POSTSCRIPT: SPECULATIVE AUTOPSY

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> Any discussion of Speculative Realism needs to begin by avoiding the intermittent and pointless debate over whether Speculative Realism really exists. This question comes five years too late to be meaningful, and generally takes the form of a put-down rather than a bona fide question. Speculative Realism is now the topic of a thriving book series at a major university press, and the subject of at least one forthcoming monograph. It is embedded in the editorial policy of several philosophy journals. It has become a *terme d'art* in architecture, archaeology, geography, the visual arts, and even history. It has crossed national boundaries with ease, and is surely the central theme of discussion in the growing continental philosophy blogosphere. Speculative Realism is the topic of several postdoctoral fellowships offered in the United States this year. It has been the subject of semester-long classes at universities as well as graduate theses in Paris. Though there are still tough tests ahead concerning the breadth and durability of Speculative Realism, it has long since passed the 'existence' test to a far greater degree than most of its critics.
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> Graham Harman, 'The Current State of Speculative Realism' in *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism* IV (2013), 22.

Has Speculative Realism passed the existence test? Graham Harman has certainly served as its indefatigable midwife. No doubt modesty forbade him from mentioning that he is commissioning editor of the 'thriving book series' he cites, and the self-volunteered editor of the new Speculative Realism section of the popular *PhilPapers* website.[1] His claim about postdoctoral fellowships and semester-long university courses sounds an impressively academic note, flagging the

1. <http://philpapers.org/browse/speculative-realism>.

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institutional recognition that is generally accepted as the seal of intellectual respectability. Yet here a note of caution is in order, since Ayn Rand's Objectivism and L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology have also succeeded in securing toeholds in American university programmes. Academic recognition is not compelling by itself unless we are told the names of the fellowships and institutions in question. Moreover, a sceptic might be forgiven for querying the reliability of a witness testifying to Speculative Realism's indubitable existence from within the pages of a publication whose official subtitle is 'A Journal of Speculative Realism'. And if existence is to be measured in terms of blogs, books, and Google hits, then Speculative Realism lags woefully far behind Bigfoot, Yeti, and the Loch Ness Monster, all of whom have passed Harman's 'existence test' with flying colours.

Of course, no one has ever denied the existence of *talk* about Speculative Realism. To ask whether Speculative Realism *deserves* to be treated as a cohesive philosophical movement is not to deny the existence of books, articles, and university courses that do just that. The real question is: Is this talk, and the currency of Harman's Speculative Realism brand,[2] sufficient

2. Harman makes no bones about his desire to turn Speculative Realism into a brand:

> The brand is not merely a degenerate practice of brainwashing consumerism, but a universally recognized method of conveying information while cutting through information clutter. Coining specific names for philosophical positions helps orient the intellectual public on the various available options while also encouraging untested permutations. If the decision were mine alone, not only would the name "speculative realism" be retained, but a logo would be designed for projection on PowerPoint screens, accompanied by a few signature bars of smoky dubstep music. It is true that such practices would invite snide commentary about "philosophy reduced to marketing gimmicks". But it would hardly matter, since attention would

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to justify the claim that it qualifies as a philosophically significant movement? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to disentangle Harman's claims on behalf of Speculative Realism from the philosophical claims of the various thinkers who are now, for better or worse, associated with this supposed movement. The disparate philosophical tendencies that have been grouped together as Speculative Realism all emerged from the subdiscipline known as 'Continental philosophy'. It is primarily those interested in the Continental tradition—whose numbers are certainly not negligible, since they comprise scholars working in such fields as comparative literature, art theory, media and cultural studies, architecture, and other humanities disciplines—whose interest has been piqued by Speculative Realism. The novelty attributed to the latter is taken to reside in the way it supposedly challenges the core tenets of Continental orthodoxy. These tenets are encapsulated in the term 'correlationism', originally coined by Quentin Meillassoux in his book *After Finitude*.[3] The rejection of correlationism is supposed to be the common denominator binding 'Speculative Realists' together, despite their many evident differences.

thereby be drawn to the works of speculative realism, and its reputation would stand or fall based on the inherent quality of these works, of which I am confident'. ('On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy' in L. Bryant, G. Harman, and N. Smicek [eds], *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism* [Melbourne: re-press, 2011], 21.)

While I have the highest regard for the work of Quentin Meillassoux and Iain Hamilton Grant, two of the supposed 'founders' of Speculative Realism, I do not share Harman's confidence about the quality of other works currently being marketed under this banner, or about his abilities as a judge of quality. As for 'orienting the intellectual public', this is a task best left to PR agents and journalists, not philosophers. By taking it upon himself to carry out this task, Harman can be credited with inventing a new genre: *philosophy-marketing*.

3. Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, tr. R. Brassier (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).

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The question then arising is whether anti-correlationism is indeed a sufficient condition for Speculative Realism. I do not think it can be. This is not to dismiss the salience of Meillassoux's diagnosis of correlationism. A favourite ploy among those who wish to rubbish Meillassoux and Speculative Realism more generally is to deny that there is any such thing as correlationism, or that it has ever been prevalent in Continental philosophy. This is plainly false. It is true that the term has been much abused by those who, following Harman, see anti-correlationism as the defining feature of Speculative Realism. At its most extreme, this allows the accusation of 'correlationism' to become a way of caricaturing rival philosophical positions and short-circuiting debate. I do not believe that correlationism is the unmitigated 'bad thing' which it seems to be for Harman (and to a lesser extent Meillassoux), and I have learned the importance of defending the 'good', epistemic formulation of correlationism from its 'bad', sceptical version.[4] Nevertheless, I still think it patently false to deny that correlationism names a characteristic tenet of Continental philosophy. Correlationism in the 'strong' version targeted by Meillassoux is simply the denial that it makes sense to postulate things-in-themselves and it is easy to find passages by numerous Continental luminaries (not to mention analytic anti-realists) unequivocally proclaiming the nonsensicality of the Kantian *an sich*.[5]

4. My failure to make this distinction vitiated my discussion of Meillassoux in *Nihil Unbound* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), where I too indulged in indiscriminate anti-correlationist rhetoric which I now regret.

5. In 2006, while helping me prepare the final manuscript for *Nihil Unbound*, Damian Veal compiled a list of such passages in a document entitled 'Correlationism: The Evidence'. It featured quotations from Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, as well as from Carnap, Quine,

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Does this mean then that anyone willing to countenance things-in-themselves counts as a Speculative Realist? Clearly not. If this were the case, Speculative Realism would count among its proponents analytic thinkers such as David Lewis, Michael Devitt, David Armstrong, Timothy Williamson, Theodore Sider, and others too numerous to mention. Anti-correlationism is simply too tenuous a criterion to be counted a sufficient condition for inclusion under the banner of Speculative Realism. Might there be a more positive criterion of inclusion? It is highly doubtful. Consider the philosophical differences between Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, Grant's neo-idealist Naturephilosophy, Meillassoux's speculative materialism, and my own Sellarsian transcendental naturalism. The first insists that only objects exist. The second defends a dynamic ontology of powers. The third proposes that the Absolute is not what is but what could be. The last claims that thinking is embedded in a nature to which it is logically (though not causally) irreducible. What is their common feature? The fact that each stakes out a position with regard to the in-itself? But so do the analytic philosophers mentioned above. And the differences that prevent these analytic thinkers from being grouped together as proponents of a single school are surely as significant as those that divide the alleged proponents of Speculative Realism. Harman says there are things-in-themselves but they can only be alluded to, not known. Grant and Meillassoux deny that the in-itself consists of things, but affirm thought's purchase upon the Absolute. I claim that we can know things-in-themselves, but not

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Goodman, Putnam, McDowell, and Brandom. Those who like to insist that correlationism does not and has never existed would do well to check the historical record.

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through contact with the Absolute, since knowing takes time. What then unites us other than the sociological fact that our work tends to be classified as part of the Continental tradition, while that of Lewis, Williamson, Sider et al. is classified as analytic?

It is true that the philosophers taken to represent Speculative Realism share an antipathy to a certain philosophical sensibility characteristic of post-Heideggerian Continental philosophy: the fetishizing of finitude, voiced with a mannered portentousness that is the unfortunate consequence of anglophone writers self-consciously aping transliterated Franco-German. But impatience with the rhetoric of finitude and distaste for excessively mannered prose hardly amounts to a common philosophical agenda. Deleuze and Badiou can be credited with rejecting the pathos of finitude long before the advent of Speculative Realism. Their numerous followers share at least this much with Speculative Realists. In fact, the only unequivocally positive commonality uniting Speculative Realism's founding members is their participation in the 2007 workshop of the same name. Yet when Alberto Toscano and I coorganized this small workshop, founding a new movement was the furthest thing from our minds.[6] Whatever affinities connected the participants, they were too inchoate to be turned into a doctrinal bond, let alone a movement. Perhaps they would have burgeoned in philosophically fruitful ways had they not been prematurely petrified by branding. Be that as it may, it is not insignificant that even if they have not yet disavowed it publicly, none of the other workshop participants

6. Indeed, Toscano's subsequent conscription into the ranks of Speculative Realism, much against his will, has been a source of periodic annoyance to him.

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has invested in the label in anything like the way that Harman has.[7]

This is unsurprising when one considers the extent to which the label itself propagates philosophical ambiguity. For even if we grant that Speculative Realists share some sort of commitment to realism—despite being realists about very different things—in what sense is this realism supposed to be 'speculative'? Of the four alleged 'founders' of Speculative Realism, only Quentin Meillassoux espouses the term 'speculative'. He does so to distinguish his materialism from metaphysical or scientistic doctrines of the same name. As used by Meillassoux, the term 'speculative' is to be understood in the Hegelian sense to mean the kind of thinking that is not content with determining its subject-matter extrinsically by appending fixed predicates to it, but instead allows subject and predicate to switch roles so that the predicate can become subject and the subject become predicate. This reversibility is of course the hallmark of dialectical thinking, of which Meillassoux is a brilliant practitioner. His 'speculative' materialism renders him far closer to Badiou and Žižek than to the Speculative Realists with whom he continues to be associated. Indeed, nothing could be less 'speculative' in Meillassoux's sense than Harman's Object-Oriented Philosophy. And while we may be more sympathetic to materialism than Harman is, neither Grant nor I endorse 'speculation' in Meillassoux's sense. Stripped of the specific philosophical meaning that it has in Meillassoux's work,

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7. Iain Hamilton Grant did write a short introduction to Speculative Realism for *The Philosopher's Magazine* in 2010: see I. H. Grant, 'Speculative Realism', *The Philosopher's Magazine* 50 (2010), 58–9. However, with typical self-effacement, Grant did not include his own work in this brief two-page survey. I think it fair to say he no longer has much use for the term; he has certainly not used it to characterize his own work since. Nor for that matter has Meillassoux.

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the term 'speculative' is reduced to its ordinary adjectival sense, meaning 'conjectural, fanciful, unsubstantiated by evidence or fact'. Prefixed to an ill-defined 'realism', it becomes the alibi for a doctrine that wishes to spare itself the trouble of justification.

Ultimately, neither commonalities nor shared aversions suffice to clearly demarcate Speculative Realists from other philosophers. Considered as a philosophical movement, Speculative Realism is vitiated by its fatal lack of cohesiveness. Whether we try to define it negatively by what it is against or positively by what it is for, we exclude too little and include too much. Harman justifies his branding of Speculative Realism as a 'universally recognized method of conveying information while cutting through informational clutter'.[8] The problem is that those he has enlisted as the brand's representatives diverge on so many fundamentals that the noise generated by bundling them together far exceeds any possible informational content this grouping might have hoped to provide. In the absence of even a minimal positive criterion of doctrinal cohesiveness, all that is left is chatter about something called 'Speculative Realism'—placing it on an ontological par with chatter about the 'Montauk Project'. It is not difficult to see how Speculative Realism passes Harman's existence test, since this test is predicated on a principle as simple as it is dubious: *to be is to be talked about*.

But there is another more important question underlying the dispute over Speculative Realism's existence. It is the following: Is there anything of real philosophical import at stake in the controversy over what Meillassoux calls 'correlationism'? I think that there is indeed, but unfortunately this is precisely what has been obscured by the concerted attempt to brand

8. See footnote 2 above.

Speculative Realism. The impetus for the original, eponymous workshop was to revive questions about realism, materialism, science, representation, and objectivity, that were dismissed as otiose by each of the main pillars of Continental orthodoxy: phenomenology, critical theory, and deconstruction. The synopsis for that workshop, which I composed with Alberto Toscano, is worth citing because it illustrates the shortfall between the concerns that animated the original 'Speculative Realism' event, and those of the current Speculative Realism brand:

> Contemporary 'continental' philosophy often prides itself on having overcome the age-old metaphysical battles between realism and idealism. Subject-object dualism, whose repudiation has turned into a conditioned reflex of contemporary theory, has supposedly been destroyed by the critique of representation and supplanted by various ways of thinking the fundamental correlation between thought and world.
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> But perhaps this anti-representational (or 'correlationist') consensus—which exceeds philosophy proper and thrives in many domains of the humanities and the social sciences—hides a deeper and more insidious idealism. Is realism really so 'naive'? And is the widespread dismissal of representation and objectivity the radical, critical stance it so often claims to be?

The interest in rehabilitating representation and objectivity remains my own personal preoccupation and was certainly not shared by any of the other participants then or now. But the issue of the link between representation and objectivity generates questions about the status of scientific representation, which in turn lead to the more fundamental issue of philosophy's relation to the natural sciences.

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This issue is central to Meillassoux's work, whether in the form of his attempt to provide a speculative proof of the contingency of the laws of nature or in his account of the positive 'meaninglessness' of mathematical signs.[9] But it is equally fundamental for Grant, whose reactivation of Schellingian *Naturphilosophie* requires reasserting 'the eternal and necessary bond between philosophy and physics'[10]—an interest emphatically reaffirmed by Grant's ongoing research into the philosophical implications of the 'deep-field problem' in cosmology. It is precisely this concern with renegotiating philosophy's relation to the natural sciences that is conspicuously absent from the Harman-sanctioned branding of Speculative Realism. For Harman, such concern smacks of 'scientism'. Indeed, Harman's vocal disdain for 'scientism' (not to mention 'epistemism') confirms the extent to which, notwithstanding the eccentricity of his reading of Heidegger, he remains an orthodox Heideggerian. For Harman, metaphorical allusion trumps scientific investigation and fascination with objects trumps any concern for objectivity. Indeed, the irony—as Pete Wolfendale's withering dissection of Object-Oriented Ontology demonstrates—is that in Harman's hands, Speculative Realism merely exacerbates the disdain for rationality, whether philosophical *or* scientific, which is among correlationism's more objectionable consequences. It is this *misology* which Meillassoux's *After Finitude* sought to challenge. Far from challenging it, Harman's Object-Oriented Philosophy

9. Q. Meillassoux, 'Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign', in A. Avenessian and S. Malik (eds) *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity Since Structuralism* (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

10. See I.H. Grant, 'The "Eternal and Necessary Bond Between Philosophy and Physics"' in D. Veal (ed.), *Angelaki* 10:1 (2005), 43–59.

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pushes this misology towards even more reckless extremes, such that it ends up being, as Wolfendale puts it, 'correlationism's eccentric uncle'.

The denigration of rationality often serves as an alibi for those seeking to evade the obligation to justify their philosophical claims. But this is precisely the obligation that no philosopher can shirk, and the demand for justification will not go away, no matter how stubbornly one tries to ignore it. For how are we supposed to *know* whether or not there are things in themselves, let alone how they are structured? While Meillassoux and Grant adduce different kinds of a priori proof to the effect that we can know that the in-itself exists, even though it does not consist of objects (since both Meillassoux's *surchaos* and Grant's Naturing nature are unobjectifiable), Harman remains content with asserting that the world is crammed full of objects in-themselves, whose sensual qualities veil real qualities neither we nor any other object can know. Yet as Wolfendale demonstrates, Harman fails to explain how one might ever know that there is a one-to-one correlation between, on the one hand, the sensual objects which we and other objects apprehend, and on the other, the real objects that underlie these sensual objects. This 'object-oriented' realism is dogmatic in Kant's strict sense. Unlike Meillassoux and Grant, Harman does not try to provide a rational rebuttal of Kant's edict that all metaphysical assertions about the noumenal are equally arbitrary. He simply ignores it.

More egregiously still, Harman cannot answer the simple question that would seem to be utterly fundamental for any Object-Oriented Ontology: *What is an object*? Harman's starting point is phenomenology. He generalizes intentional correlation and turns it into the basic relation through which objects interact. Yet he insists that the human-world correlate

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is not the indispensable condition of access to objects. But how then is it possible for us to describe the *quiddity* of objects independently of our intentional relation to them? Without intentional consciousness as source and unifier of the eidetic (object-disclosing) horizon, we have no reliable way of distinguishing between the eidetic or real features of objects and their accidental or sensual qualities. The upshot is a metaphysics in which we cannot say *what* anything really is. For if we cannot specify the essential qualities that distinguish one real object from another, how can we be sure that the discrete multiplicity of sensual objects does not mask the underlying continuity of a single, indivisible real object? Ultimately, Harman's account of 'real objects' fuses epistemic ineffability with ontological inscrutability: since real objects can never be represented, only 'alluded' to, it is impossible to say what they really are. The result, as Wolfendale shows, is a metaphysics where we can never know what we are 'really' talking about, nor explain why our allusions should succeed where our representations fail.

Graham Harman should feel honoured by what he himself recognizes as Wolfendale's 'encyclopedic diligence', even if he may be discomfited by its consequences for his own work. What Wolfendale provides us with is a compelling diagnosis of what is wrong not just with Object-Oriented Ontology, but the Speculative Realism brand to which Harman has lent his imprimatur. Wolfendale's painstaking dissection of the confusions, fallacies, and non sequiturs unleashed by this new species of speculative dogmatism is as instructive as it is devastating. And indeed, there is an appropriately dialectical paradox in the realisation that Wolfendale's autopsy for Harman's Speculative Realism brand embodies everything that the 'Speculative Realism' workshop seemed to promise: the breakout from a

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terminally sclerotic Continental tradition epitomized by a motley of what Lakatos called 'degenerating research programmes'.[11]

There is no little irony in the fact that this promise, briefly kindled in April 2007, was prematurely snuffed out as a result of the attempt to render Speculative Realism palatable to an audience whose sensibilities were already shaped by Continental philosophy—an audience that equates representation with repression, objectivity with oppression, and naturalism with scientism. But Wolfendale has reignited the breakout. His matchless philosophical intelligence cuts across traditions in search of the necessary resources for the construction of new conceptual possibilities, rearticulating the questions that the 'Speculative Realism' workshop had initially promised to take up. It is thus only fitting that Wolfendale's 'speculative autopsy' should also mark the birth of his own genuinely unprecedented philosophical voice.