Speculative Realism
After finitude, and beyond?

A vade mecum

Louis Morelle

Translated by Leah Orth with the assistance of Mark Allan Ohm, Jon Cogburn, and Emily Beck Cogburn

Introduction: Does speculative realism even exist?

Presented as the first significant movement in continental philosophy since structuralism, speculative realism (SR) vociferously announces the end of correlationism and anthropocentrism in philosophy in favor of a “speculative turn.” By accommodating things, matter, science, and the real qua objects as important as (if not more so than) language, thought, the phenomenal, and the social, SR has garnered attention and criticism from all sides these past few years. “Speculative Realism” was originally the title of a conference in 2007 that brought together four lesser-known but promising philosophers, and then it subsequently spread like wildfire via the Internet through blogs and open-access publishers, in addition to the traditional journal articles, books, colloquia, conferences and other official channels of academia. It has now become a “legitimate” subject of scholarship, taught in certain departments of contemporary philosophy and aesthetics and acquiring a section on the website Philpapers.1 And yet, what is SR? For SR seems to have become, in

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1 http://philpapers.org/browse/speculative-realism
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Anglo-Saxon “continental” circles, a buzzword, one of these fashionable terms whose meaning is obscured the more it spreads. Originally naming a philosophically diverse core of young philosophers seeking to emphasize themes that have become relatively marginal in continental philosophy such as metaphysical speculation, the inorganic, or the absolute, and united by a common refusal to attend solely to textual objects or phenomenal experience, this vague designation has sparked a diffuse desire among continental intellectuals to break with some presuppositions inherited from previous generations. Crystallizing a Zeitgeist, the term has lost its specificity, becoming the generic name for all those among the philosophical “young guard” who are laying claim to a “new metaphysics.”

The undertaking of this exposé is therefore risky on several accounts, since it concerns the state of a current of thought with a conceptual solidity and durability that may appear uncertain at first glance. I will certainly not strive to regulate the correct or incorrect use of the term “speculative realism,” nor make it strictly historical, but rather attempt to offer a concise list of the positions, arguments, and concepts at work among the founding practitioners of SR, beginning from what they have in common.

My preliminary hypothesis is therefore the following: it is possible to discover a nontrivial philosophical core of SR. The verification or refutation of this hypothesis will settle one way or the other all related questions about SR, its future, its actual importance, and its ephemeral or fashionable character.

With these preliminary precautions in mind, we can begin by studying the central question: what are the common characteristics of SR? Evidently, this cohesiveness must first be sought in the only agreed upon reference point for these philosophers: *correlationism*. If we refer to Quentin Meillassoux’s original definition:
By “correlation” we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call correlationism any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined.²

The term refers to the tendency of Western philosophy since Kant to base all philosophical discourse on conditions of knowledge and to reject metaphysical propositions since they involve freedom from reference to experience, particularly phenomenal experience. More precisely, it seeks to point out the refinement that correlationism brings to idealism, namely, that we do not reduce everything to a single origin, but to a dual relation (subject-object, Dasein-Being, etc.) from which escape is impossible. This improvement is intended to provide philosophy with a foolproof protection from any realist or metaphysical illusion. It does not change the thrust of the thesis, to reduce every real being to being dependent on the relation to an originary ground, which is itself invariably reduced to an anthropological determination (whether of experience or language).

This condensed description of the most criticized aspects of correlationism (it is, after all, an intrinsically polemical concept) is more or less common to all the philosophers identified with “speculative realism.” None of them, however, solely subscribe to this general characterization; by studying them closely one can distinguish extremely acute deviations. In fact, the problem is understanding which element, which assumption the correlation is based on (“the correlationist two-step,” as Meillassoux calls it) and how correlationism should be characterized. We can say that the challenge is to give substantial meaning, proper content, to the undetermined form of correlationism outlined by Meillassoux in After Finitude by linking it to a fundamental source or error. However, according to the nature of the diagnosed error, the

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excesses of correlationism accepted as symptomatic reveal diseases of a very different sort.

For two of these philosophers, the problem resides in the relation between ontology and epistemology, between being and knowledge.

• For Ray Brassier, the problem of correlationism is found in the dissolution of the barrier between metaphysics and epistemology. Indeed, by reducing all possible knowledge to a singular apprehension determined by the nature of a fundamental correlation, correlationism contributes to the reduction of every factual proposition, every meaning, to a particular standpoint cut off from any universality. It is therefore impossible to single out a solid epistemological criterion—this impossibility, which Brassier most strongly opposes, is due to misconstruing a contingent relation as a fundamental feature of reality, typically, but not exclusively, subjective or phenomenal experience.3

• In contrast, for Graham Harman, the problem is the reduction of every statement to its epistemological preconditions, that is to say, to human knowledge; the original sin of correlationism is the implicit presupposition of the superiority of the epistemological relation of knowledge over all other relations.4

3 “Correlationism is subtle: it never denies that our thoughts or utterances aim at or intend mind-independent or language-independent realities; it merely stipulates that this apparently independent dimension remains internally related to thought and language. Thus contemporary correlationism dismisses the problematic of skepticism, and of epistemology more generally, as an antiquated Cartesian hang-up.” Ray Brassier, Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 53.

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The other two philosophers believe it is essential to search for a solution in the relation between thought and the absolute.

• Iain Hamilton Grant sees the correlationist error in the confusion between the structure of knowledge (the Kantian transcendental) and its dynamic preconditions, which can be reconstructed from the structure, but are not found within it.\(^5\)

• Finally, for Quentin Meillassoux, correlationism errs by ignoring the intrinsic possibility of a relation between thought and the absolute, which is revealed to be the absolute character of contingency.

We are thus dealing with versions of the same concept that are, if not opposed, at the very least clearly distinct. Moreover, it is possible to articulate the differences by demonstrating that the speculative realists recapitulate certain elements of correlationism, while at the same time rejecting a central element of it. In other words, we can identify, in each of their positions, elements that partially validate the correlationist position. While keeping this in mind in each of the following sections, it will be necessary to elucidate precisely how each position is anti-correlationist, and, perhaps more importantly, how some of their theses are implicitly drawn from correlationism.

Nevertheless, one may certainly be tempted to think that this diversity seems to clearly constitute evidence against a cohesiveness of SR, since nobody seems to even agree on the nature of the problem to be tackled. Does it still make sense, then, to discuss a cohesiveness based on a mere rejection of an idea? I think so, insofar as this denial and the disagreements that it entails make significant philosophical debate between theorists possible, although it is clear that the

\(^5\) “The Idea is external to the thought that has it, the thought is external to the thinker that has it, the thinker is external to the nature that produces both the thinker and the thought and the Idea.” Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux, “Speculative Realism,” in Collapse, Vol. III, 340.
unity thereby produced is a weakened one. One can make an historical analogy here: just as the rejection of Kantian and Hegelian idealism gave rise to currents as diverse as Peirce’s and James’ pragmatism, the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, ordinary language philosophy, and phenomenology; in the same way the rejection of correlationism enables the birth of heterogeneous philosophical currents capable of communicating with one another. This is due to the fact that the rejection of correlationism remains a topic of discussion and a project common to all these currents, even though disagreement reigns over the effective content of the project.

Despite the vagueness of the positive content, it can be formulated. Rejection of correlationism implies the truth of at least parts of modern naturalism as exemplified by Meillasoux’s concept of ancestrality. The problem then becomes the same as with correlationism: what is the truth that naturalism superficially manifests? For Brassier, “naturalism” means complete materialism; for Harman, one must go beyond naturalism to reach an ontology where all levels of the world would be equally real; for Grant, nature as a power of creation and irreducible transformation becomes the absolute.

It is thus apparent that the rejection of correlationism is full of consequences, and this allows one to say quite seriously that speculative realism signs the birth certificate of a possible continental metaphysics.

A metaphysics first, because introducing the term “correlationism” into philosophy shifts the presuppositions correlationism rests on from the status of obvious facts to questionable and debatable points. Thus, correlationism is no longer a rejection of metaphysics, but one metaphysics among others, an additional metaphysics. As such, all attempts (for example, along the lines of Heidegger and Derrida) of an “overcoming of metaphysics” are rejected as obsolete,

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not so much because they are false, but because they rely on a disavowed metaphysics. Bypassing certain usual precautions, we can then reinterpret certain theses with uncertain status in continental philosophy as properly metaphysical propositions. For instance, when, at the end of “The Earth Does Not Move,” Husserl postulates the transcendental ego that precedes and remains independent of the existence of every living being, or when Heidegger asserts that the historicity of Being involves literal metamorphoses of it, transforming from ancient Greece and medieval theology to modernity, are we not thus dealing with propositions supported by “metaphysical” entities every bit as speculative as Spinozist substance or Leibnizian monads? The speculative realists abandon the suspicion associated with metaphysical activity: rather than being required to justify its metaphysical approach, or examine its endless possibility, we must simply tackle the problem, since we cannot escape it.

There is room then for metaphysics, and rational discussion between conflicting positions, where argumentation and refutation cannot be evaded. Every metaphysical attempt is prima facie legitimate, because of the mere fact that no absolute prohibition can be put in place prior to discussion. It is true that the form metaphysics must take still remains vague, especially with respect to what it must abandon and what it can keep, precisely because it must first be discussed,

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8 See also his affirmation, in the Ideas, that God would perceive not the things in themselves, but a thing’s adumbrative perception. Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book, General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Marinus Nijhoff, 1982), §43.


10 “Heidegger seeks a way out of metaphysics. He endeavors to clear a space where he can evade its grasp. But Whitehead doesn’t yearn for a return before, or for a leap beyond, metaphysics. Much more subversively, I think, he simply does metaphysics in his own way, inventing his own categories and working through his own problems.” Steven Shaviro, Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), x.
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proven. In this way SR has been hailed as a “liberation” by those who rejoiced in seeing the possibility reestablished of discussing a thing as something other than a constitutive impasse of thought, this famous “finitude.” To paraphrase Harman, a pleasing aspect of this metaphysical revival is that while SR’s followers may run the risk of uttering falsities or nonsense, at least they are saying something, that is, they maintain precise theses and defend them through considerations and argument, rather than cloaking themselves in the pathos of a principle of undecidability.

Continental, then, for three reasons. The first reason, which is not insignificant, is that most of SR’s participants come out of Anglo-Saxon academia, where continental philosophy constitutes a specific and autonomous field in the margins of mainstream, analytical philosophy, which most people see as “philosophy tout court,” while in France for example the situation is exactly reversed. For this reason, we should not be surprised that they choose to identify themselves as continentals.

Second, because correlationism can be presented as the unifying characteristic of the quasi-totality of what had been coupled with the term “continental philosophy,” Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze, the only notable (although this is certainly a subject of discussion) exceptions to this unity, can be considered the precursors of SR. The almost completely “definitive” character of the Kantian turn in the eyes of classic continental philosophers (i.e., the endorsement of correlationism) provides evidence for this historical argument. This is developed in detail in Lee Braver’s A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism, which has became a collective reference SR supporters use in interpreting the philosophical tradition. In this text, Braver identifies a continuous line of thought from Kant to Derrida through other major figures (Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault), where anti-realism develops in a more and more radical manner, from

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11 Meillassoux, After Finitude, 109-110.
12 Composed of six possible cumulative theses: rejection of the truth-
a common conceptual scheme that serves as the foundation for the various options adopted. This extremely ambitious reconstruction is interesting in that it provides a common framework for the evolution of continental philosophy,\(^{13}\) presenting it as a coherent project, which is precisely what SR seeks to reject.

Finally, the metaphysics that SR produces is certainly a continental metaphysics to the extent that it does not depart from another central point in the continental tradition, namely, the problematic status given to rationality, in particular discursive rationality. It is for this reason that “typically continental” philosophers such as Heidegger, Laruelle, Deleuze, or even Derrida (according to Martin Hägglund), far from being dismissed, are quite acceptable references in these metaphysical debates. The paradoxical idea of a metaphysics that does not seek to ignore objections to it but to incorporate their contributions, makes the “realism” in question “speculative,” since it tries to develop specific modes of thought and foundation, taking seriously the inevitable intertwining of reason with other forms of thought, apprehension, and existence. Of course, this last point is highly problematic for the justification of doctrines resulting from such a process (we will have the opportunity to return to this), but it is crucial to understand how SR is very much a continuation of the continental line of thought.

In this text, I will attempt to present the main threads of SR. I will not concentrate as much on the proposed renewal of subjects of philosophical inquiry (thus leaving aside the insistent call to “return to the real,” to focus on material objects or the contributions of natural science or the social sciences), but rather on the various metaphysical and ontological alternatives that underlie this “turn” (the central anthology of SR is titled *The Speculative Turn*, echoing the correspondence, of independence from the mind, ontological pluralism, rejection of bivalence, active role of the subject relative to its knowledge, plurality of the subject.

\(^{13}\) As well as a framework for communication between analytics and continentals.
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“linguistic turn”). I will also consider the arguments, concepts, and points of debate that emerge, as this is the heart of the subject. I will successively present Harman’s object-oriented ontology, Brassier’s “nihilism”, and finally Grant’s variety of neo-vitalism.\textsuperscript{14}

I. Object-Oriented Ontology: Graham Harman
(Latour / Heidegger)

Variants: Levi Bryant, Bruno Latour

CORRELATIONISM: Every apprehension and every relation is essentially different from the object it aims at (the tree that I think is by definition different from the tree itself).

ANTI-CORRELATIONISM: there is no fundamental ontological difference in the relations between subject and object and the relations between objects.

Object-oriented ontology (OOO)\textsuperscript{15} asserts the reality and fundamentality of singular individuals, baptized objects. An object is defined as a substantial singularity endowed with

\textsuperscript{14} I leave aside Quentin Meillassoux, firstly because Martin Fortier has more than adequately introduced his work in the seminar in which this paper was initially presented (now archived at http://www.atmoc.fr/seances/; scroll down to the seventh presentation in the series for Fortier’s talk), secondly, because, unlike other currents, Meillassoux does not “make a school,” at least to my knowledge, for reasons due to human contingency (non-appearance of L’Inexistence divine), and probably, also to the very singular character of his thought.

unity and irreducible to the whole of relations that relate to it (what Harman summarizes by the expression “unified and autonomous”). OOO is therefore an attempt to argue that the concept of substance is still as indispensible to metaphysics as it is to every other theory and discourse. The domain of objects includes: physical objects (a quark) and theoretical objects (concepts), natural objects (a dog) and artificial objects (a computer), intangible objects (a multinational) and concrete objects, real objects and imaginary objects. The central claim of OOO is that these are all on equal footing. And the concept of object has the concept of relation as its correlate, either determining the object independently, or on the interior of another object (the car that I observe and the car that the road supports are one and the same object, but apprehended through two distinct relations: vision and spatial copresence). Yet these relations are not dealing with the car itself, in its proper being, but with a version of this: the “visible car” and the “heavy car.” The real car itself is inaccessible to every relation. To be real, it must exist by itself, from itself, and not by another thing: the reality of a thing, whatever it may be, is its withdrawal (and for this reason relations only deal with second-order objects, equivalent to Husserlian intentional objects, distinct from real objects: Harman baptizes them “sensual objects”).

The concept of withdrawal is directly inherited from Heidegger. But whereas the German philosopher attributed withdrawal to Being alone, denying it to beings “immediately accessible,” present at hand entities, OOO claims that withdrawal is the essential characteristic of every reality qua individual reality. In fact, because it equates reality with withdrawal, every negation of the fundamental feature of objects is, in effect, the negation of their reality. If objects were in some way effects in an order of things distinct from themselves, they would quite simply not exist. Consequently, a “radical” position, that denies the reality of objects, is equivalent in the end to a


17 Harman, *Prince of Networks*; Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, chapter I:
more or less well-disguised monism, essentially returning to a form of correlationism. And yet correlationism only consists in elevating a specific type of relation above all others: the relation between human being and world. In order to maintain a reality full of individual objects, it is necessary to assert that there is no ontological difference between subject/object relations and object/object relations.

Thus experience and thought are restricted to a particular case of the universal category of relation: their emergence can only be envisioned as one leap among others, purely “ontic,” and never ontological. The problem that remains is knowing how each relation—of causality, of subjectivity, or of mereological composition—is metaphysically possible, which leads to the renewal of the ancient problem of occasionalism. What is essential, however, is that the mystery is not limited to the sphere of humanity or sentience.

In addition, perception, qua relation, is necessarily a caricature, but a legitimate caricature, present on all levels of the cosmos; from there perceptual realism dissolves, since no object is present in any relation, but always in the reduced, intelligible form given to experience. We are faced with a paradox: objects are precisely as they are given (qua sensual objects) and precisely other than they are given (qua real objects). OOO is presented as an ontological realism and an epistemological anti-realism, a position that sparks a number of internal difficulties.

Indeed, as we have said, since there is no difference between subject/object relations and object/object relations, in Husserlian language they are both “intentional” (because they take place between singular objects). To contest this thesis

“Undermining and Overmining.”


20 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chi-
would mean denying the specific character of each interaction, namely, that it depends upon the nature of the objects in play. For example, obviously a table does not enter into a similar relation with a feather falling on it as it does with a heavy stone that is capable of smashing it. We notice, however, that it is through Husserl that Harman defends this thesis; in fact, his refutation of empiricism in the *Logical Investigations* uses an interpretation of the sensible as composed of immanent or intentional objects.  

But such a theoretical gesture is not made without raising a number of difficulties. Indeed, activating a distinctive category of experience, intentionality, in order to attribute it to every relation *qua* relation, is double-edged; on one hand, it seems to exhaust the logic of the decentering of ontology by attributing what seems to only be a privilege of human perception to every interaction between objects of all sorts; on the other, the specter of what one can call the *sophism of the projection*, that is, the idea of covertly reducing what is called ontology to only human subjectivity, becomes a looming danger. The type of position defended by OOO is at times called a *flat ontology*, and the metaphor is here quite meaningful: by “flattening” the ontological terrain, and as a result forcing the rethinking of every type of existence and relation “on the same level,” the problem immediately arises of knowing *which* level this is, how to succeed in determining its essence, and above all, whether it constitutes a form more or less disguised by projection in the way we just introduced.

Therefore, we are again confronted with a particular version of the absolute like “the night in which all cows are black.” Such a difficulty was already present in a precursor of SR such as Whitehead, who admits to identifying his concept
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of prehension (that is to say, every relation between entities) with the concept of thought or of idea:

With the purpose of obtaining a one-substance cosmology, “prehensions” are a generalization from Descartes’ mental “cogitations,” and from Locke’s “ideas,” to express the most concrete mode of analysis applicable to every grade of individual actuality.23

This question, which can be called the “problem of decentering,” is especially troublesome with respect to OOO, because it cannot itself be envisioned, since the will to abolish all ontological privilege connected to human subjectivity precludes any conceptual account of the modalities of human subjectivity, and therefore cannot avoid making its central idea unclear. It thus fails to conceive of subjectivity as a “mere” particularization of ontology, that is to say, as something other than a hidden model that would dissolve the decentering. For this reason, it is not satisfying to conceive of alterity solely via a fundamental withdrawal, despite Harman’s call for “polypsychism” as a remedy to “panpsychist” excesses, claiming that only the latter falls prey to the “sophism of projection.” This is because, in both cases, the relational variations begin from the model of human subjectivity.24 This problem of decentering would involve an incapacity, in the end, to distinguish “flat” ontologies from their correlationist adversaries (see, for example, the literature on the rapprochements between Whitehead and phenomenology, and Pierre Cassou-Noguès” recent book, *Le bord de l’expérience* [PUF, 2010], dealing explicitly with such a project).


24 Despite the exciting possibility that this opens. On the description of the interior of objects: “I would even propose a new philosophical discipline called ‘speculative psychology’ dedicated to ferreting out the specific psychic reality of earthworms, dust, armies, chalk, and stone” (Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 213). This project is taken seriously by Ian Bogost, who concentrates on technological objects in his *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
The discussion within SR focuses on the possibility of a valid epistemology starting from the presuppositions of OOO. In order to summarize this debate, it is useful for us to focus on Bruno Latour, and more precisely on his explicitly ontological work, *Irreductions*, which can be used as a smaller model of OOO’s essential propositions on this terrain. Ray Brassier targets it in his article “Concept and Objects,” with the same goal. In short, Latour is criticized for the complete dissolution of the limits separating real objects from representations; that is, he is guilty of endorsing the impossibility of every notion of the true and false by way of a collapsing of all things into a neutral monism of “actants” and their mutual “trials of strength.”

Indeed, Latour redraws the epistemological relations of knowledge in pragmatic terms, envisaging representations and concepts, not as detached modes of contemplating established facts, but as relations between actants. As beings of the world these actants not only demand an exercise of force and a material effort in order to be realized, but are an exercise of force themselves: “Nothing is known—only realized” (*Irreductions*, 1.1.5.4). For example, in order to know the chemical properties of a liquid, it is necessary to subject it to diverse trials of composition and decomposition, as in some sort of torture where the liquid actant reveals its characteristics through resistance to confronting forces. “A sentence does not hold together because it is true, but because it holds together we say that it is ‘true.’”25 If concepts have truth, it is because they are things among others and are subject to the same rules of efficacy as any other relation. The reading of *Irreductions* is extremely disturbing in this regard, because it forces one to consider ideas from a completely desecrated view, yet within the framework of a fully coherent line of reasoning.

Yet for Brassier, this “actualist” conception of ontology only serves to destroy every limit which might allow the separation of valid discourse from fabrication. He accuses

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Latour of reductionism with regard to epistemology, forming a metaphysics liberated from any demand for justification and argumentation:

the difference between “words” and “things” turns out to be no more than a functional difference subsumed by the concept of “actant”—that is to say, it is a merely nominal difference encompassed by the metaphysical function now ascribed to the metaphor “actant.”

Brassier’s critique proves problematic, both because it rests on a rather heavy set of presuppositions (see the following section), and because it does not give an account of the finer points of Latour’s ontology. However, it certainly helps make the problem of Latour’s “flat ontology,” as well as OOO, very acute as they fail to offer an internal epistemological criterion: why qualify ontological unities as actants rather than as passive subjects of external forces? Thus, the confusion produced by ontological decentering proves to be difficult to eliminate without the risk of falling into a metaphysics with a foundation that would prove, ultimately, irrational. The fundamental problem then consists in noticing how difficult it is to supply it with a true epistemological foundation with the proper tools of OOO. Such a foundation would be the complete loss of OOO’s project, hopelessly engulfing it in a theory of sense and representation as the point of departure for philosophy. Effectively, the responses of OOO’s followers to the objections born from epistemological preoccupations such as Brassier’s,

Ray Brassier, “Concepts and Objects,” in The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 52. See also: “It is instructive to note how many reductions must be carried out in order for irreductionism to get off the ground: reason, science, knowledge, truth—all must be eliminated. Of course, Latour has no qualms about reducing reason to arbitration, science to custom, knowledge to manipulation, or truth to force: the veritable object of his irreductionist afflatus is not reduction per se, in which he wantonly indulges, but explanation, and the cognitive privilege accorded to scientific explanation in particular.” Thus, it is impossible, according to Brassier, to philosophically recontextualize the category of explanation without putting a radical attack in its place, since epistemology is, irrevocably, first philosophy.
or from the relation between the sophism of projection and ontologies of decentering are something like denial, or, in the best case scenario, accusing opposing positions of being victims of idealism. On this account, the problem remains unresolved, even if it is not necessarily insoluble.

II. “Normative nihilism,” or transcendental nihilism: Ray Brassier (Churchland/Brandom/Laruelle)

Variants: Peter Wolfendale, Martin Hägglund

CORRELATIONISM: There can only be knowledge and meaning within the limits specified by rationality.

ANTI-CORRELATIONISM: Rationality is independent from any origin situated in subjective experience.

The second theoretical side of SR is clearly less unified than the first since as it does not boast of a distinct conceptual invention theorists could be reunited around. Rather, we are dealing with a current of thought with diverse aspirations and variable forms: transcendental nihilism (Brassier), non-philosophy (Laruelle), radical atheist materialism (Hägglund), transcendental realism (Brassier, Wolfendale), methodological naturalism, normativism, inferentialism, anti-vitalism… This is not about enumerating labels, and I would not do it if this diversity were not significant. In fact, the unification of the viewpoint is less about a particular concept or original thesis than allowing the possibility of linking together a number of separate and individually discussed theses. It consists of the following positions:

27 Graham Harman, “And I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed,” in Environment and Society D: Society and Space, 28 (2010), 772-790; Harman, The Quadruple Object, chapter VIII.
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(a) Ordinary realism (independence of the world from the mind)
(b) Inferentialism (formal autonomy of reason)
(c) Scientific realism (the propositions produced by scientific and mathematical method genuinely inform us about the world)
(d) Eliminativism concerning experience (the contents of experience do not literally represent any real determination)
(e) Materialism (ontological priority of inorganic over organic, of matter over the living)

Not only are these compatible, but they also mutually entail one another based on concepts of a reality independent of the mind and reason being tied to truth. The conclusion of nihilism, that is, the inexistence of any “meaning” inherent to things thus emerges, as the essential truth of the Enlightenment project (the emancipation of Reason). In other words, if for Continentals the truth (or, in its stead, what philosophy produces) is supposed to be exciting or grand, and if, for the analytics, to discover it involves making it tedious, for

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28 An attempt, which I am not entirely satisfied with, at connecting these theses: Reason, impersonal and formal, is the condition of possibility of all thought and speculation (inferentialism). It compellingly makes possible the rational knowledge of reality (transcendental realism). This knowledge is based on the idea of a reality absolutely independent of thought, and postulated by the already established concept of reason. In turn, this allows a set of substantial deductions about the world, devoid of meaning and harmony between human being and the world, thought and being, facts and values (nihilism).

29 “Any effort in philosophy to make the obscure obvious is likely to be unappealing, for the penalty of failure is confusion while the reward of success is banality.” Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance* (Boston: R. Reidel, 1977). On the continental side, see the concept of image of thought defended by Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). “As long as we’re content with criticizing the ‘false,’ we’re not bothering anyone (true critique is the criticism of true forms, not false contents. You don’t criticize capitalism or imperialism by denouncing their ‘mistakes’).” Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004), 138, or the more systematic defense of rhetoric by Harman in *Prince of Networks*, 168-174. Let us add (“of course”) that these characterizations do not constitute value judgments. Here I es-
But if, for Meillassoux, this absence of reason (or principle of unreason) is an absolute fact, in an even more audacious way for Brassier, it is a fact which carries a substantial thesis: the absolute ontological primacy of matter over mind, of death over life. But if, for Meillassoux, this absence of reason (or principle of unreason) is an absolute fact, in an even more audacious way for Brassier, it is a fact which carries a substantial thesis: the absolute ontological primacy of matter over mind, of death over life. Philosophy then becomes the discipline charged with bringing to light the insurmountable truth of extinction.

\[\text{sententially refer to the differences in attitude concerning language, rhetoric, and the nature of knowledge produced by philosophy in the two traditions.}\]

\[30\] It would be difficult for “standard” eliminativists, à la Churchland, not only to refer to, but to admit as acceptable, the philosophical methods drawn from Laruelle, Badiou, or Heidegger...

\[31\] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 110.

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For instance, coming back to the eliminativist thesis, if one supposes its literal truth, then one infers from it that the ultimate meaning of this truth is that thought and experience allow access to no real determination. Therefore, it passes from “grass is not really, in itself, green,” to “our experience of grass is only a secondary effect and foreign to grass itself.” Ultimately Brassier’s anti-correlationism consists in its literal inversion: the correlate of thought is not being, but non-being.

This project, and the theses that it proposes, can seem excessively heavy, arbitrary, or absurd (a sort of philosophical Houellebecq). This would be the case indeed if there were no method to support this ambition. And yet one of them exists, found principally by Brassier, in the French philosopher François Laruelle. I will certainly not venture to summarize the thoughts of this rather arduous author, but will quickly present the part which concerns us here: Laruelle’s project involves replacing philosophy with “non-philosophy,” i.e., the systematic opposition to every philosophical attempt to use thought to add anything to the “flat” discoveries of scientificity and the “radically immanent” presence of the Real. The Real is always present, always accessible, but, since it is not an idea or a concept, the nature of philosophy is to perpetually miss it. Indeed, the sin of philosophy is its inaugural Decision to understand the Real (or the One) by something other than it (by idea, intuition, language, etc.), to divide itself from it in order to understand it. Philosophy does nothing except develop this circular Decision. All the subsequent work of philosophy involves the desperate attempt to rejoin what has been separated, forming a synthesis from an always-arbitrary control-point. This negative thesis, which corresponds to a formal and generalized version of denunciations of meta-

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33 We understand what we suppose to be true, if demonstrated philosophically to be true. I will return to this. That is, if we suppose it philosophically demonstrated to be true.

34 Hägglund makes use of Derrida in his approach, seeking to unearth the constructive tools of a “radical atheist materialism” within deconstruction.

35 What Laurelle calls the method of “transcendental deduction” Brassier, Nihil Unbound, 123.
physics by Heidegger or Derrida, permits abolishing every attempt to think about the world apart from the insurmountable facts of the real that are proposed to us. To think of the Real as separate from thought requires a “non-Decisional” philosophy that, with one of the most painful lexical choices of the twentieth century, Laruelle baptizes “non-philosophy.”

We now return to eliminativism (which is not the only thesis of Brassier’s nihilism, but is rather useful for us as a guiding thread here): the most contemporary opposition against eliminativism involves categorizing it as nonsense, either through self-contradiction, or because it is incapable of giving a ground for itself, and must resort to a form of, at the very least, insufficient pragmatism. Laruelle’s method, reviewed by Brassier, accepts philosophical irreducibility from the fact of the absence of correlation between being and thought—not only the empirical, but the ontological truth of the consequences of eliminativism: “We gain access to the structure of reality via a machinery of conception which extracts intelligible indices from a world that is not designed to be intelligible and is not originarily infused with meaning.”

36 “[Laruelle’s] innovation is fundamentally formal,” Brassier, Nihil Unbound, 148.

37 “Metaphysics conceived of the autonomy of the object in terms of the model of substance. But successive critiques of the hypostatization of substance from Kant to Heidegger have undermined the plausibility of metaphysical (substance based) realism, thereby securing the triumph of correlationism. Laruelle’s work challenges this correlationist consensus by proposing a version of transcendental realism wherein the object is no longer conceived of as a substance but rather as a discontinuous cut in the fabric of ontological synthesis. It is no longer thought that determines the object, whether through representation or intuition, but rather the object that seizes thought and forces it to think it, or better, according to it.” Ibid., 149.


39 Ray Brassier, “Concepts and Objects,” §4 (Our emphasis). Compare this with Churchland’s declaration: “it is far from obvious that truth is either the primary or the principal product of [cognitive] activity. Rather, its function would appear to be the ever more finely tuned administration of the organism’s behaviour.” Paul M. Churchland, A Neurocomputational Perspective: The
Brassier’s other method of supporting his position consists in maintaining that every attempt to deny the objectivity-nihilism correlation, through vitalism or an overturning of the category of objectivity, is based on an illegitimate concept of reason or thought that exceeds what can be defended by reason. The paradigmatic example here would be that of Bergson, whose philosophy of life celebrates novelty and relies heavily on a limited conception of reason, the latter being marginalized in favor of intuition. Against such a current of thought (which brings together Deleuze, Whitehead, Heidegger, Hegel, and all the metaphysicians of SR), Brassier resorts to a deconstruction inspired by Wilfrid Sellars and his critique of the “myth of the given.” The myth of the given is “the idea that there is a certain stratum of experience which is somehow making a truth claim and which is somehow more basic than any acquired conceptual system.” For Brassier, all the vitalist or phenomenological claims of conceptual priority for lived experience and the non-conceptual over conceptual reason are reduced to nothingness, either through critique of the myth of the given, or through a prior reduction to a form of correlationism undermined by this critique: “In the absence of any physicalist corrective to vitalist hubris, biocentrism leads infallibly to noocentrism.” Thus, every appeal to intellectual or sensual intuition is humiliated and rejected in favor of an irreducible attachment to an “impersonal” concept of reason borrowed from Robert Brandom (Making It Explicit). This rejection is not only formal, but also implies a substantial conclusion, namely the priority of death over

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life: “The living is only a form of what is dead, and a very rare form” (Nietzsche). The omnipresence of extinction in the very heart of life and thought is the highest truth.

How, then, can this conception be critiqued? The most obvious problem resides in its very specific usage of philosophical rationality that claims to discover some “subtractionist” truths—both substantial and negative truths (namely, nihilism)—by a formal method. It is uncertain whether such a position is tenable, at least according to the precision with which Brassier guards himself. So, more generally, his position is based on an emphatic interpretation of the nature of the ideas of objectivity and rationality, which in their proper form would have profound substantial content; yet this method, though proving definitively powerful when it comes to refutation, appears much weaker when it comes to defending its own theses. Moreover, the arguments against him, incidentally, are less concerned with the extremely technical metaphysical presuppositions borrowed from Badiou and Laruelle, than his reprise of scientific realism (and his eliminativist conclusions) via inferentialism, titled “transcendental realism.” The metaphysical tit-for-tat response (from Harman to Brassier) consisted in showing how attempts to identify scientific rationality with ontology were doomed to failure because they themselves rely on an extremely unsophisticated metaphysics equivalent to a “naïve” process-relationalism (cf. the next section). On a broader level, Harman objects to Brassier because he absolutizes scientific methods and results. This, argues Harman, does not constitute the deeper message of the Enlightenment, but simply underwrites a form of correlationism, since this affirms that the conditions of possibility of knowledge delimit the framework of ontology.


44 As Brassier summarizes it: “I am a nihilist because I believe in truth.”

45 Cf. Brassier, “Concepts and Objects,” §1, and Harman, “I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed.”
Speculations III

It seems that the question remains open since the rejection of the position (normative nihilism) involves an ontology close to OOO (and inversely), because the two tend to mutually refute each other. We will therefore examine what makes up the last type of position.

III. Neo-Vitalisms: Iain Hamilton Grant
(Schelling/Deleuze/Whitehead)

Variants: Manuel De Landa, Steven Shaviro

Correlationism: No essential difference exists between the material and the ideal.

Anti-correlationism: It is impossible to reduce the origin of existence to properties or determinations that are individually identifiable or can be apprehended by an experience.

The last current of SR is not the easiest to approach, on the one hand, because alternate versions abound (especially inspired by Deleuze and Whitehead46), and, on the other hand, because its “original” representative, Iain Hamilton Grant, expresses his thought in a way that is difficult to access, by confining it to the narrow space of Schellingian studies. In fact, for Grant, the abandonment of active nature, which characterizes modern philosophy in general and correlationism in particular (its aphysia, or forgetting of Nature), found a worthy adversary in F. W. J. Schelling’s Naturphilosophie. His essentially historical work demonstrates the existence of nontrivial thought about nature in Schelling, and he argues that it is irreducible to any other philosophical alternative. In doing so, he arrives at a vitalist version of idealism. By “idealism,” he means:

46 I will not linger here on the Whiteheadians, such as Steven Shaviro, in order to simplify this introduction somewhat.
(a) Platonist realism (the Idea exists just as much as thought and things),
(b) a concept of matter as active and substantial rather than as a mere negation of form, and
(c) relativity of the existence of singular things, commensurate with a dynamism more profound than the things themselves (Nature).

Idealism is the condition, (a) of every metaphysics, (b) of every true materialism, and (c) of a realism that is not naïve and essentialist. We obtain the only tenable realism by reuniting these three aspects: a speculative realism, in the sense Schelling gave to speculative physics. What matters for Grant is to be opposed to contemporary negations of these three fundamental theses. The idea within correlation to the thinking subject, endorsing the incessant survival of a neo-Fichteanism against the Schellingianism he defends. Against (b), the Aristotelian privilege accorded to form, resulting in a negative conception of matter against Plato’s active matter. The other forms of speculative realism do not literally subscribe to (a), but, are not, strictly speaking, opposed to it (above all object-oriented ontology, which accepts the reality of concepts as objects); by contrast, it is with (b) and (c) that the difference is the clearest. First, concerning (b), there is no doubt that OOO and transcendental nihilism are clearly devoted to the autonomy of form over matter.

For Brassier, the negation of (b) is twofold: there is a reality of form, since its autonomy with respect to every determination is the condition of existence of reason and thought, uprooted from every “intuition;” but there is also a primary reality of inert matter, since Brassier completely adopts the concept of inert matter that Grant rejects and makes the ultimate truth of ontology from it.

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For Harman, who does not hide his Aristotelian heritage on this point, the presence of formalism is rather patent: the world is structured in terms of objects, and, since we cannot know the full reality of objects, then strictly speaking only their generic form is accessible to ontology. Yet this form is universal and identical for all objects. Harman would completely agree with Grant on the fact that it is necessary to reject the concept of physical matter as the fundamental category of ontology (i.e., physicalism), because such a concept is only the pretext for a hidden idealism. However, he does not support the concept of active matter, but only the idea of objects being active.

The last point is, in reality, the true grounds for opposition between the various neo-vitalisms, (whether they are inherited from Schelling, as in Grant, from Deleuze, or from Bergson) and OOO. Active matter is rejected by OOO not because of a taste for an inert conception of matter, but because active matter deprives singular objects of their reality by situating activity, novelty, and, in the end, reality, outside of objects in a mysterious substrate. Critiquing Jane Bennett’s “vital materialism,” Harman thus declares:

Ultimately, what is real in her new Nicene Creed is a pluriverse not of many things, but of “one matter-energy” that is “traversed by heterogeneities.” The danger for Bennett, as for Deleuze and Deleuze’s Spinoza, is that objects are liberated from slavery to the human gaze only to fall into a new slavery to a single “matter-energy” that allows for no strife between autonomous individual things.

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49 “To define a thing as material stuff that occupies space is to reduce it to a system of coordinates and measurable properties. Though it may seem that matter is autonomous, it is only autonomous insofar as humans define it according to certain properties, not in its own right.” Harman, Prince of Networks, 141. See also 107-112, as well as Harman, “I am also of the opinion that materialism must be destroyed.”

Thus, it is because (b) and (c) are closely linked in Grant’s idealism and contemporary neo-vitalisms that OOO is opposed to the idea of matter defined as active. On the other side, the neo-vitalists are opposed to the existence of individual things and prefer a form of non-individuated monism, because these things would be inextricably tied to a concept of a manipulable and calculable thing: “[we] view the world as if it consisted not of an ever-changing flow of time but of a calculable set of things,” laments Bennett. 51 Such a flow, a “process,” is at the center of vitalist ontologies, 52 and is criticized very insistently by the other SR participants. 53 Either we are literally dealing with a unique “dynamism” (or the beyond of unity) that produces the individuality of things, in which case it becomes difficult to see how things have ever been able to be individuated from an entirely indeterminate _apeiron_); or, we assert that only non-individual dynamism is real, and that separate things are only a product of a human sensation, 54 in which case we are dealing with an idealism that privileges subjectivity over the real being of things. Or, finally, we take recourse to hybrid concepts such as Gilbert Simondon’s “preindividual singularities” or De Landa’s


52 “To take the most obvious example, in some realist approaches the world is thought to be composed of fully formed objects whose identity is guaranteed by their possession of an essence, a core set of properties that defines what these objects are. Deleuze is not a realist about essences, or any other transcendent entity, so in his philosophy something else is needed to explain what gives objects their identity and what preserves this identity through time. Briefly, this something else is dynamical processes. Some of these processes are material and energetic, some are not, but even the latter remain immanent to the world of matter and energy.” De Landa, _Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy_, 2-3.


54 “The distinct outlines which we see in an object, and which give it its individuality, are only the design of a certain kind of influence that we might exert on a certain point of space: it is the plan of our eventual actions that is sent back to our eyes, as though by a mirror, when we see the surfaces and edges of things.” Henri Bergson, _Creative Evolution_, 12.
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“heterogeneous continuum” in order to explain such a passage, although the consistency of such concepts is greatly diminished by their synthetic nature and they simply name a problem, rather than solving it. This is the main challenge that all vitalist, and, more broadly, panpsychist, positions must face, and that emerges in contemporary continental metaphysics: to show how their concepts are both sound and capable of overcoming “poor” materialism.

How to conclude after multiple back and forths, tentative philosophical hypotheses, and their repeated rebuttals? Ultimately, what can be said about speculative realism as such, which appears so divided and dispersed? The best response I have at my disposal to these two questions consists in maintaining that, despite the incomplete or problematic nature of the theories proposed, they all contain a philosophical, and perhaps an even larger existential, core. This seems to be the essential contribution of speculative realism: namely, that realism cannot be a trivial or obvious position, but conversely, a reality that is not a pragmatic expedient requires important ontological commitments in order to retain the specificity of the real in relation to every representation. In a word, that realism has a price.

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