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BETWEEN NATURALISM AND RATIONALISM

A New Realist Landscape

BY

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Abstract. This review essay attempts to present a coherent and reasonably unitary picture of the contemporary 'speculative turn' in continental philosophy as charted in Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, eds, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism* (2011). Avoiding a more objective yet more anodyne chapter by chapter summary, I paint an intentionally synoptic view by selecting some common concerns of the authors involved, and group them under five 'core themes'. Throughout, I try to keep open the comparative channel with the realist tenets of critical realism, and conclude vouching for the necessity for more bridge-building works to appear in the future.

Key words: analytic-continental divide; continental realism; immanence; materialism; naturalism; rationalism; speculative realism

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Introduction

The landscape of continental[2] philosophy has undergone profound changes in the past decade, to the extent that the contours of a new set of concerns and related research agendas have been identified coalescing into what has been termed the 'speculative turn'. Whether or not this is the best name for it, the somewhat bewildering variety of positions (and writing styles) presented in the twenty-three essays and two interviews[3] included in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism* (henceforth *TST*) are held together by at least two characteristics (encapsulated in the subtitle of the book): their placement in the intellectual lineage of continental philosophy and their concern with new approaches to realism and materialism. The nature (and the originality) of the 'turn' presented in *TST* consists precisely in the apparent clash between these two traits. Within the analytic tradition realist concerns have been present at least since the abandonment of the logical positivist agenda and the rehabilitation of metaphysics and causal-theoretical explanation in philosophy of science in the 1960s and 1970s. However, over and above the hostile indifference that often marks analytic/continental relations, critical realism's impact on the continental establishment has been, arguably, somewhat marginal. Coinciding with the heyday of antirealist, cultural/linguistic-relativist concerns, critical realism faced a cold reception from those continental thinkers unable to conceive of an 'after postmodernism' (the ambitious title of a 2001 introduction to critical realism)[4] by recognizing the philosophical and socio-political stakes of the realist stance.[5] That such a recognition is now spontaneously taking place from *within* continental philosophy, and that a new generation of philosophers is feeling the imperative to transcend disciplinary divisions and engage

[2] 'Analytic' and 'continental' are, of course, (in)famously historically contested categories. I employ them here to indicate the somewhat simplistic (though not incorrect) distinction between the loose set of concerns and methodologies developed in allegiance with, or as a reaction to, the Wittgensteinian-inspired movements of logical empiricism and ordinary-language philosophy on the one hand, and those developed within the Heidegger-inspired movements of phenomenology, hermeneutics and poststructuralism on the other. The terms analytic and continental might now lack any concrete referentiality (to an analytical method versus a continental geographical placement) but their sense is still well established.

[3] The main contributions in *TST* are nicely framed by two interviews, opening with Alain Badiou, and closing with Slavoj Žižek, the two most influential living figures in contemporary continental circles and strong advocates of a return to materialism.

[4] See López and Potter 2001.

[5] One exception to this general rule is the work of Christopher Norris, one of the few philosophers who has tirelessly woven together careful readings of canonical continental figures with (critical) realist concerns.

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with topics and figures from both philosophical traditions indicates how the tide has turned.

This shift towards materialism and realism and away from anthropocentric modes of thought is not merely confined to philosophy circles: an analogous trend can be observed in diverse (yet often overlapping) fields like critical theory, political theory, science studies and feminist theory. A recent collection evaluating the contemporary state of critical theory explains that 'where theory continues to thrive, it increasingly adopts positions that challenge some of the fundamental stances that once defined "Theory" [and] … it seems abundantly evident that at least some contemporary strands of theory have broken decisively with what were once its defining problematic and stances', further describing this break as 'theory's turn to the material'.[6] In science studies, the work of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers has criticized the excesses of earlier social constructionism and vouched for the inclusion of nonhumans and their power of transformative agency in any theorization of the construction of scientific and social facts. Inspired by these insights, theorists like Jane Bennett, William Connolly and Sarah Whatmore have imported them into political science, denouncing its neglect and marginalization of 'things' and 'materials' as inert and politically irrelevant elements in human-centric social structures, and arguing for their full dignity as 'actants' to be recognized when mapping a more-than-human world.[7] Similarly, weaving together science studies and feminist theory, Karen Barad and Susan Heckman have described a new relationship between discursive practices and material reality (against previous stances privileging the former). Barad has argued for an agential realism grounded on the inseparability (entanglement) of intra-acting human and non-human entities inspired by the scientific and philosophical works of Niels Bohr, and against those feminist stances (specifically, Judith Butler's performative conception of materiality) implicitly perpetuating the mistaken vision of independent domains when privileging the discursive over the material.[8] Heckman questioned the explanatory power of linguistic constructionism[9] arguing, like Barad, that the

[6] Elliott and Attridge 2011, 2, 4.

[7] See Bennett 2010, Connolly 2011 and Whatmore 2002. For two useful collections on new materialisms and their relationship to politics see Braun and Whatmore 2010 and Coole and Frost 2010.

[8] See Barad 2007.

[9] Hekman's own diagnosis echoes my quick survey when she writes (2010, 2) that '[t]he principal characteristic of the sea change we are now witnessing is a reaction against linguistic constructionism. Theorists from across the intellectual spectrum are finding linguistic constructionism inadequate. Specifically, they are finding that linguistic constructionism's loss of the material, its inability to bring the material dimension into theory and practice, its inability to talk about anything except language, imposes an unacceptable constraint on theory'.

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real/linguistic binary (envisioned as the ideological tension between modernity and postmodernity) should be deconstructed, and that a reformed feminist theory (with the work of Donna Haraway as a still largely unexploited resource) must be at the forefront of this new attempt to describe the real world. Very much in agreement with Heckman, Gillian Howie aims[10] at reactivating a form of dialectical materialism, by arguing that 'realism offers a reasonable and useful framework from which to approach the philosophical, scientific, and social challenges of this century' and – referring to the work of theorists like Christine Battersby and Elisabeth Grosz (to whom I would add Claire Colebrook[11] and Catherine Malabou[12]) – claims that indeed '[a](re)turn to realism can be detected within feminism theory'.[13]

Ultimately, the upshot of all these positions is that while social constructionism, critical theory and 'critique' in general have provided now-indispensable insights into the historically-bound ways in which we carve up the world linguistically, they cannot be employed as a stand-alone theoretical frame, since to overlook the material, non-discursive, concept-independent dimension of reality inevitably produces (politically, socially, philosophically) ineffective positions. In *TST*'s introduction the editors explain the adjective 'speculative' precisely along these lines:

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[10] In Howie 2010.

[11] In a recent paper Colebrook (2011) gave an anti-anthropocentric, materialist twist to Derrida's meditations on text's survival of the author, arguing that 'it is because of the pure and inhuman materiality of the text – its existence outside and beyond any present and governing intention – that sense is possible' and (very much in line with some reflections on the extinction of the human race within speculative realism [see Brassier 2007]) that '[a]s the end of humanity comes to be more and more apparent, and as the prospect of a future without humans promises to be literally the case, we would be better served to think of processes of textual complexity that could not be returned or contained by what we mean, must have meant or can imagine. Radical rhetorical abandonment, or a sense that sense is itself a material event of inhuman complexity, may awaken us from our political slumbers; our refusal to think of multiplicities beyond the world of man' (2011, 18, 19).

[12] Malabou has questioned the erasure, in queer and feminist theory, of talk of (embodied, material) sex in favour of (discursively and performatively enacted) gender(s), asking whether it is not the case that 'a certain transcendental disincarnation does harm to both the flesh and the concept of difference' (2011, 9).

[13] Howie 2010, 3. Howie goes on to explain that 'if as feminists, we wish to change the world, then we need to know what we are dealing with. Identity, representation, and objectivity may be implicated in an oppressive social real but are actually politically neutral concepts. Without them we are unable to investigate and change relations of oppression, and the point, after all, is to change the world' (p. 9). These positions, of course, are not unprecedented. To pick but one representative example, already in 1996 Alison Assiter rejected the antirealism and relativism of postmodern forms of feminist thought as 'morally and politically reprehensible' (1996, 5). What characterizes the more recent positions outlined here is an increased emphasis on new metaphysical foundations for realism and materialism.

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> [t]his activity of 'speculation' may be cause for concern amongst some readers, for it might suggest a return to pre-critical philosophy, with its dogmatic belief in the powers of pure reason. The speculative turn, however, is not an outright rejection of these critical advances; instead, it comes from a recognition of their inherent limitations. Speculation in this sense aims at something 'beyond' the critical and linguistic turns. As such, it recuperates the pre-critical sense of 'speculation' as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labour of critique (p. 3).

Where critique placed limits on knowledge, and language-first stances restricted the philosophical task to clarifying what is already known,[14] speculation seeks new ways to go beyond all such limits. Paraphrasing Russell's well-known line,[15] the world, which had been ideal and linguistic, suddenly became rich and varied and solid.

Speculative Realism

In voicing discontent with the 'now tiresome Linguistic Turn' (p. 1) which (with different accents and methodologies) revolutionized the way in which both analytic and continental philosophers thought of themselves throughout much of the twentieth century, this new (speculative, realist, materialist) turn is, however, more of a 'turning away from' than a 'turning towards' (making it at once a less unitary and more fertile movement). If anything, what the speculative turn is turning *down* are precisely the linguistic constraints placed upon our knowledge of reality by vulgarly postmodern, Wittgensteinian and neo-pragmatist viewpoints, those stances pronouncing the 'end of metaphysics' and defending 'the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use'.[16] This reaction spontaneously and independently occurred within the thought of a new generation of predominantly continentally-trained philosophers, and when a number of them came together in a workshop in 2007, the term (if not the movement) 'speculative realism' was born.[17] From this initial convergence, however, an

[14] Be it in terms of analysis and clarification of concepts (*à la* Wittgenstein) or in terms of disclosure of the deep meaning of everyday words (*à la* Heidegger).

[15] Russell 2009, 16.

[16] Rorty 1967, 3.

[17] The four philosophers involved in the first speculative realism event were Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux. I omit here a more detailed account of how this first encounter took place. I have elsewhere offered a brief 'introduction' to speculative realism (Gironi 2010). A complete transcript of the workshop can be found in Brassier et al. 2007.

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explosive dissemination of different positions has followed, often in fundamental (and at times hostile) disagreement over precisely those basic ontological and epistemological claims that underpin their realist enterprise. It is this hodgepodge of positions which *TST* attempts to tame within the confines of a single – if lengthy – volume which cannot, for this reason, fit the definition of an 'introduction to' speculative realist thought, being more of a snapshot portraying the contemporary realist landscape.

It is impossible to find a specific set of commitments that a speculative realist should subscribe to beyond the acceptance of some form of mind-independent reality. Similarly, the movement lacks a 'founding figure' whose core theses are shared among followers. Even more strikingly, many of the contributors to *TST* would *not* be happy to be defined as speculative realists. Finally, there have recently been claims that speculative realism does not really exist or that if it did 'it was dead on arrival'.[18] This would seem a rather forlorn starting point for anyone wishing to offer readers newly acquainted with the term something at least resembling a definition. In spite of its lack of a central figure, however, it is undeniable that the powerful debut of French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux – the brief but tightly argued *After Finitude*[19] – provoked the philosophical imagination of many thinkers involved in this movement, and indeed has served as an essential background to their encounter.[20] This can be explained both by its daring and iconoclastic content, and by the refreshing novelty of encountering a French thinker expressing vigorous aversion towards most twentieth-century French philosophy in an uncharacteristically limpid and analytic style. It is no surprise, therefore, that Meillassoux features prominently in this volume – directly, with a paper which repeats and expands upon one of the main theses of his book, the necessary contingency of the laws of nature, and indirectly by being the primary object of concern of five of the essays and by being referred to in several others.[21] Some of the debates are so deeply involved with his philosophy that *After Finitude* should probably be considered mandatory reading before approaching *TST*.

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[18] See Wolfendale forthcoming.

[19] Meillassoux 2008.

[20] Two of the four philosophers involved in the 'Speculative Realism' workshop – Graham Harman and Ray Brassier (also the English translator of *After Finitude*) – wrote prompt and enthusiastic reviews of Meillassoux's book. According to Harman's (2011, 54) retrospective reconstruction, the speculative realism movement was 'catalyzed by Meillassoux's book'.

[21] The essays composing this volume are divided into thematic sections (outlined in the Editors' introduction) which are, however, rather fuzzy. The engagement with Meillassoux's work goes well beyond the 'Meillassoux section'. It is a shame, therefore, that *TST* does not include Meillassoux's response to any of his critics (especially since Harman included two of these replies).

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This is not the place to rehearse Meillassoux's arguments,[22] and I will simply refer to those concepts which have a larger resonance throughout *TST*. Meillassoux wants to rehabilitate realism, the metaphysical commitment to mind-independent things-in-themselves, through a critique of the anthropocentric intellectual procedure which he labels 'correlationism'. Correlationism is that position (consisting in both a weak – Kantian – and a strong – phenomenological and postmodern – variety) which considers thought and being (concepts and objects) to be necessarily linked as two inseparable poles of a relation, so that nothing can be thought independently of thought itself: the being of X is correlated to the thought of X (in critical realist terms, correlationism indexes a particularly radical form of the epistemic fallacy). Against all kinds of correlationist thought, Meillassoux promotes a (genuine, non-Kantian) Copernican revolution: to reject the themes of critique and of phenomenological finitude (deprecatingly characterized, due to their anthropocentric character, as Ptolemaic counter-revolutions)[23] and to reclaim the possibility of philosophizing about a universe stubbornly independent from our conceptualization of it.[24] This allows the philosopher to rehabilitate talk of primary, mind-independent and non-relational, qualities, which Meillassoux identifies with mathematizable qualities. It is in working his way through correlationist thought that Meillassoux subverts its tenets and formulates his ambitious conclusion, a *speculative* resolution of Hume's problem of induction: there is no absolute principle of metaphysical necessity (the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason is to be rejected) and indeed the only necessity is that of radical contingency. It follows that no metaphysical necessity can be ascribed to physical constants or laws of nature. In response to the obvious objection that laws *are* phenomenally constant (thus making the scientific investigation of nature possible), Meillassoux pushes his argument to the extreme conclusion that

[22] I have tried to highlight what I take to be the most salient theses of *After Finitude* from the standpoint of a scientific realist in Gironi 2011. A book-length introduction to Meillassoux's short book (and to his few published papers) is Harman 2011, while a shorter but sharp introduction to Meillassoux and some responses to his thought is offered in Ennis 2011.

[23] Gabriel Catren exemplifies this trope when writing that '[p]hilosophy will finally be modern only if it can sublate the critical moment, crush the Ptolemaic counter-revolution and deepen the narcissistic wounds inflicted by modern science' (*TST*, 335).

[24] Such a realist reclamation of the Copernican metaphor is, of course, old hat for the critical realist: see the numerous passages in Bhaskar's work where such a metaphor is employed to signal the de-anthropomorphization of metaphysics ([1975] 2008, 52; 1979, 125; [1986] 2009, 3). In [1994] 2010, 145, Bhaskar (referring to Hume's philosophy) anticipates Meillassoux's indictment of a human-centred counter-revolution.

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> it is possible rationally to envisage that the constants could effectively change for no reason whatsoever, and thus with no necessity whatsoever; which, as I will insist, leads us to envisage a contingency so radical that it would incorporate all conceivable futures of the present laws, *including that consisting in the absence of their modification* (p. 226).

While there is more to Meillassoux's philosophy than this brutally brief sketch, his core tenets can be summarized thus: (1) the rejection of correlationist thought as a seemingly powerful but ultimately inconsistent stance or method that insists on existential finitude, precludes our knowledge of reality and allows for the dangerous return of 'fideism'; (2) rationalist confidence in the power of purely mathematical descriptions to refer to a mind-independent, real world; and (3) the thesis of the absolute necessity of contingency (the 'Principle of factiality')[25] and the consequent rejection of any totalizable set of states of affairs in the universe. Meillassoux refers to this as a *speculative* thought, pitted against those forms of dogmatic *metaphysical* thought which assume the validity of the principle of sufficient reason (thus, a speculative return to metaphysics after its poststructuralist death). While the second and third of these points are objects of – often quite intense – critique in *TST*,[26] Meillassoux's critique of correlationism (and indeed the very coinage of this term) has served as a rallying cry for fellow (speculative) realists. In the interview that opens *TST*, Badiou summarily but correctly formulates a (negative) definition, stating that

> [t]he Speculative Realist position is the position where the point of departure of philosophy is not the relationship between the subject and object or the subject and the world and so on or what Quentin Meillassoux names correlationism (p. 19).

Thus, it would not be incorrect to claim that speculative realism 'is' the multifarious reception of Meillassoux's debut in the Anglophone world. Such a reception, however, is very different from previous decades of Anglophone commentary on the work of influential French thinkers, insofar as his work has been critically appropriated by a number of philosophers interested in its instrumental employment as a starting platform for the development of *new*, original systems.

If Meillassoux's critique of correlationism, then, is something of a lowest common denominator for speculative realist thinkers, the range of other influences is vast and diverse, and engenders a corresponding variety of contrasting positions. The clearest and most philosophically substantial of these can be located in the different answers given to the basic ontological ques-

[25] Meillassoux 2008, 50ff.

[26] See in particular chapters by Adrian Johnston, Alberto Toscano and Martin Hägglund.

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tion, 'Which kind of entities should we be ontologically committed to?'; or, more straightforwardly, 'What is irreducibly real?' Bluntly put, the choice lies between the universalization of the phenomenological approach to nonhuman entities grounded in a pluralistic (if not Meinongian) 'flat ontology' (an encounter staged between the Heideggerian existential analytic, Whiteheadian metaphysics, Latourian actor-network theory and Deleuzian univocal ontology), on the one hand, and a closer naturalist adherence to the ontological commitments of scientific theories, coupled with epistemological inquiry into the conditions of the cognition of mind-independent entities (accounting for discrimination of the real from the apparent), on the other. Both are presented as anti-correlationist stances: the former aims to produce a speculative ontology wherein any entity (or 'object') is self-existent independently from any cognitive access to it, by rejecting (with Martin Heidegger) both the concept–object distinction and the Kantian phenomenon/noumenon binary, disseminating reality (together with some form of phenomenological agency) throughout the non-human domain. The latter preserves a strict epistemological space between phenomenological appearance (meaning-full sense) and the reality referred to by the natural sciences (meaning-less reference) without ontologizing it (but instead looking for a fully naturalist account of it). These are the two opposing sides of the same anti-anthropocentric coin: either cognitive agency is made unremarkable by expanding it to the entirety of reality (in either a single, Spinozan or a plural, Leibnizian mode) or it is demystified by naturalistic deflation, as a phenomenon emerging from mindless physical processes. Both positions reject any principled ontological division or dualism, but while one (in either Whiteheadian or Hegelian permutations) puts a premium on the agential/experiential and organicist dimension (inappropriately ignored by post-Galilean scientific thought), the other privileges a naturalist explanation opposed to teleological reasoning and takes a physicalist scientific representation (pitted against an aestheticized 'folk metaphysics') to be the most reliable way to achieve knowledge of mind-independent reality. Cast in a historical light, these two positions are the *realist* descendants of the two orientations running through French philosophy that Michel Foucault famously described[27] as 'a philosophy of experience, of sense, and of subject', on the one hand, and 'a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of concept', on the other.

Within both approaches, however, some internal fragmentation can be discerned. Briefly, the former, ontologically inflationary, camp is internally divided on issues of individuation and relations: whether reality is best described as a plurality of independently-existent individuals irreduc-

[27] Foucault in Canguilhem 1978, x.

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ible to their relationships (the object-oriented stance defended by Graham Harman and Levi Bryant) or whether this plurality is a simple epiphenomenon of an underlying continuous stratum (Iain Hamilton Grant's Schelling, Manuel De Landa's Deleuze, Bruno Latour's 'plasma'). The latter, ontologically deflationary trend, includes a 'transcendental materialist' stance, attempting an interpretation of psychoanalysis and neuroscience in the light of a re-reading of German idealist philosophers (Adrian Johnston, Slavoj Žižek, Gabriel Catren, Catherine Malabou) and a 'transcendental realist/speculative nihilist' one (Ray Brassier) privileging a form of naturalized, scientistic Kantianism.

Having sketched a rough taxonomy of speculative realist thought, I will now offer my own interpretation of the speculative turn by articulating it through some crucial (and interdependent) conceptual nodes that can be extracted from both this text and other closely related publications. My references to a 'speculative realist philosopher', therefore, will have something of the inventiveness of a novelist sketching the salient traits of a fictional character by borrowing elements from real-life acquaintances. No single speculative realist thinker would uncritically endorse *all* of my points, but some will serve better than others as positive 'role models'. My reconstruction of 'speculative realist thought' will weave together a (hopefully) coherent outline, pointing towards what are, in my opinion, the most interesting and philosophically fertile directions for this movement to pursue.

Core Themes

The first theme we can extrapolate from *TST* is a recognition of the (historical) necessity of striking a balance between naturalism and rationalism; between the rationally motivated allegiance to the epistemic authority of the natural sciences and reliance on the power of reason to offer disciplined speculations regarding that which lies beyond the horizon of empirical immediacy and scientific experimentation.[28] Or again, between the erosion of meaning produced by the post-Darwinian worldview (Daniel Dennett's 'universal acid')[29] and the necessity of upholding the epistemic power

[28] Note that the search for a middle position between naturalism and rationalism is opposed to previous, *phenomenological* attempts to overcome the rationalist/empiricist dichotomy, for what all such attempts had in common (from Edmund Husserl's rationalist insistence on formal structures of experience to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the material conditions of experience) is precisely the prioritization of subjective experience which speculative realist thought rejects as correlationist.

[29] See Dennett 1995, 63ff.

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of rationality in the face of modern forms of irrationalism. This necessary balance might be reached via a commitment to some form of naturalized rationalism, expressible with the seemingly paradoxical formulation of *anti-anthropocentric de-theologized rationalism*.[30] If, on the one hand, the rejection of (the most openly anti-objectivist) heritage of phenomenology is producing an inevitable (and belated) turn to naturalism in continental philosophy,[31] on the other naturalism is accepted in a qualified form. Far from a straightforwardly Quinean reduction of philosophy to a second cognitive moment, subordinate to the better epistemically warranted sciences, this mode of allegiance to the methods and results of the natural sciences is not seen as foreclosing the legitimacy of metaphysical speculation, of the a priori or of transcendental arguments concerned with discovering what the real world and our rational capacities (not two separate domains) must be like in order for scientific inquiry to be successful (a position not far from Bhaskar's 'anti-positivist naturalism').[32] Christopher Norris, a philosopher with at least a tangential interest in the speculative turn, summarizes this middle way with remarkable clarity when he argues that today

> [o]ne can see how impoverished (or downright unworkable) is a rationalist outlook unanchored in the modes of our being in the natural world, but also how crucially defective is any naturalistic outlook that fails to recognize the full extent of the mind's creative powers, that is to say, its indispensably active role in the diverse procedures of conceptual exploration and inventive hypothesis-testing … [A] rationalism pressed to the limits (and beyond)

[30] Ray Brassier talks indeed (in connection to his interest in Wilfrid Sellars' philosophical project) of a 'rationalistic naturalism' (*TST*, 50) and recently referred to a 'post-Darwinian rationalism'.

[31] In a recent essay significantly titled 'The future of continental philosophy' (in Mullarkey and Lord 2009, 2), John Mullarkey comments that 'the turn to naturalism (in various forms) may well constitute the philosophical event of our day'. Of course, there remain some conservative voices in the continental camp, still besotted by a post-Heideggerian principled rejection of the objectivism which (allegedly) necessarily follows from naturalism. For example, Michael Marder – a crusader for the continental creed if there ever was one – writes that '[u]nder the title of naturalization, which remains suspiciously vague in a discourse ostensibly committed to the rigors of argumentation and clarity of expression, we encounter nothing more than a reductivist comprehension of nature as a set of empirically verifiable causal relations and quantities of force. The proponents of this approach are loath to ask the obvious ontological question "What is nature?" – surely, bound to affect their reactionary operation' (Marder 2010). Unfortunately Marder, by concentrating his uninformed attention on the worst (most closed-mindedly dogmatic) margins of the analytic camp, paints himself into the worst (most closed-mindedly dogmatic) corner of the continental landscape. As I will explain below, one of the main characteristics of the naturalist turn in continental philosophy is precisely the questioning of the concept of nature. One might legitimately wonder which is the more reactionary operation.

[32] Bhaskar 1979, 3.

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> of consistent application will always at some point encounter the need to make sense of its worldly or historical placement as well as acknowledging, at least implicitly, the intimate tie between reason and the various enabling as well as limiting conditions of our physical or natural embodiment.[33]

To the extent that rationalism is a philosophical approach always running up against the deliverances of common sense, and since the very science that has conveyed a counter-intuitive image of reality has arguably reached (in several of its more fundamental branches) the limits of empirical testability (for either intrinsic/theoretical or extrinsic/technological reasons), such a philosophical effort is commendable, if not a necessary,[34] one.[35] The physicist/philosopher Gabriel Catren, for example, advocates a philosophy 'synchronous with modern science' but rejects dogmatic naturalism since 'no synchrony is possible between science and a philosophy which sacrifices its sovereignty, resigns itself to leading a parasitic and secondary existence, and institutes itself as a self-proclaimed guardian of scientificity' (p. 339).[36] Far from reconstituting a form of first philosophy altogether unconstrained by scientific results, Catren's synchronous (dependent but separate) philosophy 'justifies its existence by trying to localize a stratum of the real that would be subtracted *de jure* from scientific knowledge' (p. 340). This is one of the core elements of speculative realist thought: the identification – through careful and disciplined adherence to the current best results of the natural sciences – of a sphere of competence for philosophy, located precisely at that

[33] Norris 2010, 6.

[34] Or, at least, necessary for whoever construes the aim of scientific inquiry as the realist ambition of having a firm epistemic grasp on the mind-independent structure of nature.

[35] Even though I will argue below that the 'naturalist turn' in continental philosophy allows for the creation of a bridge over the analytic/continental rift, I should note here that this qualified naturalism is in conflict with some projects of uncompromising naturalization of metaphysics currently developing in analytic philosophy of science. Ladyman and Ross (in Ross, Ladyman and Kincaid, forthcoming) for example, write that '[g]enuinely naturalized metaphysics must go beyond mere consistency with current science; it must be directly motivated by and in the service of science'. Assuming that *any* conceptual innovation or clarification that promotes the disciplined progress of science can be said to be in its 'service', everything hangs on what we take to be a sufficient 'motivation': the assumption that 'speculative' philosophy (metaphysics) can interrogate blind spots of science which we find in some speculative realists seems to imply that science cannot motivate what it ignores. On the other hand, thoroughly naturalized metaphysics entails that what is ignored by science (i.e. by the community of inquirers that composes the scientific community) is, by definition, unmotivated nonsense. While recognizing the necessity of a demarcation criterion to exclude pseudo-scientific 'theorizing', I think that these constraints are too stringent: a speculative meta-scientific inquiry need not be seen as pseudo-scientific. Speculation cannot *correct* science, but it can interrogate it.

[36] Similarly, Harman claims that he and Grant share the conviction that '[p]hilosophy will not be the handmaiden of the sciences any more than the reverse' (*TST*, 27).

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self-reflexive juncture which the sciences are constitutionally unable to fully probe.[37] Philosophy is no foundational discipline, but nor is it a mere science-praising sideshow either. It is engaged in the structurally interminable task of bringing to thought (by questioning the unquestioned or by promoting the creation of new concepts) what eludes[38] our current theories derived from empirical examination.

Of course, naturalism as a methodological and ontological stance suffers from well-known problems, mainly stemming from the difficulty of formulating an uncontroversial definition.[39] Standard discussions of naturalism cautiously appeal to one of the formulae present in W. O. Quines's work, such as 'the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described'[40] or the 'abandonment of the goal of a first philosophy prior to natural science'.[41] In *TST*, Ray Brassier offers the clearest definition of a responsible commitment to naturalism, rejecting its interpretation as 'a metaphysical doctrine engaging in an ontological hypostasis of entities and processes postulated by current science' but endorsing it 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'. He further suggests that the realist philosopher should grant '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' (pp. 49, 64).[42] While the episte-

[37] Adrian Johnston summarizes this sentiment well when he observes that today 'one can step back and see the natural sciences themselves developing out of their own resources a sense of their limitations *vis-à-vis* the things that, philosophically speaking, we are interested in. We can begin to account for how the sciences, on their own terms, are necessarily incomplete and that they can actually pinpoint the ways in which they're incomplete' (Johnston 2011, 167).

[38] This is the strongest legacy of twentieth-century French philosophy carried forward by speculative realism: Gary Gutting has correctly claimed that we can identify 'a distinctive unity in French philosophy since 1960: a fundamental concern with thinking what is conceptually impossible' (2011, 184).

[39] Perhaps it would be best to use Penelope Maddy's label of 'second philosophy'. The 'second philosopher' is bound by a simple methodological commitment: she 'begins from commonsense perception and proceeds from there to systematic observation, active experimentation, theory formation and testing, working all the while to assess, correct, and improve her methods as she goes' (2007, 2).

[40] Quine 1981, 21.

[41] Quine 1981, 67.

[42] This position is consistent with the thesis that a Darwinian outlook is at the core of the naturalist's stance. Alex Rosenberg (1996, 26) defends this when he writes that '[f]or naturalism the final court of epistemic appeal is scientific method, because scientific theory

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mological constraint excludes the philosophical employment of intellectual intuition or similarly purely rationalist methods, the latter acknowledgment concedes (without falling into an antirealism-inducing pessimistic meta-induction) that the only ontological claim that naturalism should *impose* on us is the rejection of supernatural causes[43] since even current best science gives us no standpoint from which to adjudicate what the structure of reality *could* be recognized to be (while still constraining what it *cannot* be).[44]

Confronted with the problem of defining the 'natural', the speculative realist endorses a naturalism of a de-naturalized nature: the aim is to demystify nature via its metaphysical de-totalization. In other words, what is rejected is 'nature' as an ontologically closed and rationally ordered *cosmos*, and with it any monist worldview. This position can be fruitfully compared with the 'pro-disunity' orientation of the so-called Stanford School in the philosophy of science,[45] rejecting the logical empiricist ideal of the unity of science, endorsing a metaphysically pluralist realism and rejecting laws of nature as universally true generalizations. Our speculative realist would have at least some sympathy for John Dupré's critique of a narrowly interpreted physicalist reductionist account of reality, arguing that

> [t]he belief that such an account must exist in principle, or in the mind of God, is at best an inference from what we do know about the behaviour of systems simpler by many orders of magnitude, and hence an inference that goes beyond any decent empiricist strictures. It is, in short, a supernaturalist belief.[46]

A de-totalized naturalism entails a rejection of the outdated mechanistic-deterministic scientific worldview (without re-infusing nature with neo-Aristotelian teleological powers or Cartesian dualism) and demands a

attains the aim of enquiry: predictive control'. The naturalist endorsement of revisable scientific representation is motivated, on Darwinian grounds, by the survival chances granted by a correct knowledge of reality based on prediction and control.

[43] In an oft-cited paper Owen Flanagan lists fifteen different meanings of the term 'naturalism' and refers to rejection of supernaturalism as the 'one thing about which all card-carrying naturalists agree, or should agree' (in Clayton and Simpson 2006, 435). Elsewhere, however, Barry Stroud ironically notes that '[i]n the sense in which naturalism is opposed to supernaturalism, there has been no recent naturalistic turn in philosophy. Most philosophers for at least one hundred years have been naturalists in the nonsupernaturalist sense' (Stroud in De Caro and Macarthur 2004, 23). Indeed, as I will note below, what is *really* at stake in the definition of naturalism is a clarification of 'nature'.

[44] Only a rationalist excess would lead the philosopher (ensconced on the proverbial armchair) to decide upon what *must be* the case.

[45] Usually taken to include Ian Hacking, Nancy Cartwright, John Dupré and Peter Galison.

[46] Dupré in De Caro and Macarthur 2004, 50.

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scientifically up-to-date theory of subjectivity. Without contradicting the standard definition of 'natural' as spatiotemporal and belonging to the causal order, speculative thought probes the conceptual wriggle-room that this loose definition leaves open between causal closure and ontological closure. At this juncture thrives the explosive mixture of neurobiology, psychoanalysis and German idealism endorsed by 'transcendental materialists' which – approaching neuroscientific and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity through an Hegelian framework reinterpreted as a systematic effort to think natural contingency[47] – attempts to reconceive a naturalism without mechanistic necessity and vouch for 'the long-overdue transition from the image of nature as strong (*qua* overdetermining) to one in which it figures as weak … [as the] fragile matter of error-prone contingency and complexity, as the minimal, ground-zero foundation for a materialist metapsychology'.[48]

At least two senses or levels (an a posteriori one and an a priori one) of 'speculation' can be singled out then: to speculate means (1) trying to derive non-evident but rationally plausible consequences from (or conditions of) empirical (scientific) observations and theories; and (2) questioning the very conceptual toolbox that guides scientific observation and proposing non-intuitive, tentative metaphysical pictures. More generally, the term speculative should be taken to indicate the possibility of a naturalized rationalism: to speculate from, in tandem with but also beyond the natural sciences. Such a speculative thought, however, should always be wary of rationalist excesses,[49] and be conscious of the stupendous ambition of its project. Let me illustrate this point through a brief Kantian detour. Speculative realists see the transcendental idealist revolution as the historical source of all correlationist evils, the speculative and the critical being at two opposite extremes of the methodological spectrum. Perhaps uncharitably so, however, for the speculative philosopher shares at least one core commitment with Kant: to wrestle metaphysics away from theological thought. In his classic study *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*,[50] Henry Allison offers an interpretation of the Kantian project which (among other things)[51] presents it as a reaction against a

[47] Ennis (2011, 49) refers to a 'Hegel without Hope'.

[48] Johnston in Žižek, Crockett and Davis 2011, 163.

[49] Lurking, for example, in Meillassoux's extremely clear definition of what (speculative) philosophy should be: 'Philosophy is the invention of strange forms of argumentation, necessarily bordering on sophistry, which remains its dark structural double. To philosophize is always to develop an idea whose elaboration and defense require a novel kind of argumentation, the model for which lies neither in positive science – not even in logic – nor in some supposedly innate faculty for proper reasoning' (2008, 76–7).

[50] Allison 2004.

[51] I don't have the space for a complete summary of Allison's interpretation of the Kan-

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rationalist realism relying on a 'theocentric model'. For Allison, Kant's own 'anthropocentric model' is 'the epistemological counterpart of the shift from heteronomy to autonomy'[52] in ethical matters. Having identified Kant's crucial insight in the 'discursivity thesis' of cognition, i.e. the necessary interplay of both pure concepts and *sensible* intuition (as opposed to an *intellectual* intuition precluded from finite beings such as humans) in the production of knowledge, Allison's Kant argues that transcendental realism's[53] claims to knowledge of things in themselves can be justified only on the basis of a prior commitment to the perfect knowledge of God. Allison writes that

> since cognition (of whatever sort) requires that its object somehow be 'given' to the mind, the denial of discursivity requires the assumption that the objects themselves (and as they are in themselves), not merely the data for thinking them, be so given. Thus, if, as empirical idealism avers, objects are not given (but only inferred), scepticism inevitably ensues. But since the only kind of intuition that could supply the objects themselves is intellectual, which is traditionally thought to characterize a divine or infinite intellect, it follows that transcendental realism is committed to a theocentric paradigm in virtue of its denial of discursivity. In fact, these are merely two sides of the same coin.[54]

According to Allison, this theocentric paradigm of a purely intuitive, God-warranted cognition commonly accepted by all pre-Kantians is precisely what Kant's revolution aims at subverting. Kant's commitment to a transcendental (anthropocentric) methodology is aimed at rehabilitating sensible intuition against an untenable privilege granted to intellectual intuition. For Allison

> Kant's position … differs *in toto* from the rationalist's with its theocentric paradigm, which assumes that the cognitive task is to apprehend truths that hold independently of any conditions or principles of the human mind, that is, to come as close as possible to the God's-eye view of things from which alone the truth is fully accessible … [For Kant] [i]t is not that we perceive the same world that God does, albeit from a limited perspective or point of view, it is rather that we perceive our own world, that of

tian distinction between phenomena and noumena as an epistemological/methodological standpoint and not as a metaphysical thesis (the so-called 'two aspects' interpretation, wherein the external thing is *at once* empirically real and transcendentally ideal). However, it would be interesting to compare Meillassoux's characterization of 'weak correlationism' through this alternative interpretation. My argument above is, however, not dependent on a wholesale acceptance of Allison's stance.

[52] Allison 2004, xvi.

[53] Kant defines the transcendental realist as the philosopher who 'represents outer appearances (if their reality is conceded) as things in themselves, which would exist independently of us and our sensibility and thus would also be outside us according to pure concepts of the understanding' (Kant 1998, A369).

[54] Allison 2004, 28.

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> possible experience, which is governed and limited by the conditions of our cognition.[55]

The speculative realist should meet this Kantian challenge: if the anthropocentric model was a reaction to a 'realism' made possible by an omniscient God, the rejection of anthropocentrism cannot lead us back to a rationalism of intellectual intuition (a stance to which Meillassoux falls back), but towards a naturalized[56] transcendental realism, which rejects both anthropocentric limitation of knowledge to human experience *and* the necessity for a 'divine standard' (or any 'secular' surrogate of it) to guarantee the existence (*and* knowability) of a reality which exceeds our present epistemic grasp. We populate our conceptual toolbox via our empirical, imperfect but progressively accurate contact with the external word (Kant's *empirical* deduction), and a naturalized stance has to reject both the rationalist ideal of metaphysics as *prima philosophia* and the critical injunction to begin with transcendental investigation into the conditions of our cognition (Kant's *transcendental* deduction). To this extent, the speculative realist agrees with Maddy's 'second philosopher', who claims that '[a]ny judgment about whether or not we have a priori knowledge of the world can only be supported by serious investigation of the world and our cognitive access to it'.[57] Yet, this does not entail the adoption of an anti-metaphysical stance, since scientific inquiries into external reality and into the ways in which our concepts are constituted do not exclude a transcendental realist reflection on the 'deep' structure of the universe, an a posteriori ontology which remains uncommitted to the metaphysical necessity and completeness of reality. Speculative thought sets no critical limits to the power of rational inquiry,[58] but rejects the theological ideal of a necessarily rationally organized (meaningful) universe, opening the possibility to reconceive of epistemic limits

[55] Allison in Nelson 2005, 357.

[56] Allison claims that Kant's rejection of the 'predicate-in-notion' rationalist principle (underlying the idea of a possible reduction of imperfect sensible intuition to a perfect, God-like intellectual one) is the mirror image of Quine's more famous 'dogma' of the analytic-synthetic distinction (Allison in Nelson 2005, 343). The indiscriminate rejection of Kantian criticism pushes us further from a naturalist aim.

[57] Maddy 2007, 63.

[58] Note, however, that this should not make us forsake the necessary project of historical epistemology, aimed at purifying our theories and practices from ideological representations (Althusser) and epistemological obstacles (Bachelard). Such a genealogical approach need not end up with a paralyzing incommensurability between theories if we adopt an account of scientific practice as the development of increasingly accurate but never completely isomorphic descriptions (models) of nature. The transcendental realist historical epistemologist (admittedly, a mouthful) does not confound the variability of our conceptual framework and of our epistemic practices with the ontological realities which those concepts and practices seek to approximate (transitive and intransitive domains).

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as *ontological*. The real is not necessarily rational, but reason *can* rationally appraise its non-rational structure.

Secondly, this rationalized naturalism is conjoined with an ontological commitment to immanence: no reality transcends the world, and reason itself has no 'spooky' origin over and above its natural/biological substrate. The range of philosophical influences on speculative realist thinkers covers figures like Gilles Deleuze, A. N. Whitehead, Alain Badiou, Bruno Latour, Jacques Derrida and François Laruelle. All of these philosophers are discussed (at times re-interpreted) as realist, materialist and immanentist resources. Deleuze and Guattari, arguably the most vocal immanentists of the twentieth century, countered transcendence with a 'plane of immanence and univocity' which '[h]owever many dimensions it may have, it never has a supplementary dimension to that which transpires upon it'.[59] Ontological immanence[60] indexes the rejection of any entity or power beyond Being, or – in physicalist terms – the exclusion of non-physical causes from the explanation of natural processes (of course this begs the question of the nature of the 'physical' – for present purposes, however, what matters is less how the physical should be defined than the fact that there is *nothing else but* the physical).[61] In certain speculative realist circles, immanence is thus equated with a commitment to a 'flat ontology', one which rejects any hierarchy of being. More generally, all of the authors in *TST* share a rejection of all philosophical stances which place some generative mechanisms (of novelty) outside of a single ontological field (whatever the internal structuring of this field might be).[62] What there is is *this* world, and nothing else.[63] What is sought is a 'rad-

[59] Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 266.

[60] As opposed to subjectivist philosophies wherein immanence refers to the immediate experiential content of subjectivity or to a 'methodological' immanence of Kantian variety wherein our rational mind self-legislates about its limits.

[61] In a recent monograph on physicalism, David Stoljar (2010, 49) interestingly endorses what he calls a 'naturalistic Platonism': the view that the 'underlying nature of the world, whatever it is, is quite different from how it is presented to us in common sense, i.e. in ordinary thought and perception – this is the "platonist" part of naturalistic platonism. On the other hand, the nature of the world might be discovered, assuming that it might be discovered at all, by naturalistic methods – that is the "naturalistic" part of naturalistic platonism'. This formulation is valuable insofar as it avoids the paradox of presenting physicalism as a metaphysical thesis, since all it is committed to is an unobservable reality which cannot be modelled in the vocabulary of common-sense perception.

[62] The most prominent defender of the possibility of immanent novelty is Alain Badiou (whose position, however, is not accepted by all speculative realists), whose set-theoretical ontology allows for the creation of knowledge-transcending truths without recourse to a transcendent realm of being. In pursuing this goal, Badiou stands on the shoulders of (or at least stands shoulder to shoulder with) most twentieth-century French philosophers.

[63] Note that such an immanent worldview does not necessarily imply a *monist* (pseudo-Spinozist) one.

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ical immanence' (to use Laruelle's term): the undivided Real without any exteriority which is the ultimate and intransitive level, at once the object and the condition of possibility for thought. This is immanence beyond (and logically prior to) the immanence/transcendence binary (dyad) and in excess of (traditional) philosophical conceptualizations.

Thus, most speculative thinkers take immanence as unbounded from the theme of finitude and limits which characterized much twentieth-century continental philosophy: the term immanence does not any longer evoke the 'thrown' status of the human subject living within the epistemic horizon bounded by her own understanding of reality, nor the inescapable worldly cage of a world without transcendence, but on the contrary it is the ungrounded ground from which an infinite proliferation of limit-breaking novelty (transcending limits, but not of transcendent origin) can surface.[64] Turning the Wittgensteinian dictum[65] on its head, problems are solved, not by assembling what we have long been familiar with, but by coming up with new discoveries.

Thirdly, the speculative realist is also committed to a re-conceptualization of the meaning of materialism.[66] This critique does not mirror that present in analytic philosophy of mind,[67] where materialism (intended as a reductivist doctrine opposed to dualisms of Cartesian descent) is a controversial topic of debate.[68] The materialism in question here is the metaphysical thesis describing the fundamental constituents of reality as irreducibly 'material'. Contemporary philosophy acknowledges that the current scientific predicament obliges us to abandon an understanding of matter as passive and impenetrable *hyle* (the mere extrapolation of our everyday perception of objects to the realm of the unobservable, a scientifically viable hypothesis for the seventeenth-century corpuscularian revivalists of Greek atomism, but untenable today) – or indeed as phenomenologically docile 'stuff' at all. Slavoj Žižek's remarks in the interview which closes *TST* are symptomatic of this impulse, insofar as they are at once justified by a Badiouian, rationalist mathematical ontology and (in Žižek's own intention) naturalistically vindicated by contemporary quantum physics:

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[64] The rejection of immanence as an unsurpassable, unitary horizon is precisely what is at stake in the Badiouian critique of Deleuze's univocal ontology (in Badiou 2000).

[65] Wittgenstein 2009, §109.

[66] Note that Meillassoux's label for his own position in his *After Finitude* is that of 'speculative materialism'.

[67] With some exceptions: see for example Graham Harman's engagement with David Chalmers in the context of the philosophical rehabilitation of panpsychism (Harman in Skrbina 2009).

[68] See Koons and Bealer 2010, a recent collection on this topic, aptly titled *The Waning of Materialism*.

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> [m]aterialism has nothing to do with the assertion of the inert density of matter; it is, on the contrary, a position which accepts the ultimate Void of reality – the consequence of its central thesis on the primordial multiplicity is that there is no 'substantial reality', that the only 'substance' of the multiplicity is Void (p. 407).

A new terminology is thus necessary, beyond the worn-out (and confusingly overlapping) labels of materialism and physicalism. Ernan McMullin, a philosopher of science of analytic descent (and with no links to the speculative realist movement) makes a surprisingly similar claim to those of Žižek when he writes that

> [t]he materialism of old appealed to the familiar as the means to explain. A (supposedly) well-defined 'matter' was therefore the starting point of inquiry. Explanation in the physics of today works in just the opposite direction. It serves, rather, as a means of discovery of the unfamiliar … A 'materialism' of today, if one were to retain that label, would of necessity be one that could point only to a 'material' with true lineaments that constantly recede from view.[69]

It is easy to see how this turn to 'materialism' in continental philosophy can be no nostalgic, fist-banging return to the 'hard stuff' forsaken by the excesses of linguistic analysis, but rather involves the concern with a mind-independent reality which escapes simple classification. Indeed, it amounts to a scrupulous demythologizing of 'matter'. Matter is not the extension of inert Cartesian wax, nor a regress-stopping Aristotelian *hypokeimenon*, but that which resists our experimental manipulation and conceptual assimilation. A *speculative* materialism is thus necessary, cautiously moving (conforming to the Marxian-Engelsian lesson) between simplistic (and, today, plainly unscientific) reductionist excesses on the one hand and the yielding of precious terrain to the idealism that lurks in an excessively logico-rationalist understanding of 'matter' on the other.[70]

Speculative thought appropriates the experience of 1960s French post-structuralism, and its concern with the constitutive role played by difference and multiplicity (in the thought of Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Levinas and Badiou) but more explicitly re-channels it towards the problem of its reconciliation with a scientifically-informed materiality. Just as Badiou, in his *Ethics*, inverts the Levinasian priority of ethical concerns, claiming that

[69] McMullin in Davies and Gregersen 2010, 36.

[70] The latter being the most dangerous fault for speculative materialism. In their contributions to *TST*, Alberto Toscano accuses Meillssoux's speculative materialism precisely of this hyper-rationalist exuberance while Adrian Johnston critically highlights its connivance with theological tropes and inadequate treatment of the empirical side of scientific practice.

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'infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*'[71] and argues that the real philosophical challenge is the possibility of thinking the same, likewise speculative materialism: (1) takes on board the poststructuralist thought of 'originary' multiplicity and deferral; (2) ontologizes it (expanding its reach beyond that of a reflection on language);[72] (3) reads it alongside contemporary science (from fundamental physics to neurobiology); and finally, (4) attempts to answer the question: given this lack of substantiality (of sameness, of presence), how can we (re)think materialism today? This is not to say, however, that among the contributors to *TST* a unitary treatment of materialism can be found. Harman defines his position as a '*realism without materialism*' (p. 40, original emphasis). While Grant proposes an anti-naturalist materialism arguing that '"matter" can no longer maintain its ontological role as ground' since 'there is no "primal layer of the world", no "ultimate substrate" or substance on which everything ultimately rests' (pp. 44, 68). Meillassoux's own 'speculative materialism' takes the rationalist high road of a mathematically describable absolute of necessary contingency, while Martin Hägglund defends a Derrida-inspired 'radical atheist materialism' based on the inescapable 'archi-materiality of time' (p. 129). Laruelle defends a unilateral non-materialism beyond the philosophical dyad of material and conceptual, while Latour derides materialism as 'a particularly hypocritical theology' (p. 327) and Stengers warns the readers that 'materialism should be divorced from (academic) eliminativism in order to connect with struggle', thus engendering a materialism of what *matters* since '[e]limination has become the very tool of power [capitalism and related bad science]' and '[p]hysicalism is … a war machine for the conquest of new territories [the humanities]' (p. 370). The sheer variety of these positions indicates the conceptual difficulty of a satisfactory redefinition of materialism.

Fourthly, as is probably evident by now, the philosophical community that assembled in the wake of the speculative turn seems to have the potential to offer a philosophical orientation capable of bridging – or better, ignoring – the much debated analytic/continental divide and usher philosophy into a new historical era where the only principled division will be that between good (progressive, conducive to human emancipation) and bad (regressive, self-referential) philosophy. This reconciliation follows from a certain commonality of methods and of concerns: speculative realist thought can

[71] Badiou 2001, 25, original emphasis.

[72] I generalize, needless to say. This ontological interpretation of difference and multiplicity was of course already explicit in Deleuze and Badiou, but less prominent in Foucault, Lyotard or Derrida – even though the latter's reflections on the Platonic *khora* could easily be read in tandem with both Badiou's inconsistent multiplicity and Laruelle's unilateral Real.

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appeal to both naturalist and rationalist orientations within the analytic camp,[73] under the imperative of finding new conceptual resources to articulate a realist position. Indeed, a quick browse through the bibliography of *TST* can already give some inkling of this phenomenon, where the names of Robert Brandom, Mario Bunge, David Chalmers, Paul Churchland, Antonio Damasio, Ian Hacking, Philip Kitcher, Wesley Salmon, Wilfrid Sellars and Galen Strawson feature together with those of more traditionally continental thinkers.[74] Significantly, we are witnessing the end of geographically located thought, continental or otherwise. If such a label was already at best inaccurate (given the amount of 'analytic' thought historically produced on the continent), it was still the case that – in the last few decades – most continental thought was developed first in countries like France and Germany. Today, on the other hand, long-distance intellectual exchanges via electronic media make the idea of a geographically-based philosophical community outdated. Faced with the necessity to forge a new dialectical relationship with the natural sciences, philosophy cannot afford to cling to petty internal feuds and fragmentations.

Finally, seen in broad historical perspective the kind of speculative realist thought which I have described should be placed within the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment, insofar as it is committed to the modern ideal of an interminable[75] *Ausgang* (to use the Kantian term) from irrationalism, dogmatism and heteronomy towards rationally accountable (and progressively accurate) explanations of the universe and our place in it: in a word, the diligent process of *disenchantment*. This speculative thought is mindful of the

[73] Paul Livingston has convincingly argued that the presence of rationalist methodologies within the analytic tradition should not be underestimated. More than explicating the rationalist commitments in 'founding figures' such as Russell, Wittgenstein and the philosophers of the Vienna Circle, Livingstone argues that it would be a mistake to believe that such commitments were expunged from analytic philosophy with the mid-century reactions (by Quine, Sellars and the later Wittgenstein) against the unsuccessful projects of epistemological foundationalism via logical analysis of the previous generation. Livingston writes that such reactions 'left largely unscathed the methodological and semantic assumptions that had continuously determined the scope and character of analytic projects. As a result, a basically rationalist understanding of the logical nature of philosophical insight and a correlative structuralism about meaning remained the background of projects in analytic philosophy even when these projects seemed to wholly replace their analytical antecedents' (Livingston in Nelson 2005, 393).

[74] On the other hand, critical realist authors are woefully lacking. Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* is the only critical realist text referred to (in a footnote of De Landa's essay) in the whole of *TST*.

[75] This term should be read with Derridean resonances. His understanding of an Enlightenment to come was precisely grounded on the structurally interminable (deconstructive) exercise of an 'unconditional' rationalism (see Derrida 2003, 33).

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'always too facile confusions between humanism and Enlightenment',[76] and it rejects the understanding of reason as an inherently anthropocentric value while promoting its speculative reach against those stances seeking to place limits on it. Such an anti-humanist rationalism allows, or even welcomes, the counter-intuitive results delivered by the natural sciences as opportunities to push reason to its logic-bound limits. This naturalistic corrective allows for the rejection of unruly and irresponsible rationalist excesses: historian Mark Lilla reminds us that it is a mistake to confound the Enlightenment reliance on the power of reason with indulgence in metaphysical abstraction or adventurous speculation when he writes that

> [t]he Enlightenment's contempt for medieval and early modern theology, whether merited or not, was a contempt for its naïve rationalism, the *tout s'explique* which d'Alembert thought so 'childish'. It was against this rationalism and the vanity it reflected that the Enlightenment stood, functioning as an anti-object, if anything.[77]

This final speculative realist trait, however, is arguably the most contentious one. While some thinkers within this movement make explicit reference to Enlightenment values of rational clarity and unwavering disenchantment,[78] others tread dangerously on the border of irrationalism and regressive metaphorizing,[79] at times sliding down the slippery slope of uninhibited conceptual inventiveness, and turning their philosophical systems into degenerating research programs. To be committed to Enlightenment values means (among other things) to promote an intellectual *curiosity* for *explanations* over the cheap *thrills* of *wonder*.[80] To value reason means unwavering vigilance concerning the validity of our epistemic principles.

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[76] Foucault in Rabinow 1984, 43.

[77] Lilla in Mali and Wolder 2003, 6.

[78] Meillassoux (2008, 147) refers to 'the luminous clarity of intellection' and Brassier (2007, xi) to 'the coruscating potency of reason'.

[79] Graham Harman, radicalizing Latourian 'irreductionism', bemoans all 'anti-object standpoints [which] try to reduce reality to a single radix, with everything else reduced to dust' (*TST*, 24), since they generally fail to fully deliver the 'weirdness' of reality, and declares himself happy to think 'that electrical and geological facts are permeated by deeper metaphysical vibrations' (*TST*, 25) than contemporary reductionist science can account for. It is hard to identify which kinds of theoretical virtues 'weirdness' is supposed to index, and the reader might be excused for dismissing it as an up-to-date, secularized form of *credo quia absurdum*. The same could be said of Meillassoux's 'divinological' forays, where his principle of factiality is employed to 'prove' the possibility of a *future* coming-into-being of God (see the appendix in Harman 2011).

[80] The historical shift from wonder to curiosity as driving impulse of human inquiry into reality has been masterfully narrated by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park (1998). Their book highlights how the post-Enlightenment condescension towards wonders was partially due to a modern, statist equivalence between the civil and moral order on the one hand

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At its best, however, to embrace speculative thought means to reject the most pernicious forms of crypto-theological dogmatic obscurantism: the confidence in the speculative power of reason associated with the rejection of a rational natural order are implicitly anti-theological moves insofar as they counter both the optimistic, Catholic belief in our God-endowed *lumen naturalis rationis* able to decipher the structure of creation and the pessimistic, Protestant deprecation of corrupted and curbed human cognitive powers.

Conclusion

So: what to make of this speculative turn? My contention here has been that the best among the motley assemblage of positions that are included under this umbrella term can be unified (yet not collapsed together) by a cluster of guiding concerns: the fusion of a rationalist and a naturalist stance; the reconceptualization of materialism; a concern with immanence; the will finally to leave the continental/analytic split behind; and a formal commitment to certain Enlightenment values. The speculative turn undoubtedly signals the emergence of a new paradigm in the continental landscape – something which is in itself of historical and sociological interest. The critical realist, however, could legitimately ask herself how much novelty is brought to the realist's table which wasn't already provided by decades of critical realist literature (and more generally, by the long-running realism-antirealism debates

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and the order of nature on the other, which required the banishment of potentially order-subverting wonders from 'serious' discourse. They write that Enlightenment scholars '[o]n metaphysical, aesthetic, and political grounds … excluded wonders from the realm of the possible, the seemly, and the safe' and that '[f]rom the High Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, wonders had defined the order of nature by marking its limits; wonder had been the peculiarly cognitive passion that registered the breach of boundaries' (1998, 361, 363). Needless to say, my endorsement of a pro-Enlightenment stance is not guided by such policing ambitions: as it should be clear by now, speculative thought is *precisely* in the boundaries-breaching business since one of the fundamental intuitions is precisely that there is no order of nature to be mirrored by our social and intellectual choices – and that it is nothing but reason that allows for the former and that reveals the truth about the latter. Hence, to recognize the less-than-pure historical motivations of the Enlightenment intellectuals does not entail the abandonment of the purely formal standard of critical reasoning, and most certainly does not allow for an indulgent return to the wondrous – both in the excesses of tabloid culture in the public arena and in the favouring of modes of argumentation capitalizing on the 'awe-value' within the philosophical ivory tower. It would exhibit a most naïve ignorance of the human condition to deny the truth of Daston and Park's concluding remark that 'deep inside, beneath tasteful and respectable exteriors, we still crave wonders' (1998, 368). But perhaps not all of our cravings deserve satisfaction, and it is speculative thought's wager that there is no greater wonder than the very possibility of our rational appraisal of the lack of a meaningful natural order – and with it, of wonders.

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within the philosophy of science). I am not convinced that this question can be answered at this early stage, but I think that both movements would have much to gain from the development of a closer dialogue.[81] The critical realist could profit from an engagement with the most audacious theses of her speculative realist colleagues, while the latter could benefit from a more thorough (and sobering) acquaintance with the fully fleshed out, systematic approach offered by the former. If the philosophical future is a realist one, we can only hope that this encounter will promote the creation of an even more robust strain of realism.

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[81] A notable exception of a thinker linked to 'speculative realism' appropriating critical realist methodology is Levi Bryant who in his 2011 (but not in his contribution to *TST*) employs Bhaskar's work to argue for an ontology-first approach to realism.

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