerns,

in part at least, the question of how we live our lives and, indeed, produce who and what we are. This was part of his larger interest in ‘ethico-aesthetics’, which is best understood as a kind of paradigm outside the more scientific and narrowly technological one, and related to this practice of self-creation. In my book, I took the framework that Guattari offers and developed it alongside some of the late writings of Michel Foucault on technologies of the self, as well as other thinkers who I felt fitted within this paradigm, very broadly speaking. The book, then, is really to do with how we might produce ourselves *differently* or, you might say, how we can move from subjection – or being subject-to – to what Deleuze and Guattari would call subjectivation. For me this is all intimately related to the ways in which capitalism, for want of a better word, goes ‘all the way down.’ It struck me that the terrain, if you like, of any struggle against dominating forces wasn’t just out there, it was in here too; in our bodies, forming and shaping our desires, our values, and so on. So the book was an attempt to draw together a whole archive of theoretical resources that I thought might be useful for excavating/inventing another way of being. I was keen not to be partisan, and not necessarily to follow already existing camps, but to try out some creative couplings, force some encounters between these different resources and then diagram some of the compatibilities and syntheses. I mean diagramming quite concretely; there are quite a few of my own diagrams in the book (alongside those from other thinkers) that themselves arose from drawings done in a pedagogical setting.

So all the philosophers I do engage with in the book, whether it’s Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Foucault, or Deleuze are, I think, attending to concrete problems related to the subject or subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari especially seemed to offer up a kind of philosophy that was about life – a pragmatics of sorts for actually living life otherwise. These philosophers are also involved in thinking about time

and temporality, and I became interested in the question of how to get out of time, if I can put it like that, how to live against a certain standardised, homogenised experience of time. There is a sense in which each of these figures I just mentioned had found a way of exploring or experimenting with temporality, or, at least, re-conceptualising it. I figured this, very broadly, as a kind of ‘accessing’ of the infinite, for example via the gap between stimulus and response in Bergson, Spinoza’s progression through the three forms of knowledge, or the eternal return in Nietzsche. It was as if each of these thinkers had a secret, something important to say about all this, and what I wanted to do was bring some of these insights together, try and produce something composite – a composite diagram – between them all.

**You mention Foucault. A lot of people find his shift from questions of power and its relation to knowledge to his later writings on technologies of the self to be a bit bizarre, like a kind of dandyism or even narcissism disconnected from anything beyond the self. Could you say a bit about this trajectory in his thought?**

For me, one of the interesting things about Foucault was the way in which in his later writing he attended to a particular relation to force, and, indeed, the possibility of a kind of ‘folding-in’ of external forces – a folding-in of the outside. He felt that despite the problems we faced in being subject to the forces of neo-liberalism there were ways of producing a certain space of freedom by making autonomous decisions about how one lives one’s life. As you say, this was the substance of Foucault’s interest in the Ancients and their various ‘spiritual exercises’, but also Baudelaire and dandyism – the whole ‘life as a work of art’ attitude and orientation. But, again, in interview especially, Foucault also related this to our own contemporary moment and the impasses we are in, politically speaking. I found this incredibly powerful, and, in fact, was also drawn to Jacques Lacan’s work in this

area – despite the more obvious differences from Foucault – about the goal of psychoanalysis being about becoming a cause of yourself (you find this in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*). It seemed to me that this was also a crucial factor in Spinoza's *Ethics* in which he describes a kind of retroactive claiming of those forces that had caused you. To bring this down to earth a little, these were all questions that, I felt, were also related to my own life as it was then. I had basically reached a sort of impasse myself and so this question of freedom was very much a lived problem for me. So it wasn't abstract or, at least, not abstract in one sense anyway – it was about how to start producing my life differently, or what is my own production of subjectivity.

**Your book is built around what you term the finite-infinite relation. This suggests that it could be read as a response to Kant's famous barrier separating the finite from the infinite or the phenomenal from the noumenal. Is there a sense in which you were reacting against this barrier?**

I think that's right. The gambit of the book, at least in one sense, was to look at what you call the barrier or the curtain between phenomena and noumena, and then look at ways to rethink this relationship. It's a philosophical investigation into this other tradition that resists the strong Kantian separation of phenomena and noumena, and that instead posits a continuum between the finite and the infinite. This relates to what I just said about temporality, but also to the production of subjectivity insofar as the typical subject only comes into being because it raises these shutters against the infinite (or, indeed, is defined by these shutters). I was interested in another model where these shutters were less fixed, where we might 'open up' further to the world or universe. We could take as an example of this kind of framework Deleuze's famous description of the tick: its world is composed of three coordination points – heat, light, and smell.

So in the vast universe the tick only has these three coordination points related to its survival needs. The tick's world is, as it were, subtracted from this vastness. But thinking about this in relation to us, as we are, these coordination points are mutable. Our capacities for being affected, and to affect, can be increased to the point where we further and further approximate the infinite. This more or less Spinozist/Bergsonian idea was particularly attractive to me and became one of the key bases for the book, alongside the more explicitly Guattarian angle.

**At one point in the book you write that you were seeking a non-theological approach to what you term 'the problem of finitude'. Could you say a bit about what you mean by finitude here as it can be used in quite a few different ways?**

Yes, I use finitude in different ways, but, generally, I was concerned with finite existence, and also the alienated subject split off from the world. So the way in which I work with this problem is, I think, different from the way certain other contemporary thinkers (associated with Speculative Realism) are currently working with it. I'll give a couple of examples. So the 'new' Promethean philosophers like Ray Brassier and (though less so) Reza Negarestani would see finitude as an accident of sorts that can be overcome by a kind of project of remaking ourselves (utilising technology for example). Basically they refuse a sanctity of the given over the made, which would be at least one definition of religion, and, in its place, accentuate and affirm the human capacity for invention and construction. Another prominent thinker who is addressing this problem is Quentin Meillassoux, but for him the way beyond finitude lies in mathematics and the possibility of thinking the absolute in a manner that breaks with the finitude of the subject. So both the Promethean philosophers and Meillassoux think that a particular kind of abstract intelligence is the way to overcome the problem

of finitude, whereas my starting point in the book was that we always already *are* in the great outdoors, part of the infinite; and yet for some reason we don't quite see that, for some reason our consciousness occludes that. So there is a sense in which what I call the 'subject-as-is', in other words the subject that is basically an accumulation of habit (and reactivity), is condemned to finitude, and the challenge is to find a way round this for the subject, the possibility of a subject-to-come, as it were.

**In your book you use a lot of terms like pre-human, post-human, trans-human, in-human, a-personal, non-corporeal to describe this subject-to-come. What do you mean by these kinds of terms?**

In general the human is a particular configuration or itself a diagram of a mode of being, a habitual way of being in the world, and I am interested in what other diagrams or configurations there might be. This goes beyond the philosophers I write about to other thinkers and practices that I also look to. At the moment I'm working on a book on fiction and what I call 'fictioning' which is partly about these other models for other ways of life (especially as they are incarnated and embodied in different art practices and performance). But there are others. Take Buddhism for example. One of the key fetters in Buddhism is the habitual fixed sense of self that operates as an anchoring fiction. But this fiction can be loosened and one can begin to see the edges of the self, and then explore certain terrains beyond the self, and, with that, other patterns of being. This idea that there might be another way of being outside the subject-as-is has also been explored to a certain extent in neuroscientific accounts of the illusion of the self, for example in Thomas Metzinger's work on the ego tunnel and Ray Brassier's work on what he calls the 'nemocentric' subject. So although the terms you list have specific functions in my book, they are all pointing to the question of whether there's another way

of being beyond the typical, the habitual, the normal – basically beyond the finite which is constraining and produces so many problems.

**Where does philosophy itself fit into all of this? Once you're in the realm of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge or Bergson's intuition, there's a sense in which we have gone beyond concepts and the limits of what we typically call philosophy.**

There's no clear-cut answer to a question like that for me; certainly it would seem, ultimately, that concepts give way to something else in the two cases you mention. But I am also a Deleuzian, and go along with his definition of philosophy as a form of concept creation. So for Deleuze concept creation is not to be understood as simply approximating more and more of the real but is rather experimental and inventive; a kind of construction of the real as it were. It's an undertaking that results in more and more expansive ways of being in the world. This is not to say that there is no limit to conceptual thought; this is where affect, intuition, and other kinds of practices come in. Concepts can certainly build platforms and be incredibly creative, but at the same time any philosophy that emphasises only concepts, just like any philosophy that emphasises only discourse, neglects vast panoramas of experience. So one of the central ideas of the book is that as subjects or as thinking bodies we're *far* more complex than conceptual thought. To paraphrase Deleuze's book on Spinoza, the body surpasses the knowledge we have of it and thought surpasses our consciousness of it. Nietzsche says something similar with his idea that consciousness is like this little figure riding on this *massive* unconscious knowledge which isn't some sort of mysterious Freudian thing below the bar, but is simply what else is going on (in the body) that your consciousness thinks it knows but which actually outstrips this knowledge. This is where you get the Spinozist injunction that we don't even

know what a body is, we don't know what thought is. This is really what Spinoza means by ethics. It's not about morality, about right and wrong or good and bad, but, rather, concerns the question: what am I capable of becoming?

**There is a sense in which joy in Spinoza is a kind of 'inhuman' affect that lies right at the heart of his ethical project. Joy or affirmation is a central topic in your book so I was hoping you could say something about this.**

For Spinoza, joy is not a kind of ego-state like happiness, or not only this anyway. Rather it is a kind of ethico-ontological principle through which one can increase one's knowledge, when this is both conceptual and bodily. In other words one can only acquire knowledge through *agreement*, through certain things coming together and agreeing. These joyful encounters increase my capacity to act and, with that, also produce a certain kind of knowledge. This can't be separated from Spinoza's monistic ontology insofar as joy arises from agreement and an overcoming of separation. You may find dualists disagreeing with him on this, but this isn't just about what philosophical coat you happen to be wearing; rather you can test it in your experience. Does joy come from these productive encounters? Does it take you somewhere? This idea also has a place in Nietzsche and his idea of the eternal return, this sudden inhuman affirmation that takes us beyond ourselves, beyond nihilism and into a sense of cosmic communion, albeit one that 'we' don't experience.

Thinkers like Spinoza and Deleuze bring the body back in, bring affect back in, bring the passions back in, focusing on these kind of bodily forms of intelligence, whereas philosophy *per se* is quite often seen as involving an intelligence contra the body. Anyone who has ever engaged in any kind of work on themselves understands this: that the intelligence that does all the reasoning is a very small part of the process. Having said that, there is no point in pitting affect,

the body, the libidinal and so on *against* reason or concepts. In Spinoza, for example, we find concepts (understanding what things have in common) built off the back of affects which in turn produce affects, and so on. It's a circular relationship, or perhaps that should be spiral as this knowledge certainly develops incrementally.

**We've discussed Kant's dualism of phenomena and noumena, and ways to break down or overcome this dualism. But it's very difficult to let go of the idea of the noumenon or the transcendent as something separate from the world around us. Could you say something about how we can move beyond this longstanding philosophical split between two worlds?**

One of the things that attracted me to Deleuze was his re-configuration of these splits like transcendent-immanent, noumenon-phenomenon, finite-infinite, and so on through his distinction between the actual and the virtual. So the idea – very simply and reductively – is that we are surrounded by virtualities only some of which we actualise due to our perceptual mechanisms and habits, but crucially this virtual realm is not some other transcendent place, it's here all around us. As Deleuze might put it, the virtual is 'folded' into the actual and vice versa. So the actual-virtual distinction does not relate to other worlds or insurmountable barriers but to differences in perspective (when this is very broadly construed). So these aren't really dualisms at all. The tendency to split one world off from another, whether it's this world versus the world of pure forms or the next life or whatever it may be, is, for me, religious thinking, and this is what thinkers like Deleuze are challenging. This is what immanence means to me. So these thinkers, philosophers of immanence we might call them, are all suggesting that the potential for life comes from where we are now, and this was a very exciting thought for me.

**You mentioned earlier that questions of temporality were closely linked to questions of subjectivity, and to overcoming the finitude of the subject. In your book you mention Nietzsche praising the creativity of idleness and Walter Benjamin extolling the virtues of boredom, and obviously boredom was a mood that Heidegger wrote about as having huge transformative potential. But these kinds of contemplative states seem opposed to the more political goals of resistance that motivated you in writing your book. Have I made a false dichotomy here?**

In *Two Sources of Religion and Morality*, Bergson writes about the Christian mystic, and what he says is that the Christian mystic goes off into his mystical states, breaks habits, experiences cosmic memory and all the rest of it, but then *returns* to the world and is active within it, and that it is in fact this superabundant activity that characterises them. I think this is important: introspection and action in the world are not, it seems to me, incompatible. Far from it. I also think contemplation or introspective technologies can be a strategic retreat, but one that involves a confrontation with one's own habitual reactive mechanisms, so it's like retreating to a laboratory to work out what that reality really is. To come back to Foucault, there is the sense in which insight or knowledge gained through technologies of the self reveal the world to you very intimately insofar as its desires and values are incarnated in your body and mind. This knowledge can give you a greater freedom to act in the world precisely through being able to resist it more effectively. So being able to resist certain stimuli that ask you to be productive on one level (I'm thinking of TV, 9-5 living, careers, and the rest of it) allows you to access much richer depths of productivity and creativity.

My own experience is, and in this sense I agree with Bergson's point about the mystic, that people who are involved

seriously with inquiry into the self and introspective technologies tend to be the ones who are most active. So I don't really go along with the idea of contemplation as a retreat in the sense of a disengagement from the world. As far as boredom goes, I was interested in the idea that slowing down or 'stopping the world' allows other things to come to the fore – and with that the possibility of another mode of being. I should also say that this was what I found especially inspiring in Deleuze and Guattari's books: they offered a whole selection of different modes of organization, alongside a different account of how subjectivity was actually produced (as itself a kind of side effect of what they call 'desiring production').

**So where do you feel that something like production of subjectivity is actually being practised?**

If the production of subjectivity is used as a banner to talk about people who are really working on themselves, trying to work on their habits, trying to explore other modes of being, all these kinds of things, then it would be fair to say that it's not necessarily happening in religion, it's not necessarily happening in academia, it's not really happening in the art world. When I was writing that book it was only in certain forms of western Buddhism that I found it (I first read Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* – another important inspiration for my book – in a reading group on a Buddhist retreat), but there are always certain kinds of art scenes, and certain sub-cultural scenes where something like this is going on, to say nothing of political groups and activist collectives. So it's always going on but you don't find it necessarily in professional or academic philosophy departments. I think this partly has to do with what Foucault identified as the Cartesian moment and the paradigm of knowledge and thinking in the West that defers to science and objectivity, so spirituality (which is a term Foucault actually uses in his later work) or other forms of introspective

or ethico-aesthetic knowledge come to be seen as a bit soft or wishy-washy. But of course it's not. To take meditation as the most obvious example, it's not about drifting off; it's hard, in fact, it can be very hard. It's also very precise, like a science – or technology anyway.

**To return to the question of finitude, there is a strong sense in which the finite-infinite relation touches upon questions of death or mortality. People say that death is something of a taboo subject, that it's not something we really talk about, so do you have anything to say about its place in modern society?**

While Kantian finitude is primarily related to the limits of our knowledge, I was interested in something more basic about our existential situation. Looking back on the book from where I am now I think it's pretty obvious that I was attempting to address the issue of death, or at least this was part of my motivation, albeit not entirely conscious at the time. Put bluntly, was there a way around this brute fact of our existence? I think Spinoza himself said something similar about his motivation for writing the *Ethics* – that he wanted to see if he could find something in life that was eternal. I've mentioned Buddhism a couple of times and this was also, of course, a key motivation for the Buddha-to-be, whose path to enlightenment was set in motion by his realisation about old age, sickness, and death. In fact, for me, there's something profoundly similar about these two – Spinoza and the Buddha – almost as if they arrive at the same place but via different directions.

More generally I would agree with what you said: death is the one thing that's certain, it surrounds us, but, generally, no one talks about it. Looking around you, you'd think no one was going to die, but it's the horizon of everything. For me there's something important about facing that reality and seeing what follows from it. This relates to what we

discussed earlier about philosophy often being in the head, being about concepts, being about discourse, as this can, of course, be just another way – albeit a very sophisticated one – of avoiding all that kind of stuff. But it's also true that thinkers like Spinoza really do open up a different take on the problem of our finitude, they offer a different ethics for life which is also a kind of experimentation with life. In particular with Spinoza's third kind of knowledge there's a sense in which the boundaries between self and world dissolve, or, rather, as if we identify with the world rather than our limited sense of self (and thus our finitude). It's in this sense also that Spinoza suggests a kind of eternity that can be experienced *within* finitude – not immortality, as Spinoza wasn't interested in life after death, but a certain sense of the eternal that is here and now, but needs to be actualised.

## 12: Transcendental Authority

### *A Conversation with John Ó Maoilearca*

*In this conversation, John Ó Maoilearca (in English: Mullarkey) challenges the kind of transcendental authority claimed by thinkers like Kant (or, as he argues, all philosophers), and develops a model of what he calls radical or absolute immanence, whose most consistent practitioner is the contemporary French philosopher François Laruelle. Ó Maoilearca discusses how Laruelle's non-philosophy extends Kant's critique of metaphysics to philosophy as a whole, rejecting philosophy's totalizing gesture and laying the ground for a new and radically democratic vision of thinking.*

*John Ó Maoilearca is professor in film and television at Kingston University, specializing in modern French philosophy, especially the work of François Laruelle and Henri Bergson. He has published a number of books including Bergson and Philosophy, Post-Continental Philosophy, and most recently, All Thoughts are Equal: Laruelle and Nonhuman Philosophy.*

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**Some people argue that continental philosophy is primarily defined by its relationship to Kant and his transcendental legacy such that it is often simply called post-Kantian philosophy. Do you agree with this formulation?**

There is a sense in which the term 'post-Kantian philosophy' is somewhat anachronistic if it's going to be used as a brush to paint the last 200 years of European philosophy. As someone like Simon Glendinning argues, even the notion of 'continental philosophy' itself is just a name for the Anglophone reception of European ideas. And so what

counts as ‘continental’ as opposed to whatever the ‘Other’ is to the ‘continental’ is always going to be something that is flexible, changing, and strategically constructed. It’s akin to Edward Said’s argument about Orientalism – that attempt by the West, the Occident, to create its alter-ego, which is really only to mirror itself and sustain its own identity through a ‘Big Other’ – the ‘Orient’ (to mix things up with a bit of Lacan here). So, arguably, continental philosophy arose within a certain tradition of Anglo-American analytic thinking as a way to conceal the internal differences to that tradition that might actually suggest that there is no one ‘analytic’ tradition at all – *at least we’re not that!* Fixing the extra determination of ‘post-Kantian’ as an adequate descriptor of all philosophy on the Continent since 1804 only adds to the illusion. Certainly, a lot has happened in French and German philosophy *after* Kant, much of which was and remains neglected outside of France and Germany (neo-Thomism, French spiritualism, French epistemology of science, *lebensphilosophie*, and so on) but that does not mean it was *because* of Kant – in a kind of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy: post Kant *ergo propter* Kant!

Also, there is a good deal of institutional and cultural politics related to the divide. Michael Dummett placed the division of continental and analytic thought much later than Kant in the divergent trajectories of Frege and Husserl at the turn of the twentieth century: so whereas Frege wants to place philosophy back on firm foundations through the objectivity of language and logic, Husserl takes philosophy in the direction of subjective perception. Kant doesn’t really feature at all in Dummett’s telling of the story of the analytic-continental divide. And then of course there’s the fact that Kant was rehabilitated in the analytic tradition in the 1950s, mainly through the work of Peter Strawson (he had previously been regarded as mostly out of bounds on these shores). So at this point an analytic version of Kant emerged, and we have subsequently seen an analytic Hegel emerge as well.

**The first philosopher you wrote on was Henri Bergson, and much of his work could be read as pushing against the limits set by Kant’s philosophy. Please could you say something about Bergson’s attempt to transcend the transcendental?**

The general theme that runs throughout his philosophy is the distinction between the real and the possible (or conditions of possibility). And this is very much an anti-Kantian theme as he feels that we can never set *any* conditions of possibility as to what is generated by the real itself *other than by retrospection* – a kind of causal hindsightedness. The conditions of possibility are those that *we can deduce* by modelling the human mind and the limits of the human mind, which in turn gives us the putatively necessary conditions of possibility for X, Y, and Z. But that is entirely anthropocentric (and even then, only on a certain model of *Anthropos*). So Bergson’s is very much an *evolutionary* epistemology, for the mind is not set, and what it is possible for the mind to think, X, Y, or Z, is not set either. For the mind’s own evolution or mutation is generated by the real. This is a clear reversal of the Kantian-Copernican formula in which the (possibilities of) mind conditions the real. In Bergson’s picture, we know what can be done only *after* things happen – our power of conceptualisation is indeed limited in that way. A journalist once asked Bergson what he felt the ‘great dramatic work of tomorrow would be’, and he replied that such a future work is not yet possible, but that, when it takes place, it ‘will have been possible!’ In other words, a work of art only becomes ‘retrospectively or retroactively possible’ due to its reality – the real makes the possible, not the other way around. And the same can be said for thought and philosophy. Yet that doesn’t mean that our standard forms of thinking cannot be expanded, but rather that they cannot be expanded in any *speculative* way – we cannot speculate about how our own powers of speculation or conceptualisation (or imagination) will change, how the mind will mutate.

For Bergson, as a process philosopher, everything is mobile or in flux (albeit at different speeds), whereas Kant is basically Platonizing the human mind (hypostatizing and immobilising it): here is what the human mind can do, this is our best model of it, and that's as good as it gets. Kant hypostatizes one kind of mind as the only kind of (thinkable) mind. Hence, there is no distinction between the transcendental and transcendence: the former is the elevation of one image of mind, covertly rendering it transcendent over other kinds of minds. However, a slightly more radical Kant emerges in the third *Critique* which has become a favourite for many continental philosophers as Kant's aesthetic notions like 'the sublime' are used to upend and subvert the rather static approach of the first *Critique*. What emerges in these readings is a kind of 'radical Kant' as opposed to the 'accountant Kant'. The official picture is challenged by the 'dark side' of Kant that emerges in the third *Critique* with all the possibilities of inverting and transforming earlier parts of his critical philosophy.

**You specialise in modern French philosophy. Do you feel that there is a distinctive shape of modern French thought in relation to limits?**

The French have a certain style, and part of that style you might call 'the hyperbolic gesture'. So, there's a certain image of the typical Anglophone philosopher – sober (at least in public), measured, using qualifications and conditionals in his or her texts, contextualising those texts, and so on; whereas the French gesture seems to involve grandiose, over-the-top, totalizing statements such as: 'All philosophy since 1950 has been X', or 'all human being is Y', or 'all art is Z' such that to deconstruct a particular philosopher or kind of philosophy in the French style is also, *ipso facto*, to have critiqued the *entire* history of metaphysics or all anthropology or all art! To take a body of work, homogenize it, give it an essence, and then overcome it – this is part of a hyper-

bolic style of French thinking that creates limits in order to go beyond them. (Note the performative contradiction in what I have just done here, saying that 'all French philosophy is....' I must be more French than I thought.)

**But despite all these attempts to transcend the tradition, the thinkers you focus on tend to be philosophers of immanence. How do we reconcile these two seemingly opposed orientations?**

When I wrote *Post-Continental Philosophy*, I was interested in those thinkers who claimed to be espousing the notion of radical or *absolute* immanence. Once you look at the notion of transcendence, you find them all united in defending an anti-representationalist approach. So, according to representationalism, the philosopher (or some kind of ideal mind) is able to transcend the world or the real or nature, and form a judgement or representation of it – classically a God's eye view or a view from nowhere. But for these thinkers, this ideal has a moral and political edge to it, almost to the point of saying that representationalism is quasi-fascistic. Whereas if you are properly immersed in life or nature or the real or matter, and you're not trying to leap out of your own skin to stand apart (to represent), *then* you're practicing a philosophy of immanence.

To take François Laruelle as an example: for him transcendence is something philosophers attempt, and by doing so they are trying to form an authority or what he calls a 'self-sufficiency'. So when a philosopher comes to a body of material like history or art, they create a philosophy *of* history or a philosophy *of* art – *they* are the ones who are the experts or the authority on the fundamental concepts of that field – beauty, taste, or factuality, memory, etc. Artists work with materials (paint, stone, light), but they don't *understand* what they're doing *fundamentally* – they don't know what beauty is or what distinguishes art from non-

art. It's the *philosopher* who does that, and can do it in any number of fields. There's always this *transcendent* approach in philosophy, which for Laruelle is a form of authority, it's a form of power, *and* it's an illusion made by philosophy in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: it selects the artwork that will fulfil its image of what counts as great art or beauty, for all *art*. So, in this sense, the French philosopher is only a more open, honest variant of every philosopher (irrespective of origin): they all totalise. But it should be noted that for Laruelle this is a gesture of thought first and foremost – the philosophical gesture is not owned only by those we officially designate 'philosophers', for even so-called 'non-philosophers' can be tempted into performing the same philosophical gesture, by making their thought *the* authority (many physicists seem to be doing it today).

As a consequence, it doesn't only happen when someone from the philosophy department goes over to the art department and starts pontificating on the nature of beauty and taste; it can even be when the artist, in a kind of spontaneous, Platonizing moment, starts to think about the *essential* nature of what she or he is doing. This takes her away from the work, so rather than letting the work *itself* generate ideas (although exactly what this would involve is another question) she starts to think: '*This* is beauty' (or good taste or whatever else). And as soon as that gesture of finding the example which comes to *stand for all* occurs, a philosophy emerges, and we find ourselves in territory that is undemocratic and elbows out other theoretical positions (be they officially 'philosophical' or of other kinds). So the strange thing about philosophy as a gesture within thought (whether it is done by an 'authorised' philosopher or not), is that it has this self-appointing circular authority that will always justify itself because it has selected *this* example as precisely an example of what beauty or good taste is; but in the end it's always based on one selection, a transcendental *choice*. There's always this choice or decision to be

made as to what counts, and then it is made to stand for all. Deleuze's philosophy of cinema defines cinema by selecting a certain number of films that fit the theory, so he doesn't include Woody Allen films as they don't fit his model of what counts as proper cinema: they have to be excluded or denied as *not* properly cinematic. Philosophy's always circular in this way – it always loads the dice in such a manner that it always gets the result it needs. This is not conspiratorial or anything of the kind: different philosophers offer competing models, but what they can't avoid is mounting exclusive truth-claims for their particular theory that then leaves no room for others.

**Is there not already quite a well-established weariness for this kind of totalising move in philosophy, say in the work of Richard Rorty?**

There's certainly a well-established tradition of anti-philosophy, like Wittgenstein (who seemed to think of philosophy as a kind of illness of language and thinking) or Quine or Rorty. So someone like Rorty would hand all knowledge of the natural world back to the scientists and content himself as a philosopher conducting neo-liberal conversations on value, politics, and morality. However, *that gesture itself* is also a gesture of authority. It's saying: "I can now tell you scientists what great work you're doing. Off you go! You physicists understand the nature of the fundamental make-up of the universe, and you neurologists can solve the mind-body problem. We're not going to get in your way." But even this seeming gesture of docility or submission comes from a false modesty – it comes from a position of assumed power over knowledge.

**But if philosophy steps aside as a discipline with this transcendental authority, won't another discipline take it up, and possibly for the worse?**

Here's the idea (according to this way of thinking): what if authority in thought *is* the very form of philosophy? Remember: it's not a disciplinary thing, it's this particular gesture in thought (that indeed does amass retrospectively over history to become a discipline, but one with no fixed identity, save for this gesture). So group X (the physicists, the neurologists, the economists...) will then become the new philosophers. Hence, when physicists start talking about the God particle, *they* are acting *as* philosophers. The early modern philosophers like Spinoza and Leibniz were all working in natural philosophy (which we now call physics), so they wouldn't have seen the distinction between philosophy and the sciences as we do today. And it can work both ways: you get philosophers who come along and 'baptize' disciplines, like Alain Badiou, when he aggrandizes mathematical set theory as an 'ontology of the multiple' that can tell us what reality is, or you get physicists like Stephen Hawking who claim that philosophy is dead and that physicists no longer need it. So in this picture *both* Badiou and Hawking are acting as philosophers, both are claiming a transcendental authority over thought and knowledge.

### Is the alternative to this not a kind of weak pluralism?

There are definitely philosophies of humility and plurality that can indeed amount to no more than a weak pluralism (the relativist idea of 'anything goes'). Laruelle can be seen to belong to this approach, but only in part. Standard relativism is also another kind of authority. For Laruelle, though, the idea of an equality of thinking (or democracy of thought) has to be re-performed again and again, it has to keep mutating in order to avoid falling into a kind of prescriptivism. So, while the kind of ideas we have just been discussing – that *all* philosophers behave this way – could be seen as simply *more philosophy*, as just another attempt to stand outside all thought and adopt a transcend-

ent position, this would only be true *if* the same point was being made in the same form throughout. The challenge is to continually mutate one's position, to practice this kind of pluralism differently in different situations. This is what 'transcendental' means in Laruelle's early work – this constant mutation of thought. Because, even when it's being practised by authoritarians, philosophy keeps changing: one minute the most important philosophy is logical positivism, then ordinary language, then naturalized phenomenology, and so on. The one thing 'proper' philosophers can agree on is that they can't agree on what counts as proper philosophy! There is no consensus in philosophy in the way that there is a consensus around what proper chemistry looks like in the twenty-first (as opposed to nineteenth century). Philosophers are continually contesting their own identity, but, interestingly, the contested identities all end up with only one constant idea held in common: 'We are the ones who know exactly what philosophy is'

**Laruelle is presented as practicing a philosophy of immanence in the most consistent manner insofar as he would claim to have broken out of this circular gesture within thought that you discussed earlier.**

Yes, that's true. For instance, let's consider his criticisms of Deleuze. Even if Deleuze is often represented as the philosopher's philosopher of immanence and he argued that everything was on a plane of immanence implying a kind of equality of all beings, nonetheless it is *his* model of the plane of immanence – with all the elements of the 'virtual and actual', all the various technical terms that make up a 'Deleuzian philosophy' – it is *this* whole architecture or structure of the real as defined and hierarchized by Deleuze that, for Laruelle, makes it still a philosophy that attempts to transcend, that makes a claim to explain the real to which it alone – in its specific form – is adequate. And yet Laruelle still uses Deleuze's philosophy in his own work, as his

own material. Now this may sound a bit over the top, but we need to take into account the performative or mutating element of Laruelle's philosophy, as it is essential to it. It *has* to be contextual, situational, it has to mutate and constantly respond to different materials.

Laruelle claims to use other philosophies as a kind of art material in the way that other artists use paint, metal, light, or stone: he is taking the philosophers and their works, but bracketing out their claims to authority, their claims to represent the world and reality. So he takes raw philosophical material and works with it, transforming it until it has been stripped of all transcendent baggage. We can see a similar idea in Kierkegaard's treatment of Hegel, as he takes a body of philosophical work and mutates it and ironizes it until it emerges as a kind of crypto-comical Hegelian philosophy performed by Kierkegaard. But *even Kierkegaard* has a serious intent – he has a *theory of irony* and his own system of stages onto which he re-maps Hegelian teleology, whereas with Laruelle there is no optimal model. Although he uses a lot of different models – quantum mechanics, mystical thinking, photography – these are simply models for generating thought rather than superior attempts to capture reality. They are non-standard philosophical forms of thinking. Neither does he use a model simply to *illustrate* philosophical ideas, as if it is simply an illustration of Kant or Sartre or Husserl. Rather, it is *its own thing*, its own kind of philosophical thinking. So he's exploring these different models of thought as a way of also re-thinking what philosophy is in itself, or what it could be. And this includes his use of Deleuze's philosophy.

**The title of your recent book is *All Thoughts Are Equal*, which links to Laruelle's wish to liberate thinking from philosophy. Could we say that the goal of philosophy is simply to think?**

We can see this emphasis on thought and thinking largely as a twentieth century artefact, with Bergson and Heidegger especially focused on thinking as the key to what philosophy does, but why use thinking as opposed to an origin in wonder (like Aristotle) or will to power (like Nietzsche)? Or one can take the existentialists talk of action as a particular kind of philosophical enterprise – we *do* things, we don't just think.

**So the ideal of philosophical thought as rigorous, consistent, non-contradictory, and so on, is not fixed and transcendent?**

What is even meant by this notion of rigour? It brings to mind *rigor mortis* - death, rigidity. Or rather, it's thrown out there increasingly as a value-term, but one with little content, more a kind of emotivist expletive of approval, a 'hurrah' for X. If you look at the work of Luce Irigaray, on the other hand, you find writing that is quasi-poetic, fluid, elemental in its imagery, and notions of rigour (or 'robustness') do not come into it. But of course it's often discounted as 'only' feminist poetry – it doesn't really count as philosophy (for a certain model of philosophy). But such evaluations are always parochial. There's always going to be someone more rigorous, more hard-core than you – with only pure mathematicians occupying the position of top dog. This attempt to copy the rigour and logic of mathematics is of course the kind of thing that philosophy, at least since Descartes, has been in thrall to, yet this has led to numerous dead ends consisting of pure abstractions wandering in a Platonist after-life. Rigour equals death.

**But philosophy seems defined by the idea that there is a kind of thinking that is superior to others – think of Hannah Arendt calling Adolf Eichmann 'thoughtless' or Heidegger writing that the most thought-provoking thought in our thought-provoking time is that we are**

**still not thinking. So surely there must be some criterion for success in thinking?**

In this attempt to democratize thought – which is not to have a philosophy *of* democracy but to actually think thoughts *democratically* – there is an immanent criterion for judgement or evaluation. And this immanent criterion is precisely: the more democratic the thought *in practice*, the higher value it has. So the thought that thinks of *itself* as ‘this is thinking, but that is not’, creates the hierarchy and positions *itself* right at the bottom because of its totalizing gesture. And this is about *practice and situation*: it’s not just about making the bald statement ‘I am a pluralist’ without unpacking what that means in every concrete situation – a situational ethics of thought if you like. So it has to be mutated or recreated or performed anew in different situations depending on who you’re with, who you’re thinking about, who you’re thinking alongside. Is it a human, is it a non-human? Because if you start saying things like: ‘Everything we think as humans counts as equal’, then the question arises as to what you count as human (which has a considerable philosophical lineage involving numerous inclusions and exclusions). And then animals, robots, Martians – do they think or do they not think (and in what way)? All of this has to be kept in play in any situation or context in which you practice this pluralism or equality, and in this situation the gesture that creates inequality is the one that auto-reduces in value. This is the place for judgement or evaluation, immanent within a performance.

**In your book you discuss the materiality of thought quite extensively. What are the implications of this?**

When discussing the materiality of thought it is easy to jump straight to the idea that this means that thought is somehow contained entirely within the brain and that neurobiology tells us how it works – but this is *not* the sense

in which I refer to the materiality of thought. Rather, if we are to understand thought as material, as a material thing rather than an immaterial representation, and in a pluralist and non-reductive fashion, then a material practice, such as art, is actually also a thought of its own and is capable of forcing new thoughts upon us, and so can properly be regarded as philosophical (understood here non-standardly as *one* bona fide kind of thought rather than an authority over other kinds of thought). This is perfectly feasible or thinkable as part of the democracy of thought. This process very much brings thought and thinking down to earth as it overturns the notion of an immaterial thought understood as a transcendent and authoritarian representation. The gesture of pluralizing thought or making it immanent serves to remove the kind of transcendent *withdrawal* that allows certain kinds of thought to think that it has achieved the God’s eye view, or the view from nowhere. So for Laruelle, such withdrawal is something the (standard) philosophical gesture adopts in order to establish a certain kind of authority, whereas if you pluralize your position within a continual set of mutations, then this withdrawal can only ever be provisional. The distance is eliminated as you have to return to the object and the world. In this sense, the practice is difficult and painful as you know that you can never finally arrive, you will never arrive at something sufficient (the need to adapt to the situation is indefinite). It will always mutate and develop and we will only know what it is when it’s happening. We can’t foresee it.

**As a final question, what (if any) are the limits of what can be placed, and performed, under the category of ‘philosophy’?**

None – at least that I could ever predict. Or rather, what limits there may be ‘will have been possible’ once real – they’ll *become* possible retroactively!

**Part 3:**  
**The Future of Kant**

## 13: Transcendental Epigenesis

### *A Conversation with Catherine Malabou*

*In this conversation, Catherine Malabou explores the erosion of the transcendental within continental philosophy, culminating in Meillassoux's attempt to break with it entirely. She explains why she considers his attempt unsuccessful: his efforts to locate the genesis of the transcendental is a misguided one as the transcendental is an epigenetic structure founded at the moment of contact between the categories and experience. She goes on to explain how this notion of the transcendental as an epigenetic structure helps to make sense of its evolution in the trajectory from Kant's first Critique to the third Critique, arguing that the former's mechanistic approach is compatible with the latter's teleological approach.*

*Catherine Malabou is professor of modern European philosophy at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) at Kingston University, specializing in Hegel, Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida, and the relationship between philosophy, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis. She is the author of numerous books, including the hugely influential study of the philosophical implications of neuroscience, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* In line with the ambition of her book *The Future of Hegel*, Malabou's most recent book *Before Tomorrow: Epigenesis and Rationality* attempts to lay out the framework within which the future of Kant is to be negotiated.*

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**You've written books on Hegel, Heidegger, and now Kant. What was it about Kant and his legacy that inspired you to write *Before Tomorrow*?**

There were two main reasons I wrote this book. Firstly, I was not satisfied with something I wrote in my first book, *The Future of Hegel*, in which I described the transcendental in Kant as a rigid structure outside of temporality and history, and devoid of any possibility of change. So I wanted to revise this account of the transcendental. And the second source of inspiration was Quentin Meillassoux's recent and highly influential rejection of Kant in *After Finitude*. So I felt that I had to do justice to Kant, and to show that the transcendental, contrary to Hegel, is perfectly adaptable to time and history. And this in turn would challenge Meillassoux's claim as what he says is in many ways similar to Hegel – that the transcendental is a rigid structure with no transformability.

**You refer to the transcendental as the ‘minimal creed’ of continental philosophy, so would you see Meillassoux’s attempt to relinquish the transcendental also as an attack on the very identity of continental philosophy?**

The transcendental is the name for the possibility of a non-empirical origin of thinking. So for Kant there is something in cognition which has a purely logical origin and that cannot be derived from experience or empirical data. And this part of our thinking or cognition is what he calls the transcendental – something that is given a priori in a purely logical fashion. But most analytic philosophers do not believe in this – for them everything is deductible and demonstrable from empirical data. Someone like Hume would be their major reference point. So if you attack the idea of the possibility of something irreducible to the empirical, then you attack the very foundations of continental philosophy, which affirms that something in our thinking is fundamentally *irreducible* to experience.

**And yet the transcendental has been progressively eroded or attacked from within continental philosophy itself.**

Yes, that's true. So both analytic and continental philosophers have asked Kant: ‘What is this irreducible structure that you call the transcendental? Where does it come from?’ to which Kant replies: ‘It is a priori, it is given to us logically, before experience.’ So of course the problem is to justify this affirmation, and even the continental philosophers themselves have accused Kant of imposing this structure on philosophy without adequately demonstrating its necessity. Philosophers like Heidegger or Foucault want in a certain sense to deduce *better than Kant* the necessity of this structure, but then in doing so they change it and transform it until what remains is little more than a residue, something that persists only because of the impossibility of doing without it.

**So they’re not trying to break with Kant?**

No, they're trying to clarify the transcendental, but in doing so they destroy it at the same time! So more recently Meillassoux comes along and says that there's nothing we can do with the transcendental, that it will always be a magical invention that Kant has conjured up but that he will never be able to justify, so all attempts to found it on solid ground are totally useless. Meillassoux will claim to have fully broken with Kant, and to remain a continental philosopher but without all the apparatus of Kantian critical philosophy, even if he acknowledges the debt of all continental philosophers toward Kant.

**So does Meillassoux offer a plausible model of what a truly post-Kantian continental philosophy may look like?**

I don't think so. This is why I was so interested in exploring whether the transcendental could be transformed. I don't think we can keep it as it is, but I also don't think we can do without it, so the challenge was to see if Kant himself

offered the necessary resources to transform it. So as we've discussed, Meillassoux thinks that Kant cannot justify the transcendental because he cannot explain the genesis of the a priori categories. There can be no transcendental deduction of the transcendental. But this is not true: in the deduction of the categories Kant is explicit that there *cannot* be a genetic account of the a priori categories as a genesis is always empirical, and transcendental conditions are independent of all experience. But at the same time he has to prove that our categories are not *innate* or given by God, so he has to open a very subtle space between innateness and empiricism. And this is where the idea of epigenesis comes in – the categories are not given ready-made but have in themselves the principle of their own development, and this is what he calls the epigenesis of pure reason in paragraph 27 of *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

And as I read the secondary literature I discovered that for most Kant scholars this was literally *incomprehensible*. As epigenesis is a biological idea related to the development of the embryo, they felt that it was a contradiction to introduce this strange biological idea as a middle ground between the pure realm of thinking and the empirical realm. So some commentators thought that introducing this idea of epigenesis was a kind of slip of the tongue on Kant's part, and dismissed it as a fairly loose metaphor. But for me this is a central moment in the first *Critique*, and cannot be dismissed as a mere metaphor or a mistake.

Meillassoux presents a philosophy of radical contingency. Relinquishing the transcendental, as he says, is supposed to let this radical contingency out. The fact that Kant was unable to found the transcendental reveals that there is no such thing as a universal natural necessity, that the idea of it can only be imposed upon us via a coup. The transcendental is the refined and sophisticated name of this coup. Hume, as we know, had addressed the issue of a possible non-exist-

ence of necessity: how can we be certain that the sun will rise tomorrow? And Kant has just closed the question. According to Meillassoux though, Hume himself remained confident in the order of things, in the universal necessity of the laws of nature, he just affirmed that our mind was too weak to prove it by itself. Meillassoux wants to elaborate a concept of contingency that does not pertain to our intellectual finitude or incompleteness but is an ontological fact, pertaining to the real, to things *per se*. In that sense, he both relinquishes Kant and exceeds Hume.

You were asking if he offers a truly post-Kantian continental philosophy. In a sense, this is what he wants to do by proposing this ontology of contingency and of the real as profoundly modifiable. According to me, he fails because he is not able to propose a convincing model of what a world able to transform itself at any or every moment, a world deprived of any necessity, would look like. Besides, we cannot but think of the current ideology of post-truth and alternative facts. What are the political consequences of the affirmation that truth is totally contingent? Meillassoux never touches on that. Without referring to a transcendental value of things, which, again, does not mean that this transcendental would be fixed and immutable, I don't see how we can avoid the different fascist visions of the world that appear today here and there.

**So Kant uses the idea of epigenesis to show that any search for the genesis of the a priori categories is a fundamentally misguided one?**

Yes. Meillassoux says that Kant is unable to found the transcendental, but this is because the transcendental is not subject to foundation in the way that Meillassoux seeks. He is asking: 'What is this origin without an origin?' If we are always trying, like Meillassoux, to dig deeper underground to find the treasure, we will totally overlook Kant's point

that the transcendental is a *surface* structure, not in the sense of shallowness or superficiality, but in the sense in which we speak of the epicentre of an earthquake as the point of contact between the underground and the ground. Epigenesis is not genesis, and so the transcendental itself is founded at this moment of *contact* between the categories and experience. The transcendental is subject to epigenesis, not to foundation. So Meillassoux's question of what comes before the a priori is of course a legitimate one but it is also *pointless* because it is based on a misunderstanding of the specific temporality of the transcendental which is rooted in the spontaneity of the meeting point between the old and the new (or the archaic and the teleological as Paul Ricoeur put it), the point at which they meet and transform each other.

**So epigenesis opens up the possibility of a transformation occurring within the structure of the transcendental?**

Yes. I felt that there was an anticipation in the first *Critique* of what happens in the third *Critique* where Kant turns explicitly to biology and living beings – that he was on his way to saying that the transcendental is a *living structure*. He doesn't say this in the first *Critique* which is purely logical (which explains the incomprehension at his introduction of the idea of epigenesis), but in the third *Critique* the transcendental is analyzed as a living being. So if we can compare the structure of our cognition to a living being, it suggests that the transcendental is transformable and is in itself its own justification.

**So how would this differ from an evolutionary account of the transcendental in which a gradual harmonization made possible by the mechanisms of biological evolution leads to the correspondence that we observe between our cognition and objects?**

Well, if this is true then there's no a priori anymore! Again, the challenge is to find a middle ground between two extremes: first, the irreducibility that we discussed earlier which positions the transcendental as some kind of immaterial, mysterious, symbolic place that prevents any possible comparison between our rationality and other living systems; and second, negating the whole transcendental structure through an overly empiricized interpretation like the evolutionary account you just gave. And for me the epigenetic paradigm allows a way forward between these two extremes, even though an obvious objection is that if it argues for a development of our thinking which is like a living being then why not simply refer to the transcendental as the neural, as simply the brain. What's the difference between what Kant calls the faculties of the mind and a brain? I think Kant would not have resisted this fundamentally, but would have advocated a critical approach that would raise questions about the kind of reflexivity this biology of thinking produces, the effect of this biology of thinking on thought itself. What neurobiologists never do is analyse the kind of reflective movement that we can have on ourselves when reason observes itself reasoning using imaging techniques. They never take into account the ways in which it changes our perception of our thinking, of the world, and so on.

**Given that so much of continental philosophy has been focused on meaning and interpretation, why do you think it is so important for it to take into account the materiality of meaning and interpretation? Could they not just carry on without an adequate knowledge of, or even an interest in, neurobiology?**

Nietzsche was the first one to teach that biological materiality *is* in itself a hermeneutics – that a body is a self-interpreting structure. A body is always derived from a text (think of the genetic code or the epigenetic processes, and biologists talk about *translation* of DNA into RNA), and

this is not meant as a metaphor – a body *is* an interpretation. And so to think that hermeneutics has nothing to do with biology is ridiculous. Recent neurobiological research emphasises the plasticity of the brain in contrast to simply talking of genetics or other kinds of ‘hard-wiring’, and indicates that it is the site for the emergence of thinking, of passions, of creativity. And there’s nothing evil in saying that cognition is rooted in the brain. What are we trying to protect when we say that our thinking is not entirely neuronal? We find that this kind of affirmation is more and more senseless because the way in which neurobiologists show that all our intellectual dispositions are neuronal is not frightening in the least, and nor, crucially, is it *reductive*. It has all been understood in the wrong way, as if we’re nothing more than robots. But it’s exactly the contrary that is being argued – the brain is plastic, not robotic. The idea of the brain as a machine is outdated.

**So by materializing thought, continental philosophy loses nothing?**

Continental philosophy is a locus of infinite conversation and discussion about the relationship between the formal structure of cognition and its transcendental or material experience and objects. We definitely have to overcome this traditional dualism, like the one that exists between biological life and symbolic life. The idea that we lead two lives, one totally biological and obscure, the other one existential, and that there is this strict partition between the two – this kind of idea is totally obsolete. And in fact rather than stripping back the scope of continental philosophy, the materialization of thought actually *opens up* new questions to explore. So let’s take contingency as an example: Meillassoux suggests that if we dismiss the transcendental, as we should do according to him, then *everything* is contingent as it is the transcendental that grounds the necessity of nature according to Kant. So without this necessity anything

can change, for example this bottle could suddenly become round, but of course this is absurd as it won’t ever happen. Contrary to Meillassoux, Kant locates contingency in life as we can never tell in advance where evolution will go and what the future of the living being will be. This is absolutely unpredictable. So I think neurobiological research into plasticity will open the space of the radical contingency of our becoming, and this in turn pertains to ecological questions in general. What will become of the Earth? What will become of us? The contingency of life opens up fascinating new questions for continental philosophers.

**But doesn’t this contingency opened up by epigenesis undermine the necessity that the transcendental exists to provide? Does it not leave it too unstable?**

Epigenetics in biology is interesting to consider as it’s both necessary *and* contingent, both stable *and* transformable. It’s rooted in necessity at the level of the genome, and at the same time it transforms it through interpretation. This allows for an in-between bridging necessity and contingency. For example, recent epigenetic research done on survivors of Auschwitz shows that the aftershock of the trauma manifested in the children of the survivors, suggesting that epigenesis operates at a *psychic* level, and moreover that certain children in the same family inherited their parents’ stress while others did not. So there’s this fundamental contingency in how the program will be interpreted, but at the same time it’s rooted in necessity.

**But if necessity is guaranteed by the genome, surely this undermines the kind of necessity that Kant wanted to secure? Are these not ‘transcendental’ structures rather than *true* transcendental structures insofar as they emerge from the many contingencies of our evolutionary history?**

If this were the case, then neurobiologists would be correct in their evolutionary approach. But what is *not* totally empirical, and what we have to salvage from the transcendental, is the critical reflection on this process. For example what are we doing at the moment? We're engaged in a critical reflective dialogue aimed at achieving understanding that is in no way a scientific undertaking. The possibility of this critical discourse is transcendental, and crucially this is rooted in *spontaneity*. The transcendental as epigenesis emerges in this space in which meaning and interpretation are opened up within the biological. So any attempt by neurobiologists to drown this spontaneity in a biological or evolutionary past completely misses the point. Once again, the challenge is to find an in-between that collapses any strict separation of natural necessity and self-invention. The transcendental in Kant is a constant dialogue between two dimensions: our inherited structures of thinking and the possibility of critical discourse on these structures. And both are inseparable, operating together all the time. So if we admit, as I try to demonstrate in the book, that the transcendental is evolving in some sense, then the critical discourse is also evolving but it doesn't disappear. For me, this is the minimum criterion for the transcendental: the impossibility of dismissing subjectivity and closing interpretation.

**You address the question of finitude towards the end of *Before Tomorrow* when you write that we must undertake a philosophical thinking of finite life, not finite existence. Please can you explain what you mean by this?**

For Meillassoux, correlationism as the synthesis of subject and object means that we can only envisage the world from the point of view of our subjectivity, which is the point of view of finitude. Something is given to us and so we don't have any access to the thing *per se* because of the finitude of our understanding. This is of course the classic Kantian approach, and Meillassoux takes exception to it. Personal-

ly I take Kantian finitude for granted and am not bothered by it at all. And then Heidegger comes along and talks of existential finitude, the finitude of Dasein. Anything that is not Dasein, that does not have a sense of its own being, can perish but not die. But we might object and say that reality itself, without *existing* in Heidegger's sense, is nevertheless endowed with finitude. So we can reverse the standard formulation and propose that the finitude is not really the finitude of the subject or of Dasein but of *reality itself*, of nature, plants, animals, and so on. And this has yet to be considered or explored seriously. By saying that plants and animals can't die but just perish, we dismiss the fundamental question raised by the concept of the 'Anthropocene'. That is the way in which 'man' or the 'human' (*Anthropos*) has built a vision of the Earth for its own profit by colonizing, alienating and destroying it, presupposing that it was indifferent to these very acts, because it could not 'die' or 'feel', or 'think'.

To this vision, we have to oppose the notion of a finitude of the Earth. Such a finitude cannot refer to any concept of 'existence' understood in the Heideggerian sense, it means that the Earth is endowed with a life of its own, that also includes inorganic matter. Such a 'life' cannot be seen according to any anthropomorphic frame. It designates 1) an organization, 2) a system, 3) a history (geological ages), 4) limited resources, 5) capacity of extinction (species, rivers, glaciers, etc). So the sense of finitude definitely has to be enlarged beyond 'existence', even beyond strict biological life, to designate the material rhythm of the earth without which something like the 'world' would not even exist.

This opens up critical questions about Meillassoux's narrow notion of finitude, and his obsession with the idea that mathematics is the only science that can allow us to overcome the transcendental and access the real in a way that has nothing to do with subjectivity and finitude. He never

questions biology, ecology, or what has recently been termed 'deep history'. He never questions the possibility that reality itself can be concerned with finitude in a non-subjective way. We need to open up new space for elaborating on the question of finitude from a more ecological perspective.

**In the third *Critique*, you identify a different type of necessity or causality or lawfulness than the one operating in the first *Critique*, and this is central to your idea that the transcendental in Kant himself is subject to epigenesis. Please can you explain this idea in greater detail?**

In the first *Critique*, Kant offers a mechanistic view of causality rooted in physics, whereas in the third *Critique* in which he is considering the question of life and living beings, he offers a teleological view of causality rooted in biology. And this teleological view, which is related to purposiveness which Kant defines as 'the lawfulness of the contingent', appears to stand in opposition to the more mechanical model of causality that he had suggested in the first *Critique* was strictly necessary, as this purposiveness exceeds the framework of the transcendental deduction. The whole enterprise of the third *Critique* consists in solving and levelling this opposition, and proving the compatibility of mechanism and teleology.

Life and the living beings presented in the third *Critique* resist our categories due to their complete self-sufficiency. And so it is life itself that is irreducible to correlationist thinking. When we look at living beings we can see them differently according to our cognitive structures: either mechanistically or teleologically. And when you see them from the point of view of life, Kant says that these organized beings seem to be totally *indifferent* to us – they seem to have their own organizing principle within themselves and are indifferent to the fact of being judged or conceptualised. They seem to have their rationality *in themselves*. And this

forces us to de-correlate thinking, forming the basis of what Kant calls 'reflective judgments' as opposed to 'determining judgments'. We use determining judgments to subsume a particular case under a universal law, like that of gravity for example. Determining judgments are required in physics and objective cognition, for example, but a living being cannot be subsumed under any category as we just said. It forces us to judge it differently, that is in a way to invent a whole new category, to presuppose a universal, a law. Such a category is that of purposiveness. We presuppose it only, it is the consequence of reflection (reflective judgment), and it cannot be determining, that is, valid for knowledge. Its form is that of 'as if'. Living beings look 'as if' they had been designed for a specific purpose. But such a purpose remains forever undetermined. Correlation finds its limit here. Subjectivity stops having a determining power over the object.

From the mechanistic point of view it is as if the phenomena had no structures in themselves, that they needed our understanding in order to be known or cognized, whereas from the teleological point of view these objects seem to be here just to please me with their beauty or to make me wonder about who was able to organize such perfect beings. They seem to have their own judgment in themselves.

**Does this tension between mechanism and teleology threaten to undermine the necessity of the whole transcendental structure?**

For me, this tension does not undermine the transcendental structure, rather it *achieves* it. If we consider the trajectory of the three *Critiques*, Kant's first *Critique* presents the mechanistic view we have already discussed, then his second *Critique* deals with freedom, but then the question arises as to what is the effect on freedom if nature is totally mechanistically determined. If I want to introduce

something new in the world because I am a free being, *how* can this be possible if nature is entirely accomplished or achieved already? So then he writes the third *Critique* in order to reconcile mechanism and freedom, and teleology is central to this as living beings exist as both unpredictable and non-rational but also as sovereign and free. So it is in this very movement between the past and the future, between archaeology and teleology, that epigenesis is at work. It is in this transformability and mutability of the transcendental through epigenesis that the subject of cognition, the autonomy of the practical subject, and the creativity of life intersect, and this gives Kant's entire critical project its ultimate form and meaning.

**The subtitle of your book is *Epigenesis and Rationality*. Do you think there is anything distinctive about Kant's model of rationality?**

For me, Kant's transcendental is that which guarantees *both* stability and transformability, whereas speculative realists seem to offer *only* transformability as the flipside to the excessive rigidity and policing of the boundaries that has characterised so many readings of Kant. You can point to Meillassoux and the role of mathematics in his work, which of course is built on laws. But this opens a different yet related question: Is this turn to mathematics as a way to save continental philosophy from Kant's transcendental legacy sufficient to establish any kind of order of the world, of the ethical, of the political? He throws out subjectivity without any reflection on the consequences of that. *What are we as subjects doing in that world?* This question just disappears, and with it the critical dimension that is at the heart of continental philosophy also disappears. If there is anything distinctive about Kant's model of rationality, it is the constant coincidence it brings to light and underscores between the sciences and human freedom.

## 14: Global Finitude

### *A Conversation with Graham Harman*

*In this conversation, Graham Harman begins by reflecting on the status of Speculative Realism a decade on from the conference that established it as a new and exciting movement in philosophy. Although Kant attracted a fair amount of critical attention from within this movement, Harman makes it clear that Kant's legacy is far from a catastrophic one and goes on to explore the pivotal role Kant plays in his object-oriented ontology (OOO) in which it is argued that the Kantian thing-in-itself is an inevitable aspect of any relation (rather than simply of the human-world relation as in Kant). Arguably, Harman suggests, OOO is the only contemporary philosophical movement that swears by the thing-in-itself.*

*Graham Harman is distinguished professor of philosophy at the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles, and is widely known as a key figure in the contemporary Speculative Realism movement in philosophy and for his development of object-oriented ontology (OOO). He is the author of numerous books including Immaterialism, Dante's Broken Hammer, and the forthcoming Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything. In 2015 he was ranked as one of Art Review's 100 most influential figures in the art world.*

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**We find ourselves ten years on from the famous conference at Goldsmith's at which the Speculative Realism movement was founded. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on your contribution to this turn towards**

**realism in continental philosophy which has expanded and diversified so much over the past decade.**

The enduring importance of Speculative Realism is that, within the idiom of continental philosophy, the realism question had always been marginalized. One can point to Nicolai Hartmann as a *bona fide* continental realist in the early part of the last century, but of course Hartmann's influence has been near zero compared with that of Husserl and Heidegger. These two established the standard approach to the realism question, which was to call realism a 'pseudo-problem' insofar as we are 'always already outside ourselves' in intending objects (Husserl) or being-in-the-world (Heidegger). The current upswing of continental realism dates as far as I know to the early 1990s with Maurizio Ferraris's realist rebellion against his former teacher Gianni Vattimo. After that, I do believe the next important date was 2002, with Manuel DeLanda's realist interpretation of Deleuze (*Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*) and my own realist reading of Heidegger (*Tool-Being*). Notice that while DeLanda and I have both built up significant readerships, neither of us has had much success with the communities to which our books were addressed: most Deleuzeans were not persuaded by DeLanda that Deleuze was a realist; almost no Heidegger scholars have shown sympathy for my claim that Heidegger was a realist in spite of himself, from start to finish, and not just in some lonely corner of his later period. This shows to what extent realism is still a shunned doctrine in continental philosophy, even though it has always been a normal available option for analytic thought. DeLanda once told me that to call oneself a realist in continental circles was for many years equivalent to calling oneself a child molester. It's no longer that bad, though realists are still a stigmatized minority.

**Given the often critical attention paid to Kant by those within the speculative realism tradition (summed up in**

**Meillassoux's evocative phrase 'the Kantian catastrophe'), I was hoping you could say a few things about Kant and what role, if any, he plays in your philosophy.**

Kant was not a catastrophe. In any case, I wouldn't agree that Speculative Realism was built on a shared aversion to Kant. Meillassoux phrases it that way because in his quest for absolute knowledge through the mathematization of the primary qualities of things, he is a natural enemy of Kantian finitude and the thing-in-itself. By contrast, object-oriented ontology (OOO, pronounced 'Triple O' rather than 'oh oh oh') fully endorses the thing-in-itself, and claims that Kant's real error was to hold that the thing-in-itself is something that merely haunts human cognitive and sensory powers. OOO claims instead that the thing-in-itself is an inevitable aspect of *any* relation. When fire burns cotton, even when it succeeds in destroying it, the fire does not make contact with the cotton directly, but only with a phenomenal version of it. This bothers people because it smells like panpsychism, and the central dogma of modern philosophy is that humans and everything else are so utterly different in kind that it is a sin against reason to approach them both in the same way.

The real problem with Kant is the notion that humans and everything else are two different *kinds* of entities that must never be mixed. Bruno Latour, by contrast, tacitly assumes that they must *always* be mixed. But in fact, sometimes they mix and sometimes they don't. Hydrogen and oxygen combine to form water even if no humans are on the scene; they form a compound. But humans combining with water (in drinking, swimming, showering) also form a new human-water compound with an innate character of its own. Water is a thing-in-itself, but so is swimming. The thing-in-itself is not ruined by the mere involvement of human ingredients, but only by the assumption that human theoretical or practical access to the things is enough to exhaust

them. Far from being an anti-Kantian position, OOO expands Kant into the inanimate realm, rejecting the standard German Idealist tactic of claiming that the thing-in-itself is a contradictory notion.

In short, we need to move on from the long modern duopoly in which there are two and only two kinds of things: human thought on one side, and *everything else* on the other. Most of the claims to ‘overcome’ the modern subject-object dualism are really just attempts to glue these two pieces together without ever questioning that these are the two fundamental pieces. What about world-world interactions rather than just those of the human-world sort? What about meteorites striking the surface of distant planets unseen by any human? Philosophers generally cede such issues to the natural sciences: “Let scientists explain the interaction of inanimate things. They will never be able to explain the human realm in the same terms!” But then the neurophilosophers come along and try to do just that. Philosophers made a bad bargain when they exiled themselves into a purely human territory. Even when they claim that human and world are mutually determining, humans are always still part of the picture. This is what needs to change.

**I was hoping you could clarify your idea that the thing-in-itself ‘haunts’ any relation such that, to take your example, “when fire burns cotton, even when it succeeds in destroying it, the fire does not make contact with the cotton directly, but only with a phenomenal version of it.” I’m afraid I just don’t get it!**

It’s hard to grasp at first, because we’ve been culturally trained not to think in *metaphysical* terms about the inanimate world: “The natural sciences are doing so well with non-human matter, so why bother?” Let’s start with Kant’s own conception of the thing-in-itself. Human beings are finite. We experience the world only in terms of space, time,

and the twelve categories of the understanding. We don’t know if the world is really the way we perceive it to be, because we can never step outside of a human mind in order to compare reality with our understanding of reality. Now, there are a great many people who reject this argument of Kant and deny that there is a thing-in-itself beyond our grasp. Nonetheless, they all at least *understand what Kant is talking about*. It is not difficult to see what Kant meant: human experience is limited, and there is some dark and unknowable reality that haunts it from some inaccessible realm beyond perception.

But when OOO says that the same thing happens at the inanimate level, things get a bit harder for the imagination. What I claim is that when a human perceives cotton, Kant was right: we perceive the cotton only in a limited human way. But OOO goes a step further: when *fire* encounters cotton, it also encounters the cotton in a limited fire-ish manner. The problem is that Kant and his followers mix two separate issues: 1) finitude and 2) sentience. They seem to think that the reason humans are finite is *because* they are sentient, that we are limited only *because* we experience things in time and space. But these are actually two separate questions. The reason objects are finite is because no object (not even God, by the way) is able to step away from itself and relate to things in the way that something else does. It makes no difference that fire and cotton don’t seem to be ‘conscious’ in the way that animals are. Finitude has nothing to do with consciousness. It has to do with the fact that nothing is able to encounter another thing without translating it into its own terms. Fire encounters cotton in fire-terms, unable to interact with cotton-properties that lie beyond the scope of fire. And humans encounter cotton in human-terms, unable to interact with cotton-properties that lie beyond the scope of humans. Stated differently, finitude is not rooted in *consciousness*, but in any *relation* whatsoever. In any relation between any two things, there is

no direct contact between them, since everything is just as finite as humans are. It may also turn out that there is some primitive form of experience in inanimate objects too, as Whitehead and others argue, but that's not essential to my argument at this stage.

Why is this point so important for OOO? It's important because it's the first step in allowing us to escape the limitations of modern philosophy. Medieval philosophy revolved around a difference between two different *kinds* of entities: the Creator, and everything created. Modern philosophy revolved around a difference between a new pair of two *kinds* of entities: thought and the world, mind and matter, or however one wishes to phrase it. But the more important difference is between objects and relations. This distinction works globally, since everything is itself and also is in relation to other things in finite/translated form, whether we are speaking of humans, fire, or cotton balls. Medieval philosophy posits the Creator as the single most ultra-special type of thing that exists, and everything else derives from it. Modern philosophy repeats the gesture, but with human thought in place of the Creator. But OOO offers a theory that holds good for the Creator, for humans, for cotton balls, for reptiles, and for subatomic particles. We've only scratched the surface of the implications of this shift. Meanwhile, the modern split between thought and everything else continues to govern even those philosophies that explicitly claim to have overcome it: phenomenology, new materialism, even Latour's actor-network theory (which has made the greatest steps toward breaking free of modernity).

**The poet Heinrich von Kleist famously committed suicide in part due to the despair induced by Kant's transcendental idealism, writing that "my one, my highest goal has sunk from sight, and I have no other"; the goal in question being knowledge of things in themselves, absolute and independent of us, as opposed to the**

**scraps of appearances with which we are left to content ourselves following Kant's transcendental philosophy. Meillassoux is presumably on Kleist's side in his reference to 'the Kantian catastrophe'. Would it be fair to say that you see this yearning for the in itself as a peripheral issue or even a non-issue?**

Kleist's difficulty was the one that plagues most melancholics: their focus on what is inaccessible, beyond their reach. And OOO is often accused of leading nowhere but to a similar melancholia of the lost object. But that's just a start. Though we can't *know* the thing-in-itself, we nonetheless *are* a thing-in-itself: Kant already saw this in his ethical philosophy, which is based on a human free will that can never be proven on the purely phenomenal level. Yet there's more. Not only *is* each of us a thing-in-itself, we can also *become* countless others. Kant fell a half-step short of seeing this, since he was so focused on purifying consciousness from any attachment to the object.

Max Scheler, a colourful German philosopher of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, saw the problem with Kant's ethics: it leaves no room for ethical objects, such as the objects of serious devotion or passion, or the objects of a personal or national vocation (chess, ballet and many other things for the Russians; sweeping collective fantasies and dreams for the Americans). Through such passions we actually form part of a new object by entering into union with the objects of our ethical seriousness. The same with artworks, as Kant again missed in his *Critique of Judgment* because he was so concerned to put both the beautiful and the sublime on the side of humans, uncontaminated by any object. The modern era defined and measured itself too much in terms of what it *knew*. Perhaps the next era will be more about what we create when we surrender ourselves to our fascinations and take them even more seriously than we still think we take knowledge.

**I am intrigued by your comment that “the next era will be more about what we create when we surrender ourselves to our fascinations and take them even more seriously than we still think we take knowledge”. I was hoping you could say something about your vision of a philosophy that does not place knowledge as the highest goal of its enquiry.**

Put simply, I don't think philosophy is really about knowledge, any more than the arts are about knowledge. It's strange that this has been forgotten, since Socrates – and I would call him the first philosopher, not his pre-Socratic forerunners – made no secret of his ignorance, his lack of knowledge of anything. *Philosophia* in Greek means 'love of wisdom,' not wisdom itself. Much later Nicholas of Cusa called it 'learned ignorance,' at the moment when medieval philosophy was passing into early modern philosophy. Most people are willing to admit that art is not primarily a transmission of knowledge, despite its obvious cognitive value. Then why not philosophy? Probably because philosophy since the dawn of modern thought – meaning the 1600s – has allowed itself to be intimidated by the great strides made by mathematical physics, and has internalized the notion that if philosophy does not emulate the sciences then it cannot be of any value.

As I see it, knowledge comes in only two basic forms. When someone asks you what something is, you can answer either by 1) explaining what it is made of, or 2) explaining what it does. For example, a few hours ago, a non-native speaker of English asked me what a 'seam' is; she was reading some sewing instructions regarding the cushions on her couch. My explanation involved a bit of both 1) and 2). You can say that the seam is made of stitches at the point where the surface of the cushion meets its side. Or you can say what the seam's purpose is. But these are both just ways of recognizing the seam, and both of them fail to give

us the seam in its own right, over and above what it's made of and 'under and beneath' what it does. In a case as trivial as this one, it might sound silly to ask what the seam-in-itself might be. But what about cases that Socrates discusses, such as friendship, virtue, or justice? Here it is clear not only that Socrates cannot tell us exactly what these are, but that there is no way to understand, say, justice, only by talking about the various elements of justice or the various positive effects and punishments that result from it. These are just indicators that help us find it when we run across it. Art may be an even clearer case. If someone asks us to give an analysis of Picasso's *Guernica*, we most likely aren't going to describe the physical properties of the canvas and the pigment of which it is made. But neither is it enough to say that *Guernica* was meant as a stirring protest against the Luftwaffe's brutal intervention in the Spanish Civil War.

When someone explains something by reducing it downward to its pieces, I call it 'undermining.' When they do the opposite and reduce something upward to its effects, I call it 'overmining.' When they do both at once, which is usually the case, I call it 'duominning.' All knowledge involves some sort of 'minning.' Philosophy and the arts are not a form of knowledge, and hence they aim at the thing insofar as it is *more* than the knowledge we have of it, not identical with that knowledge.

**So what resources would a 'post-knowledge' philosophy utilize? What would its aims and goals be? And to whom would it be in service (if not the natural sciences, for example)?**

Philosophy must serve no one, and in turn it must expect no one else to serve. Everyone is quick to celebrate the fact that philosophy is no longer the handmaid of theology, as it was said to be in the Middle Ages. But they still want

philosophy to be the handmaid of something else: usually either brain science or the political Left. This won't work. Since philosophy is not a form of knowledge, as Socrates already taught us, it cannot be the servant of disciplines that claim to know. This is related to the reason that art should also not be the handmaid of theology, Leftism, or brain science. Knowledge generally fights forward by way of trench warfare against what it regards as the paramount symbol of ignorance. Darwinian evolutionary theory is haunted by the image of drooling Creationists; Marxism by the specter of evil capitalist moneybaggers; 'scientific' psychology by the supposedly unscientific character of psychoanalysis; contemporary rationalism by the purported dangers of 'New Age Obscurantism.' Philosophy proceeds differently, by outflanking all trench wars of this kind. It seeks neither knowledge nor victory, but is always on the lookout for *surprises*. And if you see yourself primarily as a soldier of Rationality, of Enlightenment, of Justice, of Truth, or of anything else, then you have already sacrificed *reality* in those cases where it may challenge the ideal you seek. The philosopher is the one who never sacrifices reality, and this is what is always done by those who are sure that they already know what it is, and merely wish to annihilate or silence those who have not yet grasped the shining truth.

As for what resources post-knowledge philosophy would utilize, I'll start negatively here as well. Philosophy should not primarily be about 'arguments,' though the whole of Anglo-American analytic philosophy is constructed on the basis of this faith. There have never been more 'rational arguments' in the world than we have today; they are now a commodity reaching the level of basic grain stockpiles or sand dunes. And yet, it would be hard to claim that this is the greatest era of philosophy the world has ever seen. There are several problems with viewing philosophy as being primarily about arguments. First of all, arguments are attempts to prove something through a chain of statements,

yet it has long been noted that such chains of proof depend on the validity of their initial premises, which are never proven by argumentation but must be either assented to or rejected. Second, and more importantly, philosophy has less to do with proof than with being able to distinguish the important from the unimportant. There are some brilliant philosophers who nonetheless waste their talents on incredibly narrow technical problems. Third and finally, proof is not necessarily the most important philosophical activity, since philosophy is not like geometry, deducing non-obvious findings from unshakeable first principles. This is a seventeenth century prejudice that has somehow managed to survive into the twenty-first century. It is easy to imagine a philosopher who mostly makes assertions rather than giving proofs (Nietzsche is like this, and some would say Wittgenstein as well) who are nonetheless obviously more interesting than a run-of-the-mill philosophical technician who 'proves' any number of conclusions.

It also follows from my claims that doing philosophy requires some aesthetic talent. Few people will appreciate this claim, because 'aesthetics' has been widely trivialized into meaning cosmetic decoration, style without substance, and so forth. But OOO grants far more importance to aesthetics than this. For us, aesthetics is about the separation between objects and their qualities, which we take to be the single most important topic of metaphysics.

**I am keen to pursue what you have just opened up, but before we do this I was hoping you could attempt an answer to the following question: what is an object?**

In the minds of many people, the word 'object' has connotations such as 'physical,' 'durable,' 'inanimate,' 'different from the human subject,' and so forth. For OOO, none of these connotations are accepted. When we say 'object,' we simply mean anything that is not exhausted by being reduced

downward to its components or upward to its effects. As mentioned, every form of knowledge is either about a) what a thing is made of, or b) what it does. We call these two strategies ‘undermining’ and ‘overmining.’ And since knowledge is essential to the survival of the human race, so are both forms of ‘mining.’ We need to know the constituents of the human body or the effects of various chemicals. The mistake is to think that cognition cannot do anything else. It can. It can give us indirect access to the reality of objects insofar as these objects are irreducible to either of the two kinds of knowledge.

It is also important to note that OOO distinguishes between two different kinds of objects. *Real* objects are those that exist apart from any observer or any other entity that might encounter them, while *sensual* objects are those that exist only in the experience of some other entity. An obvious case would be the hallucination of something like a unicorn: the unicorn is an *object*, because it is a unit in our experience and not just a ‘bundle of qualities’ as David Hume thought. 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology did the service of showing that even the objects of our experience are units, since we see them from different sides and different angles from one second to the next, yet they remain the same unified things. In turn, there are also two kinds of qualities: the real and the sensual again. This gives us the basic stock of elements from which OOO is built. We have real and sensual objects (RO, SO) and real and sensual qualities (RQ, SQ). That gives us four basic permutations of objects and qualities. You can have RO-RQ, RO-SQ, SO-RQ, SO-SQ. When you start playing around with these combinations as I do, you find that an awful lot falls into place.

**Given that you consider exploration of this interplay between objects and qualities to be the single most important topic of metaphysics, I was hoping you could give some specific examples of the kinds of questions ob-**

**ject-oriented metaphysicians may be asking. What can philosophy do with objects?**

First of all, philosophy needs to shift to the study of *compound* objects, whether or not those objects contain humans as part of the compound. Modern philosophy, and modern civilization more generally, was too much about purifying different *kinds* of entities from one another: science must eliminate the arbitrary influence of human observers on nature-in-itself (though quantum theory complicates this picture considerably), and the human sciences must talk about purely arbitrary projections of personal preferences and values without any non-human contribution. Latour dealt this sort of modernism a death blow in *We Have Never Been Modern*, but unfortunately he has a tendency to counter the nature/culture divide by demanding that nature and culture always come as a pair. But no, they don’t. Many compound objects (and all objects are compounds, made of parts) do not contain humans at all. Take the sun, for example. Latour has the tendency to replace the sun itself with an account of how humans came to know it and learn things about it, which is not the same thing. Sun plus human is a different compound object from the sun in its own right, and to this extent scientific realists are right to smell something they don’t like in Latour’s work (though I will defend him to the end against cheap dismissals from such people).

But let’s get back to what I take to be the real intent of your question, which is to ask about the more concrete stakes of the turn toward objects. Many of the most obvious stakes involve art and architecture, but since everyone knows OOO is involved deeply with those disciplines, let’s look at two others. In 2014 I published *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*. What I saw when writing that book is that modern politics sees itself structured around the difference between Left and Right, a distinction that clearly emerged in the French Revolution. But the deeper distinction in mod-

ern political theory, as I see it, is between Truth Politics and Power Politics, a distinction that crosses the one between Left and Right. Truth Politics thinks it already knows the political truth, which is sadly withheld from implementation due to the innate competitive corruption of society (Rousseau), greedy class interests of the exploiting rich (Marx), or the ignorance of the dangerous mob that will always kill a Socrates and must therefore not be told the whole truth (Leo Strauss). Power Politics tells us that there is no truth, that might makes right, and that it is a matter either of overpowering and outfoxing one's opponents so as not to be subjugated (Machiavelli), delivering all power to the sovereign so as to prevent constant bloody civil war (Hobbes), or allowing the sovereign to declare a state of exception in which we stop talking to the enemy and simply defeat them due to the existential threat they pose (Carl Schmitt). But what all these diverse positions share in common is the idea that politics consists in *knowledge* of the best political state of things. They fail to incorporate our inevitable *ignorance* about political matters. The funny thing about Latour is that he begins as a remorseless power politician, praising Machiavelli and Hobbes. But then he flips in about 1991, and realizes that Hobbesian power needs to be deconstructed just as much as the textbook picture of natural science does. On a similar note, OOO invites us to exit the sphere of modern idealist philosophy that gave rise both to Marx and to a number of right-wing parallels to Marx, and incorporate the impossibility of knowledge into our political reflections. Knowledge must be replaced with *reality* as a political consideration, and this is why I dislike characterizations of Donald Trump as a 'post-truth' figure. For who has this truth that Trump supposedly ignores? He should be seen, instead, as a 'post-reality' figure. The same reality can support a number of alternative truths, but one must be in contact with that reality to be given any credence. In any case, OOO tries to provide a new way to look at modern political theory, by returning focus to our political *ignorance* as the centre of politics.

Another place where the implications of OOO have been worked out in more detail is in my 2016 book *Immaterialism: Objects and Social Theory*. There I take the example of the Dutch East India Company and try to show that the history of the Company should not be read in terms of 'events,' as has been so fashionable in philosophy for a while now. Many events that look big on paper are not so big on the ground. Certain events, I argue, are 'symbiotic' (in the sense of the late, great Lynn Margulis) and therefore irreversibly create new objects out of two previously independent ones. My thesis is that every object goes through roughly 5-6 symbioses before reaching mature form, after which they ripen before decaying and dying. Only OOO can offer the basis for such a theory, because only OOO lays such stress on the compound character of objects, and on the fact that most relations are trivial and only some are symbiotic. I'm happy with the book, but the theory it contains has a lot more room to expand, and I am optimistic that the humanities and social sciences will find much to draw on here.

**It is clear that object-oriented metaphysics is extremely ambitious in terms of its scope. Given that Kant is generally seen as a curtailer of metaphysical ambitions, do you see OOO as a break from Kant or a radicalization, and thus extension, of Kant? In short, what kind of future does Kant have within the framework of OOO?**

Rather than endless attempts to overcome Kantian finitude, whether through Hegelian dialectics, pragmatist wishy-washiness, or a resurgent French rationalism, we need to accept the finitude and simply deny that humans alone exhibit it. Finitude is the very stuff of relations, not just the stuff of human perception and cognition. This is a crucial step forward made by Kant, even though it is one of his least popular insights today. Is there another philosophical movement besides OOO that swears by the thing-in-itself? I can't think of any at the moment.

Otherwise, Kant gives us a formalist program that we *should not* follow any longer. In both ethics and the arts, he is too keen to purify human consciousness from any contamination by the outside world, and though he did so for a very good reason (to preserve the *autonomy* of ethics and aesthetics from peripheral concerns) he paid too high a price. As I mentioned earlier, Max Scheler pointed the way for ethics by making it about a love or passion for what is *different* from us, which Kant wrongly denounced as ‘heteronomy.’ Scheler showed that each person’s and even each nation’s ethical vocation is unique, though not all such vocations are admirable, since some or all involve some degenerate component.

In metaphysics, the first thing that will happen once we have truly worked ourselves free of Kant is that all the philosophical disputes he denounced as impossible – Is there a simplest atom of matter or can it be divided infinitely downward? Does the world have a beginning in time and space or do both extend infinitely? – will come back from the dead. The reason Kant thought we could never answer such questions is because they pertain to the thing-in-itself, which we cannot access directly. But this assumes that there’s either direct access or none, and Kant makes clear that he thinks all knowledge is ‘discursive’ knowledge, meaning the kind that you can put into literal propositions. I’d agree with Kant that this is impossible, but here he is missing not only the *aesthetic* way of referring to things indirectly, but even the *philosophical* way of doing so pioneered by Socrates. Yes, the Socrates portrayed by Plato and Xenophon is always very clear, but he never gives us a conclusive prose definition of the meaning of justice, friendship, virtue, or anything else. This has been missed because everyone is in such a hurry to turn philosophy into a science. They should watch out, because they are on the wrong side of history.

### **As a final question, do you have any predictions about where philosophy could go in the future?**

I often ask myself what earlier figures in philosophy, the arts, and the sciences would think about more recent masters in those fields. Would Aristotle recognize Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as great philosophy? It’s doubtful, since even Edmund Husserl (Heidegger’s teacher and immediate predecessor among great philosophers) never really got the point of the book. What about in the arts? The same holds here. I read once about a conversation Matisse and Picasso had about the emerging Jackson Pollock. Picasso was quick to denounce Pollock’s art, while Matisse admitted that he didn’t grasp it, and merely added the qualification that it is always hardest to judge those *younger* than we are. What would Newton have thought of Einstein? It’s not clear that great figures in the natural sciences would be any better equipped to understand the importance of later figures than can be done in philosophy or the arts. One of my greatest fears, in fact, is reaching a point at which I simply can’t understand what younger thinkers are doing. But maybe that’s just inevitable.

But there’s one thing I’m fairly sure about when looking at the future of philosophy. As there is no linear progress, certain concepts or strategies that are thought to be dead will eventually return in new form. Even the greatest philosophers go in and out of fashion. During my student years, everyone held Plato at arm’s length. Everyone was ‘reversing’ Plato, or ‘overturning’ Plato, or accusing others of being closet Platonists. That stopped at some point, for reasons I still don’t fully understand. More recently, it has been Aristotle and Husserl who are the least popular great classics. Few people want anything to do with them, perhaps because they both speak highly of ‘essence’ – a pariah concept at the moment, though one I don’t think we can do without. And then there is the strange case of Deleuze. In

my early student years, he was considered just an irreverent smart-ass of the same order as Jean Baudrillard, while the 'serious' people were all working on Derrida and Foucault. Well, Deleuze's star really rose in the mid-1990s at around the time of his death, and now this irreverent smart-ass is spoken of with the greatest admiration as a sage for all time, even by some analytic philosophers. It is difficult to predict what the next cycle will do for the reputation of various philosophers. But if philosophers were publicly traded stocks, I would sell Derrida and Foucault, both of whom rose on the wave of wider cultural trends that I expect to fade away. Maybe I'll even live long enough to test that prediction.

## 15: Transcendental Realism

### *A Conversation with Ray Brassier*

*In this conversation, Ray Brassier considers various ways in which the scope and remit of metaphysics have been transformed in the wake of Kant's critique, especially in the work of Hegel and the twentieth-century philosopher Wilfrid Sellars. Brassier goes on to explore the relation between speculative philosophy and naturalism that lies at the heart of his 'Transcendental Realism,' a framework that is both hugely indebted to Kant, and yet at the same time considers the boundary between the for-us and the in-itself to be porous, not impenetrable.*

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**We find ourselves ten years on from the conference at Goldsmith's at which the Speculative Realism movement was founded. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on your contribution to this turn towards realism in continental philosophy which has expanded and diversified so much over the past decade.**

The conference sparked a lot of interest among people fed up by the then current state of Continental philosophy, but I don't think it founded a 'movement'. My understanding

of the philosophical problems underlying the issue of realism has certainly advanced considerably since then. I think my main contribution has been to insist that metaphysics without epistemology is blind. This is not to disavow metaphysics but just to insist that it can't be seriously undertaken without paying attention to epistemology. Many realists insist that metaphysical issues are independent of and irreducible to epistemological issues and conclude that metaphysics cannot be epistemologically corralled. I agree. But that metaphysics is irreducible to epistemology does not entail that it can be undertaken with complete disregard for epistemology.

**Given the often critical attention paid to Kant by those within the Speculative Realism movement (summed up in Meillassoux's evocative phrase 'the Kantian catastrophe'), I was hoping you could say a few things about 1) whether Kant's basic outlook (the Copernican revolution, his transcendental framework etc.) is still worth maintaining, and 2) if he is wrong, then *how* is he wrong?**

The problem is whether it is possible to go beyond Kant without regressing to pre-Kantian rationalist dogmatism or empiricist scepticism. I am more sympathetic to Kant than other 'speculative realists' and my worry has always been that simply rejecting Kant represents a step back rather than a step forward. So I don't think Kant's 'Copernican revolution' was a catastrophe, at least not in the pejorative sense. It was certainly a radical transformation, perhaps the most momentous in philosophy since Aristotle. For philosophical modernity, there is a before and after Kant, just as there is a before and after Aristotle for ancient philosophy. So in answer to 1): Yes, I think Kant's basic achievement, which is the discovery of the transcendental, is not only worth maintaining but must be upheld on pain of fundamental philosophical regression. The real issue for me is whether or not Kant's immediate philosophical heirs, principally Fichte, Schelling,

and Hegel, took full measure of his break with dogmatic metaphysics, whether rationalist or empiricist. To the extent that they did, they moved philosophy forward into hitherto unknown territory (a *terra incognita* for metaphysics) and this is the territory that philosophy must continue to explore if it is to be contemporary, which is to say, post-Kantian. But to the extent that they did not, their own explorations were hindered by metaphysical prejudices that they did not manage to overcome completely. The task for contemporary philosophy is to push forward into this *terra incognita* by identifying and jettisoning as many of these metaphysical prejudices as is possible. In answer to 2), Kant's 'error', or better his limitation, is probably his reification of the transcendental framework: the assumption that epistemological categories and forms of intuition can be fixed once and for all. Hegel saw this limitation and tried to overcome it, without reneging on Kant's transcendental turn. This is why he is an increasingly important figure for me.

**In many ways, a critique of correlationism was the sole factor unifying the participants at the 2007 conference. I was hoping you could say something about where you currently stand on the correlationism question. Do you agree with Steven Shaviro that when we 'step outside of the correlationist circle, we are faced with a choice between panpsychism on the one hand, or eliminativism on the other'?**

I think it's necessary to distinguish between a good and a bad sense of correlationism. Kant's correlationism is an indispensable philosophical advance. To reject it out of hand is to take a step back, not forward. Basically, Kant shows that neither thinking nor sensing suffices for knowing: knowing combines thinking and sensing. Most importantly, you can't know objects without using concepts. But this is not to say that reality itself is conceptual; precisely the opposite. Kant's claim is that cognitive experience has a con-

ceptual structure, but reality in itself does not. The question then is whether the conceptual conditions for knowledge, together with the boundary between the knowable and the unknowable, are fixed and immutable (as Kant seems to have thought), or historically mutable. The philosopher who accepts Kant's critique of cognitive immediacy, whether rationalist or empiricist, while rejecting his strictures on knowing the thing in itself, is Hegel, and I now think Hegel is Kant's most profound critic and heir.

Hegel defends the view that cognitive experience has a necessary conceptual structure, but this structure includes the discrepancy between how the world appears to us and how it is in itself. Cognitive progress is the correction of our concept of the object, what it is for us, by incorporation of the truth about what the object is in itself into what it is for us, which also means, into our experience of it. The boundary between the for-us and the in-itself is porous, not impenetrable. We can know the thing in itself; but not immediately: knowing it is a long and arduous process involving many unexpected reversals, inversions, and even regressions. Hegel is not a pre-Kantian metaphysician, a theologian of Absolute Spirit, as he is so often portrayed. What he calls the 'becoming subject of substance' involves a radical de-substantialization of both mind and matter. I don't think the full extent of this de-substantialization has been properly appreciated. It means Hegel makes it possible to think both mind and matter without substance. The consequences are far reaching and I hope to explore some of them in future work.

I don't agree that the only alternatives to correlationism are either panpsychism or eliminativism. Both options represent a regression to pre-Kantian metaphysical dogmatism: either that the world is nothing but mind or that it is nothing but matter. Neither mind nor matter are properly understood in this optic.

**Despite rejecting the label 'Speculative Realism' to describe your own philosophy, do you remain a speculative philosopher? And if so, what role does speculation play in your work?**

I avow speculation only in the Hegelian sense. I think it means to think dialectically, which is fundamental to philosophy. A speculative proposition is one in which the subject and the predicate can change place, revealing the interdependence between things and the determinations we attribute to them. I don't endorse speculation in its non-Hegelian sense, which just means to make claims about the nature of reality without regard for empirical science. I've been working through a contemporary extension of the Kantian framework, Wilfrid Sellars's, and my understanding of its limitations are orienting me towards Hegel, but a Hegel who is neither a classical metaphysician nor a postmodern pragmatist. Re-engaging with Hegel has given me a clearer sense of the limits of empiricist, rationalist, and transcendental stances in philosophy, and of the precise meaning of the 'speculative' alternative, together with its virtues and vices.

**You are currently working on a theoretical framework you call 'Transcendental Realism'. I was hoping you could say a few things about what this entails, as well as the ways in which you are using the terms 'transcendental' and 'realism'?**

My use of these terms is primarily indebted to Wilfrid Sellars, whose work I have been studying for the past seven years. In this context, 'transcendental' is opposed to metaphysical, where 'metaphysical realism' is any realism that equates being with substance. Thus, 'transcendental realism' is (at least partly) a realism about actualities that are not substantial. For Sellars, to be is to be an actuality that makes a difference, but this does not mean being present to

consciousness or making a difference in experience. ‘Transcendental realism’ in this sense is a corollary of Sellars’s rejection of the metaphysical variant of ‘the myth of the given,’ which is simply the assumption that there are *self-presenting actualities*. What is real or actual does not simply impress itself upon the mind, nor is it transparently manifest in experience. To be a transcendental realist in this Sellarsian sense is to claim that we can know a reality that exists independently of what manifests itself in experience, while insisting that cognitive access to this reality is conceptually (or epistemically) mediated; it is not direct or immediate.

**Do you regard Transcendental Realism as a critical project (in the manner of Kant’s critique of metaphysics) or as a constructive project (in the manner of metaphysics itself)?**

It’s both, at least for Sellars. Epistemological critique and metaphysical construction go hand in hand for him, which is why he such a fascinating figure. Epistemic analysis of the cognitive function of categories is supplemented by the construction of new metaphysical categories to flesh out our understanding of reality (this is the role of the category of ‘pure process’ in his system). This is part of what I hope to explain in the book I am trying to write about him: *Reasons, Patterns, and Processes: Sellars’s Transcendental Naturalism*.

**Transcendental Realism appears to be Kantian insofar as it acknowledges the in itself; however, it appears to radicalise Kant insofar as it considers the in itself to be knowable (via science). Is this a fair picture?**

Yes. All that remains is for transcendental realism to be rendered dynamic such that the process through which the in-itself is integrated into the for-us becomes knowable. This is precisely what Hegel does. But he does so by challenging the assumption that empirical science alone ac-

cesses the in-itself. So the real issue is the question of the relation between speculative philosophy and naturalism.

**Adrian Johnston describes his Transcendental Materialism as, on the face of it, “an oxymoronic absurdity”. In what way is a transcendental philosophy compatible with the kind of thoroughgoing naturalism that you endorse?**

Sellars defends a transcendental naturalism: the mind’s knowledge of nature is conditioned by the nature of which it is a part. The a priori is not something other than nature; it is another, unfamiliar nature. But the mind is not pre-equipped with the concepts it needs to recognize this other nature that conditions its knowledge of empirical nature; it must acquire them through a process of construction. This is why transcendental naturalism cannot rest content with the method of reflection: the transcendental is not transparent to consciousness. It has to be part excavated, part constructed. This is problem of the relation between speculation and naturalism, which is currently preoccupying me.

**It seems strange to have to defend the idea of reason or rationality against other philosophers, but you have suggested that recent Continental philosophy has denigrated and reduced reason to such an extent that your attempt to rehabilitate it appears a ‘contrarian’ move. Please can you say something about this misology in Continental circles and your own attempts to rehabilitate the rational?**

I don’t think it’s controversial to suggest that most Continental philosophers take a dim view of reason, and of scientific reason in particular. Reason is mere calculation or logocentrism or instrumental rationality or identity thinking or representation etc. There are exceptions of course, but I think it’s true to say that Continental philosophers overall are much more interested in aesthetics, ethics, and

politics than in logic or epistemology. I'm not saying that the critique of scientific rationality is uninteresting or devoid of merit. But it has been vulgarised and reduced to platitude, to such an extent that invocations of 'rationality' have become automatically suspect in Continental circles. I certainly don't think science has an exclusive prerogative on knowledge and truth: I fully espouse normative truths, in politics, ethics, and even aesthetics. That's because I follow Plato, Kant, Hegel, and Sellars in upholding the integrity of the normative. Reason is essentially normative. But I think the suspicion of rationality as the source of justification, when accompanied by a Nietzschean reduction of truth to power and of justice to domination, leaves Continental philosophers ill-equipped to rebut appeals to supra-rational sources of authority or legitimacy, whether political, religious, or cultural.

**One of the most quotable lines from an interview you gave is "I am a nihilist because I still believe in truth". The rehabilitation of the concept of nihilism on rationalist and scientific grounds was a central focus of *Nihil Unbound*, but does nihilism still play a role in your current work?**

The overarching argument of *Nihil Unbound* was dialectical insofar as it sought to identify the point at which the exhaustion of sense turned into a gain in intelligibility. However, I disavowed my book's implicit dialectical structure because I was still in thrall to a dogmatic anti-Hegelianism that I had unthinkingly absorbed as a result of my prolonged exposure to French post-structuralism. But my increasing dissatisfaction with the anti-rationalism of the latter, together with my interest in upholding the privileges of conceptual rationality, led me to reappraise my attitude towards Hegel. I realized it was no longer possible to dismiss him as a neo-Aristotelian theologian of Absolute Spirit. I began to understand how Hegel's emphasis on the necessity

of thought's 'tarrying with the negative' might be indispensable for my own attempt to formulate a non-Nietzschean and rationally compelling overcoming of nihilism.

My prolonged engagement with Sellars has been a necessary detour in order to obtain a clearer understanding of what it might mean to give an account of concepts, thinking, meaning, and reasoning within a broadly naturalistic framework. Concepts are rules governing perception, inference, and action. To think is to connect and disconnect concepts according to proprieties of inference. Meanings are rule-governed functions supervening on the pattern-conforming behaviour of language-using animals. Lastly, reasoning is rule-governed conceptual competence.

Having clarified these basic terms, I want to extend the project initiated in my first book in a follow-up currently entitled *That Which Is Not*. It takes as its starting point Nietzsche's distillation of the history of nihilism in 'How the "True World" Finally Became a Fable'. Nietzsche's provocative suggestion is that the apex of nihilism is also its cancellation, since the abandonment of belief in an intelligible reality beyond sensible appearances abolishes the very concept of appearance. Thus nihilism does not consist in believing that only appearances are real, it consists in not believing that reality appears. This is an un-belief in reality which cannot recognize what it denies. It leads to an aestheticization of metaphysics which relinquishes the question of truth. I want to argue that the rational overcoming of nihilism (and the repudiation of metaphysical aestheticism) requires rehabilitating the distinction between appearance and reality, or the sensible and the intelligible, but precisely in order to account for the reality of appearances, or the intelligibility of the sensible. The challenge is to understand how every appearance has a kind of reality, but only insofar as it is split from within by what it does not reveal. 'That which is not' is the insubstantiality proper to the intelli-

ble form of sensible becoming. This is the rationalist thread connecting Plato and Hegel to Sellars and Badiou.

The book will then try to link this negativity through which intelligible form is entwined with sensible becoming to the question of time. Nietzsche already understood that the problem of nihilism is the problem of what to do with time: Why keep investing in the future when there is no longer any prospect of reconciliation or redemption that would recompense this investment? Nietzsche's solution – his attempted overcoming of nihilism – consists in affirming the senselessness of becoming as such – all becoming, without reservation or discrimination. The affirmation of eternal recurrence is *amor fati*: the love of fate. To affirm fate is to let time do whatever it will with us, but in such a way that our will might coincide with time's. (This option has been much in vogue in contemporary Continental metaphysics.) But to reject fate requires knowing how to transform time. This transformation requires fusing thinking and sensing in an act of negation that makes becoming intelligible. Thus the book's principal contention (contra Nietzsche) is that nihilism is not the negation of truth but the truth of negation, and the truth of negation is transformative. But it is also necessarily catastrophic because it overturns the linear coordination of origin and end, past and future. Rather than disavowing the catastrophic nature of truth, reason affirms truth's catastrophic overturning of linear time. Thus the book proposes to resolve the problem of nihilism truthfully by insisting that it matters knowing whether or not anything matters. Knowing that nothing matters matters because it makes a difference to thinking as such. This is the truth of nihilism.

The ultimate goal of this project is to connect the catastrophic temporality of truth to Prometheanism, understood (in Alberto Toscano's words) as the articulation of action and knowledge in the perspective of totality. Pro-

metheanism is the attempt to eradicate the discrepancy between what is humanly made and what is nonhumanly given – not by rendering the world amenable to human whim or by merely satisfying our pathological needs, but by remaking ourselves and our world in conformity with the demands of reason. In metaphysical terms, this requires reinscribing the transcendence of time into the immanence of space. To grasp the form of formlessness (i.e. becoming) is to transform the structure of fate understood as the way in which things happen to us. The gain in intelligibility is practically transformative once one realizes, with Sellars, that thinking is not a preliminary to doing, but a kind of doing whose potencies we have yet to understand. The point at which thinking and doing coincide is the point at which idealism and materialism fuse.

**We tend to see Kant as a curtailer of metaphysical ambitions, and yet there is a clearly discernible hunger for a renewal of metaphysics in your work. What, if any, do you feel are the conditions under which a rehabilitation of traditional metaphysics is possible, and would this involve a break with Kant or a continuation of the Kantian project? In short, what kind of future does Kant have within the framework of Transcendental Realism?**

I take Kant to have shown that traditional metaphysics – in the lineage that runs roughly from Aristotle to Leibniz – cannot be continued. What is required is neither a renewal nor a rehabilitation of classical metaphysics but a transformation of the scope and remit of metaphysics in the wake of Kant's critique. This is what Hegel, Sellars, Adorno, and Badiou, are all engaged in, albeit in very different ways, and this is why they are decisive interlocutors for me. Sellars's 'transcendental realism' represents one way of engaging in this transformation of metaphysics, but it is not the only way, nor the most radical. The project sketched above is my attempt to contribute to such a transformation but it does

so by drawing on all the thinkers mentioned above, as well as others. But to repeat: Kant's destitution of traditional metaphysics is the ineluctable condition for philosophizing, not an option that one can take or leave.

**As a final question, what, if any, do you feel are the limits to what can be placed and performed under the category of philosophy?**

Philosophy as I understand it is simply the self-consciousness of theory. Philosophical thinking requires an extreme attentiveness to concepts, together with an acute conscientiousness about the process of concept formation. Philosophy is neither entirely beholden to empirical knowledge nor wholly independent of it. It is both reflexive and constructive. But it must try to integrate our multifaceted understanding of the world – social, historical, scientific, aesthetic, etc. – into something like a conceptual totality, even if only to expose the gaps and inconsistencies in our understanding. Beyond that, it is difficult to stipulate what can and cannot count as philosophy. Perhaps the important distinction is not so much between what counts as philosophy and what does not, but between good and bad philosophy, since there will always be more of the latter than the former.

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