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# Concepts and Objects

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1. The question 'What is real?' stands at the crossroads of metaphysics and epistemology. More exactly, it marks the juncture of metaphysics and epistemology with the seal of conceptual representation.

2. Metaphysics understood as the investigation into *what* there is intersects with epistemology understood as the enquiry into how we *know* what there is. This intersection of knowing and being is articulated through a theory of conception that explains how thought gains traction on being.

3. That the articulation of thought and being is necessarily conceptual follows from the Critical injunction which rules out any recourse to the doctrine of a pre-established harmony between reality and ideality. Thought is not guaranteed access to being; being is not inherently thinkable. There is no cognitive ingress to the real save through the concept. Yet the real itself is not to be confused with the concepts through which we know it. The fundamental problem of philosophy is to understand how to reconcile these two claims.

4. We gain access to the structure of reality via a machinery of conception which extracts intelligible indices from a world that is not designed to be intelligible and is not originarily infused with meaning. Meaning is a function of conception and conception involves representation—though this is *not* to say that conceptual representation can be construed in terms of word-world mappings. It falls to conceptual rationality to forge the explanatory bridge from thought to being.

5. Thus the metaphysical exploration of the structure of being can only be carried out in tandem with an epistemological investigation into the nature of conception. For we cannot understand *what* is real unless we understand what 'what' *means*, and we cannot understand what 'what' means without understanding what 'means' *is*, but we cannot hope to understand what 'means' is without understanding what 'is' *means*.

6. This much Heidegger knew.[1] Unlike Heidegger however, we will not conjure a virtuous circle of ontological interpretation from the necessary circularity of our pre-

1. cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford, Blackwell, 1962, 'Introduction'.

ontological understanding of how things can be said to be. The metaphysical investigation of being cannot be collapsed into a hermeneutical interpretation of the being of the investigator and the different ways in which the latter understands things to be. Although metaphysical investigation cannot be divorced from enquiry into what meaning is, the point of the latter is to achieve a metaphysical circumscription of the domain of sense which avoids the phenomenological equivocation between meaning and being.

7. If we are to avoid collapsing the investigation of being into the interpretation of meaning we must attain a proper understanding of what it is for something to *be* independently of our conceiving, understanding and interpreting its being. But this will only be achieved once we possess a firm grip on the origins, scope, and limits of our ability to conceive, understand, and interpret *what* things are.

8. The metaphysical desideratum does not consist in attaining a clearer understanding of what we mean by being or what being means for us (as the entities we happen to be because of our natural and cultural history), but to break out of the circle wherein the meaning of being remains correlated with our being as enquirers about meaning into a properly theoretical understanding of what *is* real regardless of our allegedly pre-ontological understanding of it—but not, please note, irrespective of our ways of conceiving it. Such a non-hermeneutical understanding of metaphysical investigation imposes an epistemological constraint on the latter, necessitating an account that explains how sapient creatures gain cognitive access to reality through conception.

9. Some might be tempted to think that this arduous epistemological detour through the analysis of the conceptual infrastructure underlying our understanding of terms such as 'what', 'is', and 'real' can be obviated by a doctrine of ontological univocity which dissolves representation and with it the tri-partite distinction between representing, represented, and reality. Proponents of a univocal conception of being as difference, in which conception is just another difference in being, would effectively supplant the metaphysical question 'What differences are real?' with an affirmation of the reality of differences: differentiation becomes the sole and sufficient index of reality. If being is difference, and only differences are real, then the traditional metaphysical task of 'carving nature at the joints' via an adequate conception of being can be supplanted by re-injecting thought directly into being so as to obtain the non-representational intuition of being as real difference. This would be the Deleuzean option. However, the celebrated 'immanence' of Deleuzean univocity is won at the cost of a pre-Critical fusion of thinking, meaning, and being, and the result is a panpsychism that simply ignores rather than obviates the epistemological difficulties signaled above. The claim that 'everything is real' is egregiously uninformative—and its uninformativeness is hardly palliated by the addendum that everything is real precisely insofar as it thinks since, for panpsychism, to think is to differ.[2]

10. Meaning cannot be invoked either as originary constituent of reality (as it is for Aristotelian essentialism) or as originary condition of access to the world (as it is for Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology): it must be recognized to be a conditioned phenomenon generated through meaningless yet tractable mechanisms operative at the sub-personal (neurocomputational) as well as supra-personal (sociocultural) level. This

2. For a critical account of the role of panpsychism in Deleuze's ontology see my article 'The Expression of Meaning in Deleuze's Ontological Proposition', *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, no. 19, 2008, pp. 1-36.

is a naturalistic imperative. But it is important to distinguish naturalism as a metaphysical doctrine engaging in an ontological hypostasis of entities and processes postulated by current science, from naturalism as an epistemological constraint stipulating that accounts of conception, representation, and meaning refrain from invoking entities or processes which are in principle refractory to any possible explanation by current or future science. It is the latter that should be embraced. Methodological naturalism simply stipulates that meaning (i.e. conceptual understanding) may be drawn upon as an epistemological *explanans* only so long as the concomitant gain in explanatory purchase can be safely discharged at a more fundamental metaphysical level where the function and origin of linguistic representation can be accounted for without resorting to transcendental skyhooks (such as originary sense-bestowing acts of consciousness, being-in-the-world, or the *Lebenswelt*). The Critical acknowledgement that reality is neither innately meaningful nor inherently intelligible entails that the capacities for linguistic signification and conceptual understanding be accounted for as processes within the world—processes through which sapient creatures gain access to the structure of a reality whose order does not depend upon the conceptual resources through which they come to know it.

11. The junction of metaphysics and epistemology is marked by the intersection of two threads: the epistemological thread that divides sapience from sentience and the metaphysical thread that distinguishes the reality of the concept from the reality of the object. Kant taught us to discern the first thread. But his correlationist heirs subsequently underscored its significance at the expense of the metaphysical thread. The occultation of the latter, following the liquidation of the in-itself, marks correlationism's slide from epistemological sobriety into ontological incontinence.[3] The challenge now is to hold to the metaphysical thread while learning how to reconnect it to the epistemological thread. For just as epistemology without metaphysics is empty, metaphysics without epistemology is blind.

12. Kant underscored the difference between knowing, understood as the taking of something *as* something, classifying an object under a concept, and sensing, the registration of a somatic stimulus. Conception is answerable to normative standards of truth and falsity, correctness and incorrectness, which develop from but cannot be collapsed into the responsive dispositions through which one part of the world—whether parrot or thermostat—transduces information from another part of the world—sound waves or molecular kinetic energy. Knowledge is not information: to know is to endorse a claim answerable to the norm of truth *simpliciter*, irrespective of ends. By way of contrast, the transmission and transduction of information requires no endorsement; it may be adequate or inadequate relative to certain ends, but never 'true' or 'false'. The epistemological distinctiveness of the former is the obverse of the metaphysical ubiquity of the latter.

13. Critique eviscerates the object, voiding it of substance and rendering metaphysics weightless. Tipping the scale towards conception, it paves the way for conceptual idealism by depriving epistemology of its metaphysical counterweight. Conceptual idealism emphasizes the normative valence of knowing at the cost of eliding the metaphysical autonomy of the in-itself. It is in the work of Wilfrid Sellars that the delicate equilibrium between a critical epistemology and a rationalist metaphysics is re-

3. For an account of correlationism, see Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, London and New York, Continuum, 2008.

stored.[4] Re-inscribing Kant's transcendental difference between noesis and aisthesis within nature, Sellars develops an inferentialist account of the normative structure of conception that allows him to prosecute a scientific realism unencumbered by the epistemological strictures of empiricism.[5] In doing so, Sellars augurs a new alliance between post-Kantian rationalism and post-Darwinian naturalism. His naturalistic rationalism[6] purges the latter of those residues of Cartesian dogmatism liable to be seized upon by irrationalists eager to denounce the superstition of 'pure' reason. Where the prejudices of metaphysical rationalism hinder reason in its struggle against the Cerberus of a resurgent irrationalism—phenomenological, vitalist, panpsychist—Sellars' account of the normative strictures of conceptual rationality licenses the scientific realism that necessitates rather than obviates the critical revision of the folk-metaphysical categories which irrationalism would consecrate.[7]

14. Ultimately, reason itself enjoins us to abjure supernatural (i.e. metaphysical) conceptions of rationality. An eliminative materialism that elides the distinction between sapience and sentience on pragmatist grounds undercuts the normative constraint that provides the cognitive rationale for elimination. The norm of truth not only

4. See in particular Sellars' demanding but profoundly rewarding *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*, London Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968. Contrary to widespread opinion, Sellars is a philosophical writer of exceptional distinction and elegance. His prose—obdurate, lapidary, elliptical—exerts greater philosophical power and communicates more of genuine substance through obliquity than the unctuous blandishments of allegedly superior (i.e. more easily digestible) stylists. Vacuous suavity remains the abiding deficiency of self-consciously 'good' writing in the American pragmatist vein—a congruence of stylistic and philosophical facility particularly exemplified by James and Rorty—this is too often the specific context in which Sellars is chastised for not being a 'good' writer.

5. Sellars' inferentialist account of rationality has been developed and expanded by Robert Brandom, the contemporary philosopher who has probably done most to draw attention to the significance of Sellars' philosophical achievement. See Brandom's *Making it Explicit: Reasoning Representing and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994 and *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000.

6. Or 'rationalistic naturalism': straddling as it does the divide between post- Kantian rationalism and post-Darwinian naturalism, Sellars' philosophical project is susceptible to very different interpretations depending on whether one emphasizes its rationalistic or naturalistic aspect. The rationalist component of Sellars' legacy has been developed by Robert Brandom. By way of contrast, its naturalistic aspect has influenced such uncompromising philosophical materialists as Paul Churchland, Ruth Garrett Millikan, and Daniel Dennett. Although Brandom's 'neo-Hegelian' interpretation of Sellars has dominated recent discussion of the latter's legacy—arguably to the detriment of his naturalism, and particularly his commitment to scientific realism—the importance accorded to the scientific image in Sellars' 'synoptic vision' has been emphasized by James O'Shea in his important recent study *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn*, Cambridge, Polity, 2007. O'Shea's work provides a much-needed corrective to the dominant neo-Hegelian appropriation of Sellars' legacy.

7. cf. Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics*, p. 173. The concept of 'folk metaphysics', understood as the set of default conceptual categories in terms of which humans make sense of the world prior to any sort of theoretical reflection, is beginning to play an increasingly important role in cognitive science. Faces, persons, bodies, solid objects, voluntary motion, cause-effect, are all examples of folk-metaphysical categories in this sense. One obvious implication of this research is that phenomenological ontology is simply folk metaphysics writ large. cf. Pascal Boyer 'Natural Epistemology or Evolved Metaphysics? Developmental Evidence for Early-Developed, Intuitive, Category-Specific, Incomplete and Stubborn Metaphysical Presumptions', *Philosophical Psychology*, no. 13, 2000, pp. 277 -297; Pascal Boyer and H. Clark Barrett 'Evolved Intuitive Ontology: Integrating Neural, Behavioral and Developmental Aspects of Domain-Specificity', in David Buss (ed.), *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*, New York, Wiley, 2005. Scott Atran provides a particularly suggestive account of the extent to which Aristotelian metaphysics systematizes pre-philosophical intuitions in his *Cognitive Foundations of Natural History: Towards an Anthropology Science*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993. For a critical discussion of some of Atran's claims, see Michael T. Ghiselin, 'Folk Metaphysics and the Anthropology of Science', *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, no. 21, 1998, pp. 573-574.

provides the most intransigent bulwark against the supernatural conception of normativity; it also provides the necessary rationale for the elimination of folk metaphysics.

15. Unless reason itself carries out the de-mystification of rationality, irrationalism triumphs by adopting the mantle of a scepticism that allows it to denounce reason as a kind of faith. The result is the post-modern scenario, in which the rationalist imperative to explain phenomena by penetrating to the reality beyond appearances is diagnosed as the symptom of an implicitly theological metaphysical reductionism. The metaphysical injunction to know the noumenal is relinquished by a post-modern 'irreductionism' which abjures the epistemological distinction between appearance and reality the better to salvage the reality of every appearance, from sunsets to Santa Claus.[8]

16. Bruno Latour is undoubtedly among the foremost proponents of this irreductionist creed. His Irreductions[9] pithily distils familiar Nietzschean homilies, minus the anxious bombast of Nietzsche's intemperate Sturm und Drang. With his suave and unctuous prose, Latour presents the urbane face of post-modern irrationalism. How does he proceed? First, he reduces reason to discrimination: "Reason' is applied to the work of allocating agreement and disagreement between words. It is a matter of taste and feeling, know-how and connoisseurship, class and status. We insult, frown, pout, clench our fists, enthuse, spit, sigh and dream. Who reasons?' (2.1.8.4) Second, he reduces science to force: 'Belief in the existence of science is the effect of exaggeration, injustice, asymmetry, ignorance, credulity, and denial. If 'science' is distinct from the rest, then it is the end result of a long line of coups de force'. (4.2.6.) Third, he reduces scientific knowledge ('knowing-that') to practical know-how: 'There is no such thing as knowledge—what would it be? There is only know-how. In other words, there are crafts and trades. Despite all claims to the contrary, crafts hold the key to all knowledge. They make it possible to 'return' science to the networks from which it came'. (4.3.2.) Last but not least, he reduces truth to power: 'The word 'true' is a supplement added to certain trials of strength to dazzle those who might still question them'. (4.5.8.)

17. It is instructive to note how many reductions must be carried out in order for irreductionism to get off the ground: reason, science, knowledge, truth—all must be eliminated. Of course, Latour has no qualms about reducing reason to arbitration, science to custom, knowledge to manipulation, or truth to force: the veritable object of his irreductionist afflatus is not reduction per se, in which he wantonly indulges, but *explanation*, and the cognitive privilege accorded to scientific explanation in particular. Once relieved of the constraints of cognitive rationality and the obligation to truth, metaphysics can forego the need for explanation and supplant the latter with a series of allusive metaphors whose cognitive import becomes a function of semantic resonance: 'actor', 'ally', 'force', 'power', 'strength', 'resistance', 'network': these are the master-metaphors of Latour's irreductionist metaphysics, the ultimate 'actants' encapsulating the operations of every other actor. And as with any metaphysics built on metaphor, equivocation is always a boon, never a handicap: 'Because there is no literal or figurative

8. It is not enough to evoke a *metaphysical* distinction between appearance and reality, in the manner for instance of 'object-oriented philosophies', since the absence of any reliable cognitive criteria by which to measure and specify the precise extent of the gap between seeming and being or discriminate between the extrinsic and intrinsic properties of objects licenses entirely arbitrary claims about the in-itself. For an example of 'object-oriented' philosophizing see Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, Chicago, Open Court, 2005.

9. Included as Part Two of Latour's *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. A. Sheridan and J. Law, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993.

meaning, no single use of metaphor can dominate the other uses. Without propriety there is no impropriety […]. Since no word reigns over the others, we are free to use all metaphors. We do not have to fear that one meaning is "true" and another "metaphorical"'. (2.6.3)

18. However, in the absence of any understanding of the relationship between 'meanings' and things meant—the issue at the heart of the epistemological problematic which Latour dismisses but which has preoccupied an entire philosophical tradition from Frege through Sellars and up to their contemporary heirs—the claim that nothing is metaphorical is ultimately indistinguishable from the claim that everything is metaphorical.[10] The metaphysical difference between words and things, concepts and objects, vanishes along with the distinction between representation and reality: 'It is not possible to distinguish for long between those actants that are going to play the role of "words" and those that will play the role of "things"'. (2.4.5). In dismissing the epistemological obligation to explain what meaning is and how it relates to things that are not meanings, Latour, like all postmodernists—his own protestations to the contrary notwithstanding—reduces everything to meaning, since the difference between 'words' and 'things' turns out to be no more than a functional difference subsumed by the concept of 'actant'—that is to say, it is a merely nominal difference encompassed by the metaphysical function now ascribed to the metaphor 'actant'. Since for Latour the latter encompasses everything from hydroelectric powerplants to toothfairies, it follows that every possible difference between powerplants and fairies—i.e. differences in the mechanisms through which they affect and are affected by other entities, whether those mechanisms are currently conceivable or not—is supposed to be unproblematically accounted for by this single conceptual metaphor.

19. This is reductionism with a vengeance; but because it occludes rather than illuminates differences in the ways in which different parts of the world interact, its very lack of explanatory purchase can be brandished as a symptom of its irreductive prowess by those who are not interested in understanding the difference between wishing and engineering. Latour writes to reassure those who do not really want to know. If the concern with representation which lies at the heart of the unfolding epistemological problematic from Descartes to Sellars was inspired by the desire not just to understand but to assist science in its effort to explain the world, then the recent wave of attempts to liquidate epistemology by dissolving representation can be seen as symptomatic of that cognophobia which, from Nietzsche through Heidegger and up to Latour, has fuelled a concerted effort on the part of some philosophers to contain if not neutralize the disquieting implications of scientific understanding.[11]

20. While irreductionists prate about the 'impoverishment' attendant upon the epistemological privileging of conceptual rationality, all they have to offer by way of

10. Much as the claim that everything is real turns out to be indistinguishable from the claim that nothing is real: with the dissolution of the distinction between appearance and reality, the predicate 'real' is subjected to an inflation that effectively renders it worthless.

11. For a succinct but extremely efficacious demolition of the various arguments (Latour's included) alleged to undermine the authority of scientific rationality, see Paul Boghossian's *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007. For a critique of Latour's claims specifically, see James Robert Brown, 'Critique of Social Constructivism' in *Scientific Enquiry: Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, R. Klee (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 260-64. In *The Advancement of Science: Science without Legend, Objectivity without Illusions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, Philip Kitcher mounts a magisterial defence of the rationality of science against its postmodern detractors, dispatching Latour in passing.

alternative is a paltry metaphorics that occludes every real distinction through which representation yields explanatory understanding.

21. *Pace* Latour, there is a non-negligible difference between conceptual categories and the objects to which they can be properly applied. But because he is as oblivious to it as the post-structuralists he castigates, Latour's attempt to contrast his 'realism' to postmodern 'irrealism' rings hollow: he is invoking a difference which he cannot make good on. By collapsing the reality of the difference between concepts and objects into differences in force between generically construed 'actants', Latour merely erases from the side of 'things' ('forces') a distinction which textualists deny from the side of 'words' ('signifiers').

22. Mortgaged to the cognitive valence of metaphor but lacking the resources to explain let alone legitimate it, Latour's irreductionism cannot be understood as a theory, where the latter is broadly construed as a series of systematically interlinked propositions held together by valid argumentative chains. Rather, Latour's texts consciously rehearse the metaphorical operations they describe: they are 'networks' trafficking in 'word-things' of varying 'power', nexuses of 'translation' between 'actants' of differing 'force', etc. In this regard, they are exercises in the practical know-how which Latour exalts, as opposed to demonstrative propositional structures governed by cognitive norms of epistemic veracity and logical validity. But this is just to say that the ultimate import of Latour's work is prescriptive rather than descriptive—indeed, given that issues of epistemic veracity and validity are irrelevant to Latour, there is nothing to prevent the cynic from concluding that Latour's politics (neo-liberal) and his religion (Roman Catholic) provide the most telling indices of those forces ultimately motivating his antipathy towards rationality, critique, and revolution.

23. In other words, Latour's texts are designed to do things: they have been engineered in order to produce an effect rather than establish a demonstration. Far from trying to prove anything, Latour is explicitly engaged in persuading the susceptible into embracing his irreductionist worldview through a particularly adroit deployment of rhetoric. This is the traditional modus operandi of the sophist. But only the most brazen of sophists denies the rhetorical character of his own assertions: 'Rhetoric cannot account for the force of a sequence of sentences because if it is called 'rhetoric' then it is weak and has already lost'. (2.4.1) This resort to an already metaphorized concept of 'force' to mark the extra-rhetorical and thereby allegedly 'real' force of Latour's own 'sequence of sentences' marks the nec plus ultra of sophistry.[12]

24. Irreductionism is a species of correlationism: the philosopheme according to which the human and the non-human, society and nature, mind and world, can only be understood as reciprocally correlated, mutually interdependent poles of a fundamental relation. Correlationists are wont to dismiss the traditional questions which have preoccupied metaphysicians and epistemologists—questions such as 'What is X?' and 'How do we know X?'—as false questions, born of the unfortunate tendency to abstract one or other pole of the correlation and consider it in isolation from its correlate. For the correlationist, since it is impossible to separate the subjective from the

12. Interestingly, Latour's own dissolution of the distinction between logic and rhetoric effectively undermines any attempt to segregate the conceptual content of his work from its rhetorical armature. To try to insulate 'actor network theory' from Latour's politics (or his religion) is to invoke a distinction between public theory and private practice which Latour's thought openly repudiates. I intend to carry out a more systematic dissection of Latour's claims, as well as of those philosophers who have taken up the banner of his irreductionism, in a future article.

objective, or the human from the non-human, it makes no sense to ask what anything is in itself, independently of our relating to it. By the same token, once knowledge has been reduced to technical manipulation, it is neither possible nor desirable to try to understand scientific cognition independently of the nexus of social practices in which it is invariably implicated. Accordingly, correlationism sanctions all those variants of pragmatic instrumentalism which endorse the primacy of practical 'know-how' over theoretical 'knowing-that'. Sapience becomes just another kind of sentience—and by no means a privileged kind either.

25. Ultimately, correlationism is not so much a specific philosophical doctrine as a general and highly versatile strategy for deflating traditional metaphysical and epistemological concerns by reducing both questions of 'being' and of 'knowing' to concatenations of cultural form, political contestation, and social practice. By licensing the wholesale conversion of philosophical problems into symptoms of non-philosophical factors (political, sociocultural, psychological, etc.), correlationism provides the (often unstated) philosophical premise for the spate of twentieth century attempts to dissolve the problems of philosophy into questions of politics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. To reject correlationism and reassert the primacy of the epistemology-metaphysics nexus is not to revert to a reactionary philosophical purism, insisting that philosophy remain uncontaminated by politics and history. It is simply to point out that, while they are certainly socially and politically *nested*, the problems of metaphysics and epistemology nonetheless possess a relative autonomy and remain conceptually irreducible—just as the problems of mathematics and physics retain their relative autonomy despite always being implicated within a given socio-historical conjuncture. The fact that philosophical discourse is non-mathematical and largely (but by no means entirely) unformalized (but certainly not unformalizable), does not provide a legitimate warrant for disregarding its conceptual specificity and reducing it to a set of ideological symptoms. Again, this is not to assert (absurdly) that the problems of metaphysics or epistemology have no social determinants or political ramifications, but simply to point out that they can no more be understood exclusively in those terms than can the problems of mathematics or physics.

26. To refuse correlationism's collapsing of epistemology into ontology, and of ontology into politics, is not to retreat into reactionary quietism but to acknowledge the need to forge new conditions of articulation between politics, epistemology, and metaphysics. The politicization of ontology marks a regression to anthropomorphic myopia; the ontologization of politics falters the moment it tries to infer political prescriptions from metaphysical description. Philosophy and politics cannot be metaphysically conjoined; philosophy intersects with politics at the point where critical epistemology transects ideology critique. An emancipatory politics oblivious to epistemology quickly degenerates into metaphysical fantasy, which is to say, a religious substitute.[13] The failure to change the world may not be unrelated to the failure to understand it.

27. The assertion of the primacy of correlation is the condition for the post-modern dissolution of the epistemology-metaphysics nexus and the two fundamental distinctions concomitant with it: the sapience-sentience distinction and the concept-

13. In this regard, the notable preponderance of theological motifs in those variants of critical theory that have abandoned epistemology provides a telling symptom of the slide from ideological critique to metaphysical edification: 'redemption', 'reconciliation', 'Utopia', 'Messianism', 'grace', 'fidelity', 'faith', etc.

object distinction. In eliding the former, correlationism eliminates epistemology by reducing knowledge to discrimination. In eliding the latter, correlationism simultaneously reduces things to concepts and concepts to things. Each reduction facilitates the other: the erasure of the epistemological difference between sapience and sentience makes it easier to collapse the distinction between concept and object; the elision of the metaphysical difference between concept and object makes it easier to conflate sentience with sapience. Thus Latour's reduction of things to concepts (objects to 'actants') is of a piece with his reduction of concepts to things ('truth' to force).

28. The rejection of correlationism entails the reinstatement of the critical nexus between epistemology and metaphysics and its attendant distinctions: sapience/sentience; concept/object. We need to know what things are in order to measure the gap between their phenomenal and noumenal aspects as well as the difference between their extrinsic and intrinsic properties. To know (in the strong scientific sense) what something is is to conceptualize it. This is not to say that things are identical with their concepts. The gap between conceptual identity and non-conceptual difference—between what our concept of the object is and what the object is in itself—is not an ineffable hiatus or mark of irrecuperable alterity; it can be conceptually converted into an identity that is not of the concept even though the concept is of it. Pace Adorno, there is an alternative to the negation of identity concomitant with the concept's failure to coincide with what it aims at: a negation of the concept determined by the object's non-conceptual identity, rather than its lack in the concept. Pace Deleuze, there is an alternative to the affirmation of difference as non-representational concept (Idea) of the thing itself: an affirmation of identity in the object as ultimately determining the adequacy of its own conceptual representation. The difference between the conceptual and the extra-conceptual need not be characterized as lack or negation, or converted into a positive concept of being as Ideal difference-in-itself: it can be presupposed as already-given in the act of knowing or conception. But it is presupposed without being posited. This is what distinguishes scientific representation and governs its stance towards the object.[14]

29. What is real in the scientific representation of the object does not coincide with the object's quiddity as conceptually circumscribed—the latter is what the concept *means* and what the object *is*; its metaphysical quiddity or essence—but the scientific posture is one which there is an immanent yet transcendental hiatus between the reality of the object and its being as conceptually circumscribed: the posture of scientific representation is one in which it is the former that determines the latter and forces its perpetual revision. Scientific representation operates on the basis of a stance in which something in the object itself determines the discrepancy between its material reality—the fact *that* it is, its existence—and its being, construed as quiddity, or *what* it is. The scientific stance is one in which the reality of the object determines the meaning of its conception, and allows the discrepancy between that reality and the way in which it is conceptually circumscribed to be measured. This should be understood in contrast to the classic correlationist model according to which it is conceptual meaning that determines the 'reality' of the object, understood as the relation between representing and represented.

14. This is one of the most valuable insights in the mid-period work of François Laruelle (which he refers to as *Philosophie II*): see *En tant qu'un: la non-philosophie expliqué au philosophes*, Paris, Aubier, 1991. Unfortunately, its importance seems to diminish in Laruelle's subsequent work.

30. The distinction between the object's conceptual reality and its metaphysical reality has an analogue in the scholastic distinction between objective and formal reality. Yet it is not a dogmatic or pre-critical residue; rather, it follows from the epistemological constraint that prohibits the transcendentalization of meaning. The corollary of this critical constraint is the acknowledgement of the transcendental difference between meaning and being, or concept and object. Contrary to what correlationists proclaim, the presupposition of this difference is not a dogmatic prejudice in need of critical legitimation. Quite the reverse: it is the assumption that the difference between concept and object is always internal to the concept—that every difference is ultimately conceptual—that needs to be defended. For to assume that the difference between concept and object can only be internal to the concept is to assume that concepts furnish self-evident indexes of their own reality and internal structure—that we know what concepts are and can reliably track their internal differentiation—an assumption that then seems to license the claim that every difference in reality is a conceptual difference. The latter of course provides the premise for conceptual idealism, understood as the claim that reality is composed of concepts—precisely the sort of metaphysical claim which correlationism is supposed to abjure. Yet short of resorting to the phenomenological myth of an originary, self-constituting consciousness (one of the many variants of the myth of the given, denounced by Sellars[15]), the same critical considerations that undermine dogmatism about the essence and existence of objects also vitiate dogmatism about the essence and existence of concepts (whether indexed by signifiers, discursive practices, conscious experiences, etc). Thus it is not clear why our access to the structure of concepts should be considered any less in need of critical legitimation than our access to the structure of objects.[16] To assume privileged access to the structure of conception is to assume intellectual intuition. But this is to make a metaphysical claim about the essential nature of conception; an assumption every bit as dogmatic as any allegedly metaphysical assertion about the essential nature of objects. Thus, correlationism is perpetually tottering on the cusp of the slippery slope to conceptual idealism. The latter begins by assuming that knowledge of identity and difference in the concept is the precondition for knowledge of identity and difference in the object, before going on to conclude that every first-order difference between concept and object must be subsumed by a second-order conceptual difference, which must also in turn be conceptually subsumed at a higher level, and so on all the way up to the Absolute Notion. But unless it can be justified by the anticipation of a conceptual Absolute retrospectively enveloping every past difference, the subordination of every difference to the identity of our current concepts is more not less dogmatic than the transcendental presupposition of an extra-conceptual difference between concept and object.

31. More often than not, this idealist premise that every difference must be a difference in the concept underwrites the argument most frequently adduced by correlationists against metaphysical (or transcendental) realism. This argument revolves around a peculiar fallacy, which David Stove has christened 'the Gem'.[17] Its locus clas-

15. See Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997.

16. The signal merit of Paul Churchland's work, following Sellars', is to challenge the myth that the nature of concepts is given. See Paul Churchland, *A Neurocomputational Perspective: The Nature of Mind and the Structure of Science*, Cambridge, MIT, 1989.

17. See David Stove, 'Idealism: A Victorian Horror Story (Part Two)' in *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, pp. 135-178. Stove is a curious figure: a philosophical writer of outstanding analytical acumen and scathing wit, he is too acerbic to be respectable but too brilliant to be dismissed

sicus can be found in paragraph 23 of Berkeley's Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, where Berkeley challenges the assumption that it is possible to conceive of something existing independently of our conception of it (we will disregard for present purposes the distinction between conception and perception, just as Berkeley does):

> But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than for me to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it; but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? But do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? This therefore is nothing to the purpose; it only shews you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind: but it does not shew that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind. To make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. But the mind taking no notice of itself, is deluded to think it can and does conceive bodies existing unthought of or without the mind, though at the same time they are apprehended by or exist in itself. A little attention will discover to any one the truth and evidence of what is here said, and make it unnecessary to insist on any other proofs against the existence of material substance.[18]

32. Berkeley's reasoning here is instructive, for it reveals the hidden logic of every correlationist argument. From the indubitable premise that 'One cannot think or perceive something without thinking or perceiving it', Berkeley goes on to draw the dubious conclusion that 'Things cannot exist without being thought or perceived'. Berkeley's premise is a tautology, since the claim that one cannot think of something without thinking of it is one that no rational being would want to deny. But from this tautological premise Berkeley draws a non-tautological conclusion, viz., that things *depend* for their existence on being thought or perceived and are *nothing apart from* our thinking or perceiving of them. Yet Berkeley's argument is clearly formally fallacious, since one cannot derive a non-tautological conclusion from a tautological premise. How then does it manage to exude its modicum of plausibility? As Stove points out, it does so by equivocating between two senses of the word 'things': things as conceived or perceived (i.e. *ideata*), and things *simpliciter* (i.e. physical objects). This is of course the very distinction Berkeley seeks to undermine; but he cannot deny it from the outset without begging the question—the negation of this distinction and the metaphysical claim that only minds and their *ideata* exist is supposed to be the consequence of Berkeley's argument, not its presupposition. Yet it is only by substituting 'things' in the first and tautological sense of *ideata* for 'things' in the second and non-tautological sense of physical objects that Berkeley is able to dismiss as a 'manifest absurdity' the realist claim that it is possible to conceive of (physical) things existing unperceived or unthought. For it would indeed be a manifest absurdity to assert that we can conceive of physical things without conceiving of them. But it would be difficult to find any metaphysical realist who has ever endorsed such an absurdity. Rather, the realist claims that her concep-

as a crank. No doubt Stove's noxious political views (fanatical anti-communism coupled with not so thinly veiled racism and sexism) prevented him from gaining the recognition his work might have won had he been of a more benign temper. Some will cite his reactionary opinions as reason enough to dismiss him; correlationists in particular are liable to conclude from the fact that Stove, who defended realism, was a racist and a sexist, that realism entails racism and sexism.

18. http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/berkeley.html

tion of a physical thing and the physical thing which she conceives are two different things, and though the difference is perfectly conceivable, its conceivability does not render it mind-dependent—unless of course one is prepared to go the whole Hegelian hog and insist that it is conceptual differences all the way down (or rather, up). But then it will take more than the Gem to establish the absolute idealist claim that reality consists entirely of concepts; indeed, once the fallacious character of the Gem has been exposed, the absolute idealist claim that everything is conceptual (there are no things, only concepts) has little more to recommend it than the vulgar materialist claim that nothing is conceptual (there are no concepts, only things).

33. The difficulty facing the proponent of the Gem is the following: since the assumption that things are only *ideata* is every bit as metaphysical ('dogmatic') as the assumption that *ideata* are not the only things (that physical things are not ideas), the only way for the idealist to trump the realist is by invoking the self-authenticating nature of her experience as a thinking thing (or mind) and repository of ideas. But this she cannot do without invoking some idealist version of the myth of the given (which I take Sellars to have convincingly refuted). So in this regard, the alleged 'givenness' of the difference between concept and object would be no worse off than that of the identity of the concept (*qua* self-authenticating mental episode). Obviously, this does not suffice to vindicate metaphysical realism; what it does reveal however is that the Gem fails to disqualify it. It is undoubtedly true that we cannot conceive of concept-independent things without conceiving of them; but it by no means follows from this that we cannot conceive of things existing independently of concepts, since there is no logical transitivity from the mind-dependence of concepts to that of conceivable objects. Only someone who is confusing mind-independence with concept-independence would invoke the conceivability of the difference between concept and object in order to assert the mind-dependence of objects.

34. The paradigmatic or Berkeleyian version of the Gem assumes the following form:

> 'You cannot conceive of a mind-independent reality without conceiving of it. Therefore, you cannot conceive of a mind-independent reality'.

Note that the Gem does not assert that there is no mind-independent reality; it merely says that it must remain inconceivable. This is of course the classic correlationist claim. But as we have seen, it is predicated on a fundamental confusion between mind-independence and concept-independence. To claim that Cygnus X-3 exists independently of our minds is not to claim that Cygnus X-3 exists beyond the reach of our minds. Independence is not inaccessibility. The claim that something exists mind-independently does not commit one to the claim that it is conceptually inaccessible. By implying that mind-independence requires conceptual inaccessibility, the Gem saddles transcendental realism with an exorbitant burden. But it is a burden which there is no good reason to accept.

35. That one cannot conceive of something without conceiving it is uncontroversial. But the tautological premise in a Gem argument need not be so obvious. All that is necessary is that it exhibit the following form:

> 'You cannot do X unless Y, some necessary condition for doing X, is met'.
> Thus a Gem is any argument that assumes the following general form:
> 'You cannot X unless Y, a necessary condition for Xing things, is met.
> Therefore, you cannot X things-in-themselves'.

One gets a Gem by substituting for X and Y:

> 'You cannot experience/perceive/conceive/represent/refer to things unless the necessary conditions of experience/perception/conception/ representation/reference obtain.
>
> Therefore, you cannot experience/perceive/conceive/represent/refer to things-in-themselves'.

Of course, having distinguished Xed things from things-in-themselves and relegated the latter to the wastes of the inconceivable, the pressure soon mounts to dispense with the in-itself altogether and to shrink all reality down to the confines of the 'for us' (the phenomenal). Thus, although it is only supposed to secure correlationist agnosticism about the in-itself, rather than full-blown conceptual idealism, the Gem invariably heralds the slide towards the latter. In this regard, Stove catalogues, in an amusing and often acerbic manner, the various Gems mobilized in the service of post-Kantian idealism. But the Gem is better viewed as an argument for correlationism rather than for full blown conceptual idealism. For there are any number of human activities besides thinking or conceiving that can be substituted for X, thereby yielding an equally wide assortment of non-idealist anti-realisms: pragmatism, social constructivism, deconstruction, etc. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the Gem should have proved the trusty adjutant for almost every variety of late 20th Century correlationism, from Goodman and Rorty at one end to Latour and Foucault at the other. But unfortunately for correlationism, no amount of inventiveness in substituting for X and Y can suffice to palliate the fallaciousness of the Gem, which Stove understandably dismissed as 'an argument so bad it is hard to imagine anyone ever being swayed by it'.[19]

36. Yet ironically, and notwithstanding Stove's incredulity, correlationism's status as the regnant intellectual orthodoxy throughout the humanities and social sciences would seem to indicate the triumph of the Gem. There is little doubt that correlationism's appeal can be attributed to factors that have little or nothing to do with its logical probity—factors that are at once emotional (the defence of value through the subversion of fact); psychological (cutting the inhuman world down to human size); and political (the ontological investiture of politics compensating for its replacement by management in the public sphere). Argumentative stringency has never been the litmus test for the success of any philosopheme. Nevertheless, given the striking discrepancy between the cogency of correlationism's principal argumentative gambit and its academic popularity, one might be forgiven for asking (paraphrasing Stove): 'Can it be by this contemptible argument that the West was won for correlationism?'[20]

37. In light of this argumentative paucity, it is somewhat perplexing to see Quentin Meillassoux, the philosopher who has done more than anyone to challenge the hegemony of correlationism, declare his admiration for 'the exceptional strength of this [correlationist] argumentation, apparently and desperately implacable [.... It is] an argument as simple as it is powerful: No X without a givenness of X, no theory about

19. Stove, 'Idealism: A Victorian Horror Story', p. 147. As Stove himself remarks, the Gem's ubiquity in some philosophical quarters is such as to discourage attempts to catalogue individual instances of its occurrence. Stove discusses the Gem primarily in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth Century idealism, but any account of it now also has to consider its role in the vast literature comprised under the heading 'continental philosophy'. Here again, the sheer number and variety of Gems threatens to overwhelm the investigator, reducing her to numbed catatonia. Nevertheless, Alan Musgrave and James Franklin have both helped expand Stove's catalogue of Gems beyond the corpus of idealism by recording instances of the Gem in contemporary varieties of anti-realism. See Alan Musgrave 'Realism and Antirealism' in R. Klee (ed.), *Scientific Enquiry: Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 344-352; James Franklin 'Stove's Discovery of the Worst Argument in the World' *Philosophy*, no. 77, 2002, pp. 615-24.

20. Stove, 'Idealism: A Victorian Horror Story', p. 147.

X without a positing of X'.[21] What Meillassoux is entreating us to admire here is the high transcendentalist variant of the Gem, where 'givenness' and 'positing' stand for the conditions of reception and reflection respectively, and X is the object whose necessary conditions they provide. In order for X to be given, the necessary conditions of givenness must obtain (transcendental affection). In order for there to be a theory of X, the necessary conditions of positing must obtain (transcendental reflection). Meillassoux has Fichte rather than Kant in mind here.[22] For as he points out, it is not Kant but Fichte who is the veritable architect of the correlationist circle, understood as the abolition of the Kantian dualism of concept and intuition. Fichte overcomes the Kantian duality of active conception and passive affection through his notion of the Tathandlung, which is at once the positing of the given and the giving of the posited. By construing the correlation as a self-positing and thereby self-grounding act, Fichte seals the circle of correlation against any incursion of dogmatically posited exteriority—in other words, he eliminates the thing-in-itself. For Fichte, the non-I through which the I is affected is merely the posited residue of the absolute I's free and spontaneous act of self-positing. Thus, it is Fichte who uncovers the full idealist potency of transcendental reflection by tracking the power of positing back to its source in the unobjectifiable activity of the absolute ego.

38. Meillassoux underlines the extent to which Fichte's radicalization of transcendental reflection seems to preclude any possibility of metaphysical realism. Reflection as condition of objectification (representation) is precisely what cannot be objectified (represented); thus, Meillassoux argues, one cannot defeat correlationism merely by positing an unobjectifiable real as the allegedly mind-independent condition of objectification, for in doing so one is effectively contradicting oneself, since the non-posited status of the reality that is the content of one's thought is effectively contradicted by the act of thinking through which one posits it. Thus, transcendental realism understood as the positing of what is allegedly non-posited becomes self-refuting. According to Meillassoux, one is merely dogmatically *seceding* from rather than rationally *refuting* Fichtean correlationism if one thinks that positing an un-posited reality suffices to exempt one from the circle of transcendental reflection. By emphasizing what he takes to be the exceptional rigour of Fichtean correlationism, Meillassoux reasserts his conviction that correlationism can only be overcome from within: since Fichte has disqualified the possibility of positing the absolute as an object, the only non-dogmatic alternative to Fichte's transcendentalization of reflection consists in absolutizing the contingency of the correlation; i.e. the inability of positing to ground its own necessity, which Meillassoux sees exemplified by Fichte's characterization of the *Tathandlung* as a *free* act—in other words, something that is contingent rather than necessary:

> We choose whether or not to posit our own subjective reflection, and this choice is not grounded on any necessary cause, since our freedom is radical. But to say this is just to recognize, after Descartes, that our subjectivity cannot reach an absolute necessity but only a conditional one. Even if Fichte speaks abundantly of absolute and uncondition-

21. Quentin Meillassoux, 'Speculative Realism', *Collapse*, vol. 3, 2007, p. 409.

22. Interestingly, a good case can be made for the claim that Kant's work is far less indebted to the Gem than that of many Kantians. This is a point made by James Franklin (Franklin, 'Stove's Discovery of the Worst Argument in the World'). Among the many merits of the Sellarsian reconstruction of Kant is that it gives us a Gem free Kant: Sellars shows that transcendental philosophy can and should be dissociated from transcendental idealism, and that Kant's transcendental distinction between concepts and intuitions can and should be dissociated from his arguments for the ideality of space and time.

> al necessity, his necessity is no longer a dogmatic and substantial necessity, but a necessity grounded in a freedom that is itself ungrounded. There can be no dogmatic proof that the correlation exists rather than not.[23]

39. Meillassoux is surely right to identify Fichte as the veritable founder of strong correlationism (as opposed to weak or Kantian correlationism). But transcendental realists may be forgiven for remaining unmoved by the claim that the free act of positing reflection disqualifies every invocation of a non-posited reality. Fichte's characterizations of freedom and reflection cannot but strike one as instances of gratuitous idealist dogmatism. Reflection is supposed to disqualify the in-itself because it is the unobjectifiable condition of representation and as such renders all objects, even and precisely those objects represented as existing in-themselves, into objects that are merely *for us*. Yet even if we grant the assertion (which seems to be based on little besides an appeal to the phenomenology of conscious experience) that reflection as condition of cognitive representation cannot be objectively known, how does this license the claim that reflection, which is supposedly only accessible through a conscious experience of subjective spontaneity (here automatically equated with indetermination) indexes a genuinely transcendental freedom? Meillassoux is overly indulgent towards Fichte's reckless equations between reflection and activity, spontaneity and freedom; he is too quick to license Fichte's hypertrophic inflation of terms like 'reflection', 'act', and 'freedom'.

40. Moreover, the Fichtean distinction between objectification and reflection hardly ameliorates correlationism's rational credibility once we realize that the attempt to indict realism of performative contradiction is simply an elaborately camouflaged version of the Gem. Consider:

> 'One cannot posit Saturn unless the conditions of positing (the free and unobjectifiable activity of the absolute ego) obtain.
>
> Therefore, one cannot posit Saturn as non-posited (existing independently of the free and unobjectifiable activity of the absolute ego)'.

Here once again, the sleight of hand consists in the equivocation between what should be two distinct functions of the word 'Saturn'. (We will use 'Saturn' when mentioning the word and **Saturn** when designating the concept for which the word stands). In order for the premise to be safely tautological (rather than an outrageously metaphysical begging of the question), the word 'Saturn' must be understood to mean *sense* (or 'mode of presentation') of the concept **Saturn**. But in order for the conclusion to be interesting (as opposed to blandly tautological), the word 'Saturn' must be understood to mean the *referent* of the concept **Saturn**. Once this is understood, it becomes clear that the considerations that make it true to say that **Saturn** cannot be posited independently of the conditions of its positing (i.e. the conditions for the proper use of the concept), do not make it true to say that Saturn cannot be posited as non-posited (i.e. that Saturn cannot exist unless there are conditions for the proper use of **Saturn**).

41. When I say that Saturn does not need to be posited in order to exist, I am not saying that the meaning of the concept **Saturn** does not need to be posited by us in order to exist—quite obviously, the concept **Saturn** means what it does because of us, and in this sense it is perfectly acceptable to say that it has been 'posited' through human activity. But when I say that Saturn exists un-posited, I am not making a claim about a word or a concept; my claim is rather that the planet which is the referent of

23. Meillassoux, 'Speculative Realism', p. 430.

the word 'Saturn' existed before we named it and will probably still exist after the beings who named it have ceased to exist, since it is something quite distinct both from the word 'Saturn' and the concept **Saturn** for which the word stands. Thus the 'Saturn' that is synonymous with 'correlate of the act of positing' (i.e. **Saturn** as the sense of the word 'Saturn') is not synonymous with the Saturn probed by Cassini-Huygens. To say that Saturn exists un-posited is simply to say that Cassini-Huygens did not probe the sense of a word and is not in orbit around a concept.

42. It might be objected that we need **Saturn** to say *what* Saturn is; that we cannot refer to Saturn or assert that it is without **Saturn**. But this is false: the first humans who pointed to Saturn did not need to know and were doubtless mistaken about what it is: but they did not need to know in order to point to it. To deny this is to imply that Saturn's existence—that it is—is a function of what it is—that Saturn is indissociable from **Saturn** (or whatever else people have believed Saturn to be). But this is already to be a conceptual idealist. Even were the latter to demonstrate that the conditions of sense determine the conditions of reference, this would still not be enough to show that the existence of the referent depends upon the conditions of reference. To do that, one would have to show that 'to be' means 'to be referred to'; an equation tantamount to Berkeley's equation of 'to be' with 'to be perceived'; yet it would require more than another Gem to dissolve such a fundamentally normative distinction in meaning. Of course, this distinction can be challenged by questioning the nature of the relation between sense and reference and interrogating the relation between words and things.[24] The more sophisticated varieties of anti-realism have done so in interesting and instructive ways. But the claim that the difference between what things are and that they are is not ultimately conceptual cannot be challenged by willfully conflating the sense of a word with the referent of its concept, as the Fichtean argument above does. Fichte notwithstanding, there would seem to be good cognitive grounds for distinguishing words from things and meanings from objects. One can of course contest this cognitive conviction by alleging that it is a rationally indefensible dogma; but confusing **Saturn** with Saturn is not the way to do it. It is tautologically true to say that one cannot posit something without positing it; but it no more follows from this that the posited X is nothing apart from its positing than that **Saturn** is the same thing as Saturn.

43. Since Fichte's purported disqualification of transcendental realism relies entirely on this trivial confusion, there is no reason for us to lend it any more credence than we accord to Berkeley's 'proof' of the impossibility of conceiving independently existing material objects. But Berkeley has more than one version of the Gem. His argument can also be reformulated as follows:

All our knowledge of physical objects begins in experience.

1. But the only things we directly experience are ideas.
2. Therefore all the properties by which we know physical objects, whether these are sensory properties (as in the case of secondary qualities like smell, colour, touch, taste), or conceptual properties (as in the case of primary qualities like figure, motion, extension, mass, velocity), are ideas, i.e. experiences.

24. Sellars for one does not believe that meaning can be understood as a set of relations between words and things (whether mental or physical); his 'conceptual role' account of meaning is one in which reference can no longer be construed as a relation between words and extra-linguistic items. Sellars' account is far too intricate to be addressed here; but suffice it to say that Sellars remained committed to a naturalistic (scientific) realism and that his philosophy of language provides no warrant for the sort of anti-realism we have been considering here.

3. Consequently, when we say we know a physical object, what we really mean is that we are experiencing a collection of properties (whether primary or secondary).
4. But experiences cannot exist unless they are experienced.
5. Therefore physical objects cannot exist apart from our experiences of them.

The fallaciousness of this version of the argument becomes apparent when we notice that Berkeley has already smuggled in his conclusion in step 3, where he simply identifies ideas with experiences. Having done so, it follows that the idea of something existing independently of thought becomes self-contradictory because it is equivalent to an *experiencing* of something that is *un-experienced*. This is obviously contradictory; but it is contradictory only because Berkeley has illegitimately identified the *act* of thinking (the experiencing) with the *object* of thinking (the experienced). Thus to identify physical objects with experiences is already to assume that they do not exist independently of experience. This is why Berkeley is able to maintain that to try to think of something that exists outside thought is contradictory because it is tantamount to thinking a thought that is not a thought. But to say that I can think of something existing independently of my thought need not be flagrantly contradictory once I distinguish the claim that my thoughts cannot exist independently of my mind, which is trivially true, from the claim that *what* my thoughts are about cannot exist independently of my mind, which simply does not follow from such a trivial truth. Thus, to take one of Berkeley's own favoured examples, the fact that I cannot think of an uninhabited landscape without thinking of it does not mean that this landscape becomes inhabited merely by virtue of my thinking about it. It is certainly true that I cannot think about the Empty Quarter without thinking about it; but it does not follow from this that the Empty Quarter is populated by my thinking about it. To insist that it does would be like claiming that it is impossible to paint an uninhabited landscape because the act of painting it renders it inhabited. But this would be to confuse the act of painting with *what* is painted, or the act of thinking with *what* is thought. As with Berkeley, Fichte's putative refutation of transcendental realism rests on precisely this equivocation between the necessary or *formal* conditions for the being of the act and the *real* conditions for the being of its correlate. The correlationist conceit is to suppose that formal conditions of 'experience' (however broadly construed) suffice to determine material conditions of reality. But that the latter cannot be uncovered independently of the former does not mean that they can be circumscribed by them.

44. Meillassoux insists that transcendental realism remains a secession from rather than a refutation of Fichtean correlationism. But there is no need to secede from something whose cogency evaporates upon critical scrutiny. Once one realizes that Fichte's intimidating Teutonicisms mask flimsy Berkeleyian Gems, it becomes no more impossible to refute Fichtean correlationism than it was to refute Berkeleyian immaterialism. Fichte's *Tathandlung* is merely the most rarefied species of Gem as that form of argumentation that slides from the true claim that we need a concept of mind-independent reality in order to make claims about the latter to the false claim that the very concept of mind-independent reality suffices to convert the latter into a concept, which is by definition mind-dependent. This is the fatal non-sequitur at the root of every variant of correlationism; one rendered all the more egregious by its reliance on a naive folk-psychological theory of the nature of conception. But a thesis as dubious as subjective idealism does not become miraculously more cogent once bedecked in transcendental

fancy-dress and subjectivism is not rendered any more plausible once festooned with the mysterious activities of the absolute ego's 'positing' and 'reflecting'. The word 'transcendental' has for too long been invested with magical powers, immunizing any term to which it is affixed against the critical scrutiny to which it is susceptible in its ordinary or 'empirical' use. *Pace* Meillassoux, the burden of proof lies squarely with correlationism, not with transcendental realism.

45. The problem of objective synthesis (or what Laruelle calls 'philosophical decision') is basically that of how to adjudicate the relationship between conceptual thought and non-conceptual reality. But that we have a concept of the difference between **Saturn** and Saturn does not entail that the difference is a difference in the concept: concept of difference ≠ conceptual difference. The acknowledgement of this non-equivalence is the basic premise of transcendental realism, which cannot be subverted simply by equivocating, in the manner of strong or Fichtean correlationism, between the conditions of positing and the being of the posited. For as Laruelle points out, even this equivocation cannot but invoke the absolute reality of the Tathandlung or act of self-positing: the Fichtean cannot help but be a realist about her own positing activity.[25] Realism is uncircumventable, even for the most stubborn anti-realist. The problem is to identify the salient epistemological considerations so that the question of what to be a realist about may be rationally adjudicated. In this regard, the sorts of phenomenological intuition about conscious activity resorted to by Fichteans and other idealists remain a dubious source of authority. More fundamentally, the question is why those who are so keen to attribute absolute or unconditional reality to the activities of self-consciousness (or of minded creatures) seem so loath to confer equal existential rights upon the un-conscious, mindless processes through which consciousness and mindedness first emerged and will eventually be destroyed.

46. Kantians rightly charge dogmatic metaphysicians with ignoring the problem of cognitive access: this is the Critical problem of the relation between representation and reality. Yet far from resolving the access problem, strong correlationism simply dissolves it by abolishing the in-itself. Acknowledging the autonomy of the in-itself, transcendental realism faces the problem of determining what is real. This cannot be addressed independently of scientific representation. For those of us who take scientific representation to be the most reliable form of cognitive access to reality, the problem is one of granting maximal (but not, please note, incorrigible) authority to the scientific representation of the world while acknowledging that science changes its mind about *what* it says there is. Accordingly, the key question becomes: How can we acknowledge that scientific conception tracks the in-itself without resorting to the problematic metaphysical assumption that to 150do so is to conceptually circumscribe the 'essence' (or formal reality) of the latter? For we want to be able to claim that science knows reality without resorting to the Aristotelian equation of reality with substantial form. This

25. Ironically enough, although Meillassoux invokes Fichte in order to refute what he sees as Laruelle's dogmatic realism, Laruelle has cited Fichte as a decisive early inspiration (See François Laruelle, *Le déclin de l'écriture*, Paris, Aubier-Flammarion, 1977). The irony is that when Meillassoux indicts Laruelle of a performative (or 'pragmatic') contradiction between the act of positing and the non-posited reality posited through that act, he is making the same Fichtean allegation against Laruelle as the latter makes against philosophers when he charges them of a performative contradiction between the non-thetic reality of the act of philosophical decision and the thetic reality that is synthesized (i.e. decided) through that act. Once one strips away the extraneous post-Heideggerian rhetoric about its supposedly 'non-philosophical' status, it becomes possible to discern in Laruelle's radically immanent 'One' or 'Real' an updated (Michel Henry influenced) version of Fichte's absolute ego.

is to say that the structure of reality includes but is not exhausted by the structure of discretely individuated objects. Indeed, it is the nature of the epistemological correlation between individuated concepts and individual objects that is currently being investigated by cognitive science. Here again, Sellars' work provides an invaluable starting point, since his critique of the given shows that we require a theory of concepts as much as a theory of objects; indeed, folk psychology is itself a proto-scientific theory of mind which can be improved upon. The science of objects must be prosecuted in tandem with a science of concepts, of the sort currently prefigured by Sellarsian naturalists such as Paul Churchland, although we cannot follow the latter in maintaining that pragmatic-instrumentalist constraints provide a secure epistemological footing for the connection between concepts and objects.

47. Of course, recognizing this does not resolve or answer any of the profound epistemological and metaphysical difficulties which confront us in the wake of science's remarkable cognitive achievements. But it may help us realize that these difficulties cannot be circumvented, as both correlationists and dogmatic metaphysicians seek to do, by dispensing with those hard-won dualisms that have helped clarify what distinguishes scientific representation from metaphysical fantasy. Dualisms such as those of meaning and being, and of knowing and feeling, are not relics of an outmoded metaphysics; they are makeshift but indispensable instruments through which reason begins to be apprized both of its continuity and its discontinuity with regard to what it is still expedient to call 'nature'.