Interim Report with Just a Few Caveats

Like a good many others I was greatly impressed when I first read Quentin Meillassoux’s After Finitude—at any rate its opening section—and even more so to witness its extraordinary impact among the livelier sections of the continental philosophy community over the next few years. What the book clearly marked was a full-scale retreat (for which, read “advance”) from the kinds of far-out anti-realist, constructivist, or socio-linguistic-relativist position that had captured the high ground across large swathes of the post-1970 continentaly influenced humanities, philosophy included. In its place there now emerged a hard-line objectivist realism which defined itself squarely against that whole theoretical-cultural mindset. Moreover it did so with primary reference to just those disputed zones, like epistemology and philosophy of science, where anti-realism had pressed its case with maximum vehemence and rhetorical if not argumentative force.

Hence the effect of high drama that Meillassoux achieved with his now-famous opening passage concerning the “arche-fossil” and its erstwhile habitat, the “ancestral realm.” He takes these to offer a standing refutation of the basic anti-realist idea that truth is coextensive with the scope and limits of attainable human knowledge, or that it cannot exceed the bounds of cognitive-linguistic representation. This doctrine is simply not capable of accommodating truths, such as that embodied in the fossil, which confront it with the sheer impossibility of thinking that the truth of their having existed pre-historically could be somehow ruled out by the fact that there were no human beings (or other sentient life-forms) around at the time. If such is indeed the logical upshot, whatever the various attempts to avoid it by producing some compromise formula, then better give up that whole misconceived project and accept that truth and reality are in no way dependent on human perceptual, cognitive, or linguistic-representational capacities. Thus speculative realism, on Meillassoux’s account, constitutes a really decisive break with those sundry movements of thought—from hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, Foucauldian discourse-theory, and Rortian neo-pragmatism to social constructivism and the strong sociology of knowledge—which had made it a high point of radical doctrine to assert just the opposite case. This is no doubt why his book became first a debating-point and then, very soon, something of a cult object amongst the swelling company of those—mostly younger philosophers with an existing interest in one or other of those movements—who signed up as speculative realists. Indeed there soon emerged the first signs of that fissile tendency or proneness to generate internal rifts, groupings, and (in this case, fairly amicable) differences of view that has often gone along with such collective shifts of allegiance.

Still there is a good measure of agreement as to what marks out speculative realism (henceforth SR) from the major currencies of post-war continental thought, or—to be precise—those mainly French-influenced movements that have achieved greatest visibility as cultural exports. One claim that emphatically unites the SR clan is that the linguistic turn in its structuralist and post-structuralist manifestations, as well as its sundry analytic forms, stands in a direct line of descent from German idealism. On their diagnosis things went grossly awry when Kant, having been roused from his dogmatic slumbers by the challenge of Humean scepticism, responded by announcing his “Copernican revolution” in epistemology. Earlier philosophers, from Descartes down, had treated the problem of knowledge as a problem about somehow proving that our cognitive faculties were reliably in touch with an external, objective, mind-independent reality. Since Kant considered Hume to have shown once and for all that this was impossible.

2 For further discussion see Christopher Norris, Truth Matters: Realism, Anti-Realism and Response-Dependence (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) and Philosophy of Language and the Challenge to Scientific Realism (London: Routledge, 2004).

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an impossible project—since human knowers had no conceivable access to reality except by way of the various concepts, categories, and sensuous intuitions that alone afforded such access—therefore philosophy must now renounce its old, self-deluding quest and instead seek to limn the scope and the limits of that same cognitive apparatus. Hence the whole immensely complicated business of Kantian epistemological critique, designed to beat the bounds of human cognitive capacity and preclude any speculative overreaching, whether by knowledge in its vain attempt to scale the metaphysical heights or by metaphysics in its equally vain pretension to offer itself as a source of probative knowledge.

It is chiefly these negative or cautionary aspects of Kant's philosophy—its constant placing of limits, restrictions, or ne plus ultra conditions on the enterprise of human enquiry—that Meillassoux, like his mentor Alain Badiou, finds so very irksome. More specifically, it is the twofold dogmatic requirement: first, that philosophy not bother its head with those old, strictly unanswerable questions concerning the existence, nature, and properties of objective, mind-independent reality, and second: that it not indulge itself in metaphysical speculations that transgress the limits of human phenomenal or sensuous cognition yet none the less see fit to claim some kind of cognitive warrant. Thus the twin terms “speculative” and “realism” both have a strong anti-Kantian charge closely linked to the central claims and motivation of the SR project. “Speculation” is what its proponents rely on to carry them past the limits of phenomenal cognition or beyond any epistemology, like Kant’s, for which phenomenal cognition provides both a model and a strict boundary-marker. It is also, and for just that reason, what enables thought to make strong argumentative use of certain instances, like the arche-fossil, that are taken to confront the idealist, constructivist, or anti-realist with the fact of an objective reality that far antedated the emergence of human cognition. Such strictly pre-historical objects bear witness to the basic realist claim that human beings and their particular (as it happens highly limited) powers of sensory, perceptual, or cognitive grasp are by no means prerequisite to the existence or indeed the nature, structure or properties of what those beings sometimes manage to cognise. Of course anti-realism comes in various strengths and kinds, some of them seeking to head off the standard range of counter-arguments by giving themselves suitably emollient names like “internal realism,” “framework-relative realism,” or “quasi-realism.” However, these compromise theories invariably work out as a more or less fig-leaf version of “realism” which in the end yields so much ground to anti-realism (and relativism) that the fig-leaf might as well be discarded.

This is why any properly realist philosophy of science has to adopt an objectivist ontology—that is to say, one that allows the truth-value of our various statements, theories and predictions to be fixed by the way things stand in reality whatever our present-best belief concerning them—as well as a workable epistemology that convincingly explains our knowledge of the growth of knowledge. Anything less—any concession to the idea of truth as epistemically constrained—can easily be used as the thin end of an anti-realist or ontological-relativist wedge. One may even end up in the absurd position of a “constructive empiricist” like Bas van Fraassen according to whom we should not ascribe reality to anything that exceeds the powers of technologically unaided human perception through its being too small, too large, too fast, too remote, or too complex to be registered clearly by creatures with our kind of sensory-physical constitution. Or rather, those items have a decent claim to reality when perceived with the aid of relatively simple pieces of apparatus (such as optical telescopes or microscopes), but not if they require more advanced and sophisticated means of observation. Thus, on his account, we are better off trusting to our eyesight and peering at the moons of Jupiter through a spaceship window than deploying the latest radio telescope with superlative powers of

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7 For a particular waspish passage on Kant, see Alain Badiou, Logics of Worlds, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2006), 533–536.


resolution and based on design and construction principles that are well understood. Such are the warpings of critical intelligence brought about by a commitment to the perverse logic of anti-realism conjoined with a basically Lockean empiricist epistemology and a deep scepticism regarding the scope and truth-indicative power of rational inference to the best explanation. Hence the countervailing SR emphasis on the verification-transcendent character of truth or the fact—albeit knowable only through an exercise of speculative reason—that human knowledge may always fall short of objectivity and truth. From this objectivist standpoint reality must be thought to extend unknowably far beyond the confines of human perceptual-conceptual grasp and its spatio-temporally indexed character. Thus the arche-fossil is (or should be) enough to convince us of the extreme parochialism entailed by any version of the anti-realist doctrine which supposes that truth or knowledge are epistemically constrained, i.e., that they are ineluctably subject to the scope and limits of human knowledge.

This latter notion is one that Meillassoux deems to have taken hold with Kant, and thereafter—very largely through Kant's ubiquitous and diverse influence—to have exerted something like a stranglehold on philosophy right down to the currently prevailing strains of continental and analytic thought. His watchword for it is “correlationism,” a term that is nowadays bandied about by speculative realists with the idea—basic to the “old” correspondence theory of knowledge—of present-best (or even best-humanly-attainable) knowledge, while if truth is humanly (epistemically) accessible then it must come in forms adapted to the intelligence of human knowers. And if this is the case—if all known or knowable truths are in some sense pre-adapted to human cognition—then correspondence theorists who suppose the contrary (who take it that truth, objectively conceived, dictates what shall count as veridical knowledge) are ex hypothese barking up the wrong tree.

On this view the realist conception with respect to every branch of human inquiry is in the same dead-end predicament as that supposedly identified by Paul Benacerraf in a well-known essay on philosophy of mathematics. That is, it runs up against the dilemma that if truth is objective then it might always exceed, surpass or transcend the powers of present-best (or even best-humanly-attainable) knowledge, while if truth is re-defined (in constructivist, anti-realist, or other such non-objectivist) terms then it is no longer truth as the realist would have it but something more like “truth’ to the best of our always fallible, error-prone, or corrigible best belief.” Although the issue is posed most strikingly with respect to mathematics and the formal sciences, it is one that has been raised to broadly

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similar effect across a wide range of subject-areas, including philosophy of science and epistemology. In each case the argument standardly proceeds from correlationist premises—or some version of truth-as-corrrespondence—to the claim that this realist order of priorities needs to be reversed since truth can only be a matter of attainable human knowledge and human warrant only a matter of optimized epistemic warrant. It is here—in its steadfast opposition to precisely this sceptical twist on the correspondence theory—that speculative realism stakes out its distinctive philosophical ground. “Correlationism” is thus held to signify the fateful inversion of priorities that philosophy suffered when it followed Kant in his “Copernican revolution”—falsely so called—and henceforth took epistemology, rather than ontology, as its primary concern. Indeed, as Meillassoux says, it is ironic that Kant should advance that immodest comparison with other SR thinkers—of Kant’s claim (like Husserl’s after him) to be reasoning in a transcendental rather than a merely empirical mode—that is—to be talking about the a priori conditions of possibility for thought, knowledge, judgement, and experience in general rather than about some given psychological, dispositional, cultural, or more broadly anthropological mind-set. For it is a basic part of the SR project to insist that nothing short of objectivist realism—certainly no Kantian attempt to make up for the loss of it by the appeal to some supposedly invariant set of a priori conditions on the scope and limits of human knowledge—can account for what science tells us concerning the mind-independence of reality and truth.

Moreover, that project has ambitions beyond what might, as I have presented it so far, strike many analytic philosophers of science as a fairly familiar (if dramatically worked-up) rendition of the standard case against anti-realism in its relativist, constructivist, instrumentalist, pragmatist, conventionalist, or framework-internalist forms. Those ambitions take it into speculative territory where analytic philosophers would fear (or disdain) to tread, although—to be fair—the SR community would hardly take this as reason for grave concern. Brassier’s above-mentioned animadversions on the heat-death of the universe and what it means for human beings in the presumption that they (or their particular species-relative range of cognitive powers) are the final arbiters of reality and truth.

II

If Meillassoux deploys his arche-fossil as a standing rebuke to anti-realist pretensions at one end of the historical time-scale then Ray Brassier mounts the same sort of challenge from the opposite end. For him, the great fault of mainstream epistemology and philosophy of science is that they buy into an agenda where the terms of debate, whatever their professed stance on this issue, are always at some point subject to assessment with reference to an ultimately anthropocentric framework of beliefs. According to Brassier, this is most apparent in their striking failure—or plain incapacity—to reckon not only with the fact of human mortal finitude but also with the prospect, brought home very forcibly by present-day physics, that human beings and all other sentient (including extra-terrestrial) life-forms will be subject to total extinction with the heat-death and final dissolution of the universe. Thus he takes a decidedly sceptical view—in common with other SR thinkers—of Kant’s claim (like Husserl’s after him) to be reasoning in a transcendental rather than a merely empirical mode—that is—to be talking about the a priori conditions of

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14 See Notes 3, 8, 12 and 13, above.
tion between overt radicalism and something that is ultimately far less challenging to received ways of thought. In the SR case this duality—or conceptual fault-line—runs between a scientific-realist outlook which, although expressed with dramatic flair, is distinctly under-theorised or lacking in philosophical substance and, on the other hand, a speculative bent that leans so far in a “radical” (self-consciously heterodox) direction as to lose touch with any workable variety of scientific realism.

In other words, there comes a tipping-point where certain kinds or degrees of speculative licence, conjoined with a certain fondness for extravagant (not always very pertinent) cosmic scenarios, tend to weaken a thinker’s critical purchase on the issues under review. This is especially the case when, as here, the variety of realism in question is one that has emerged in reactive opposition to a regnant anti-realism and which—perhaps for that reason—tends to adopt a hard-line contrary stance without having yet developed the resources (in particular the modal and logico-semantic resources) to fully support its claims. Hence, I suggest, the marked SR inclination toward lines of (strictly speaking) metaphysical speculation that rather too often pass themselves off as having some direct or decisive import for science and philosophy of science. Of course there is no thinking about philosophy of science—or indeed about science—without a whole range of metaphysical commitments, whether of a Kuhnian “normal” or “revolutionary” kind. One common error of sundry, otherwise highly diverse movements of twentieth-century thought, from logical positivism/empiricism to structuralism and post-structuralism, was to ignore this simple truth and habitually invest their usage of the term “metaphysics” with a routine pejorative force. Yet if philosophy of science has worked its way clear of this massively disabling prejudice, then it has done so by dint of much hard critical and clarificatory work at the interstices of logic, metaphysics, and epistemology. For all the reasons cited above this has not—or not yet—been the case with SR, despite nascent signs that some of its exponents are moving in that direction.

Briefly summarised, Meillassoux’s claim in the second part of After Finitude is that the best way to break with Kant’s malign influence is to go back to Hume, but to a thinker who bears absolutely no resemblance either to the Hume that Kant acknowledges as having delivered his wake-up call or to the Hume that nowadays figures as a football in current analytic debate. This has to do with the question whether Hume was indeed, as widely thought, a deep-dyed sceptic about the existence of causal laws and (by implication) physical reality along with all its imputed structures, properties, dispositions, etc., or whether on the contrary he espoused an outlook of epistemological (rather than ontological) scepticism and merely doubted our capacity ever to achieve certain knowledge of them. But if the “new Hume” is deemed a radical departure from orthodoxy by the standards laid down for interpreting classical thinkers amongst mainstream analytic types, it is tame stuff when compared with the reading of Hume that Meillassoux comes up with. His Hume is a realist in the sense that Humean scepticism about laws of nature is taken as a downright disbelief that such laws really, truly exist—or a belief that they really, truly don’t—rather than a mere disbelief in our capacity (as epistemically restricted human knowers) to find them out. More than that: Meillassoux’s Hume is one who thinks—who argues with impeccable logic and consistency—that if there exist “laws of nature” or physical ground-rules of any sort then they are utterly contingent, momentarily changeable, subject to random fluctuation, or apt to transmute into something radically different without any underlying cause or reason explaining why this should have occurred. For Meillassoux the only real necessity is the necessity of contingency, or the rational requirement—in a shrewdly-aimed bouleversement of Leibniz—that we should reason from the infinite multiplicity of possible worlds to the necessarily possible existence of innumerable worlds in which the “basic” or “fundamental” laws of physics in our particular world no longer apply. The Leibnizian principle of reason is thereby turned back against

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19 See entries under Note 18, above.

20 See Note 5, above.

itself and becomes, in effect, a principle declaring the rationally demonstrable non-existence of any reasons (or causal explanations) for anything that would hold good beyond the solitary moment of their happening to state some (necessarily transient) necessary truth.

Thus Meillassoux proposes a flat-out reversal of Leibniz’s argument from God’s omniscience to the idea that all truths are necessary although many will appear contingent throughout our creaturely lack of such divine knowledge. On the contrary: what reason does (or should) tell us is that any intelligence with the power to see beyond those human cognitive limits would be prey to no such high-rationalist illusion. It would then reveal that in truth the very canons of rationality, logic, evidential warrant, abductive inference to the best explanation, and so forth, are (for all that we can know) epistemically valid—if at all—only for some limited time and thereafter quite possibly subject to radical change. One might expect Meillassoux to argue for this extraordinary thesis partly through an appeal to the “evidence” of various physical-scientific developments (especially the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics) and partly through modal-logical considerations having to do with the supposedly “real” existence of possible though non-actual worlds. However, more crucial to his thinking is the argument from post-Cantorian set theory—elaborated by his mentor Alain Badiou—to the effect that “inconsistent multiplicity” will always and necessarily exceed any limiting order of consistency imposed upon it. That is to say, the history of set-theoretical methods, concepts, and techniques has been one of constantly pushing back the borders of that new-found “mathematicians’ paradise” that David Hilbert acclaimed in 1900. It started out with Cantor’s breakthrough discovery, contrary to the teaching of philosophers from Plato and Aristotle down, that there existed a real or actual (as distinct from merely virtual) order of infinity, defined as applying to any set whose members could be placed in a one-to-one relation with one of its proper sub-sets. (Consider the infinity of natural numbers, or integers, vis-à-vis the infinities of even or odd numbers.) That discovery led on to Cantor’s

22 For a detailed treatment of these topics, see Christopher Norris, Quantum Theory and the Flight from Realism: Philosophical Perspectives on Quantum Mechanics (London: Routledge, 2006).
24 For an illuminating survey of these developments, see Michael Potter, Set Theory and its Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); also Badiou, Being and Event.

epochal proof—an affront to commonsense intuition as well as to many eminent mathematicians at the time—that the infinity of integers was only the first in a series of larger orders of infinity, such as that of the real numbers.

This is not the place for any lengthier treatment of the ontological, political, scientific, and other far-reaching consequences that Badiou draws from his intensive engagement with set theory and its philosophy. My point is that Meillassoux takes its lessons very much to heart in constructing his radically heterodox reading of Hume and his argument for the absolute contingency of anything that might count as a “law” of nature. The result is to make of Hume both the ultimate epistemological sceptic (in so far as he takes any such “laws” to be radically contingent and hence beyond our best powers of rational grasp) and the ultimate ontological realist (in so far as he takes this to be an objective truth about the physical world and not just a way of acknowledging our own strictly limited or temporally indexed epistemic powers). Hence the crucial significance, for Meillassoux, of Badiou’s claim that “mathematics is ontology” and his exposition of post-Cantorian set theory—especially in so far as it reveals the existence of multiple orders of infinity—as our best (indeed our sole adequate) guide in ontological matters. What this enables (Meillassoux would say: absolutely requires) us to think is that there is—from must be—an infinite number of ways in which the “laws of physics” might lie, or an infinite range of possible transformations from moment to moment in the radically contingent or underdetermined structure of physical reality. No doubt the objection could be raised that this makes it hard, or downright impossible, to explain how techno-science has achieved such an impressive record of achievements to date. Such arguments are something of a realist stock-in-trade, especially in response to sceptical or relativist claims that since scientists are now known to have got so many things wrong in the past then surely it is hubris to suppose that their present-day efforts are at last managing to cut nature at the joints. To which realists just as often respond with a version of the “no miracles” case, i.e., that if science hadn’t got most things right with regard to the nature and structure of physical reality then the fact that our technologies work so well could only be due to some massive cosmic coincidence.26

26 On this side of the debate, see J. Aronson, R. Harré and E. Way, Realism Rescued: How Scientific Progress is Possible (London: Duckworth, 1994); Roy Bhaskar, A Realist Theory of
Meillassoux again has a novel twist on this familiar topic of debate. If his “necessity of contingency” thesis holds good—if any presently existing “laws of nature” are merely an infinitesimal subset of the infinitely many such laws that could come into force from one millisecond to the next—this must surely be thought to throw a huge paradox into any argument on either side of the realism/anti-realism issue. Thus it allows, even strictly requires, that there will sometimes be intervals—of which the present might just be one—when they keep falling out the same way over a long enough period for scientific knowledge (and human enquiry generally) to get up and running. These intervals will in effect be “singularities” by suggestive analogy with the current mathematical-physical sense of that term, but subject to the fairly mind-boggling difference that what here renders them so massively improbable, hence infrequent, is precisely the reverse of that standard usage. It is not the fact of their constituting a singular exception to the fundamental constants or the baseline physical laws—since these are (for all that we can know) changing momentarily for no assignable reason—but rather their happening (against all the odds) to remain in place or in force throughout some appreciable timespan. It is only by the sheerest of flukes that the conditions could exist whereby those laws might come to provide a basis for any physical science meriting the name. In which case the old debates over scientific realism must seem hopelessly naïve or off-the-point, as must the closely related dispute between “old” and “new” Humeans over whether Hume was a full-strength or only half-strength sceptic. What all those parties fail to grasp—on Meillassoux’s submission—is that Hume got it right about the problem of knowledge but got it right in a way that he himself failed to grasp and moreover, paradoxically, could not have taken on board without undermining his professed sceptical outlook. For if this outlook finds its justification in the inconstancy of nature itself, rather than the uncertain or error-prone character of human knowledge, then of course that truth about the world—along with our capacity, as speculative realists, to grasp it—is sufficient to refute the sceptic’s claim, albeit while raising other problems that might make the traditional problem of knowledge appear philosophical child’s play.


III

Clearly for Meillassoux there is no discrepancy between the first and second portions of After Finitude, or no good reason to suppose that a strong ontological-realism approach of the sort that his book propounds with such eloquence might come into conflict with his doctrine of absolute contingency. Yet if the latter is taken at anything like face value—as it certainly asks to be taken—then it is certainly not realism-compatible in any sense of “realism” that will hold up against various well-honed lines of attack from the sceptical-relativist, constructivist, conventionalist, or anti-realist quarter. More specifically, it blocks the appeal to abduction—or the argument from inference to the best explanation—which has long been a staple of the realist case against Humean and other forms of sceptical doubt. For, as I have said, that argument gains its strength from a version of the no-miracles (or cosmic-coincidence) rejoinder whereby the realist requires of the sceptic that he explain the various notable achievements of science by some means other than the well-supported rational inference that it has managed to accumulate a fair stock of knowledge concerning a good range of really existent objects along with their properties, structures, dispositions, causal powers, and so forth. No doubt the previous sentence contains a good many terms and associated concepts—including “rational inference”—that will strike the sceptic as flagrantly begging all the main points at issue. Still the realist’s challenge retains its force since the sceptic has yet to meet it by doing what the realist quite reasonably requires—i.e., providing that non-miraculist alternative—rather than retreating, as so often happens, into a somewhat childish “who says?” posture of reiterated flat denial.

At this stage the realist is right to claim, on the basis of inference to the best explanation, that scepticism of this all-purpose or indiscriminate variety—as distinct from the scepticism that comes of a critical and questioning attitude to received ideas—is nothing more than a tedious irrelevance or product of hyper-cultivated doubt. However, the speculative realist who follows Meillassoux to the point of endorsing his “necessity of contingency” argument along with his extraordinary reading of Hume will in consequence be deprived of any such resource in battling the diehard sceptic. That resource


28 See entries under Note 26, above.
is available only on condition that one not deny, as a matter of *a priori* commitment, that there exists sufficient continuity, stability, or permanence about the basic laws of nature to ensure that knowledge has something determinate to be knowledge about, or that the truth (or falsehood) of our scientific theories, hypotheses, and predictions has to do with the way things stand in objective reality. After all, if Meillassoux is right—and (*concesso non dato*) if this could ever be established by any means at our scientific, theoretical, or speculative disposal—then for that very reason it is impossible to conceive what might properly count as confirming or falsifying any such claim. Quite simply, and again for all that we could know, the truth-conditions would be in such a state of undetectably rapid and discontinuous change that the realist—at any rate the champion of realism in a genuine and substantive rather than a purely notional sense—would be played off the field for lack of any means to specify, define, or apply them.

No doubt it could be argued, in support of Meillassoux’s position, that ontological realism of his uncompromising kind is sure to involve the always possible coming-apart of present-best knowledge (or optimal belief by the lights of this or that expert community) from truth objectively conceived. However, as shown by the recent history of analytic debate on this topic, any statement of the strong ontological case had better go along with a convincingly worked-out epistemology—an adequate account of how such truths might come within range of human apprehension or cognitive grasp—if it is not to court the standard range of sceptical responses. Otherwise it will invite some version of the Benacerraf-type argument (first proposed with reference to philosophy of mathematics but capable of extension across other domains of scientific knowledge) that one can either have truth objectively conceived or truth within the limits of human epistemic capacity but surely not both on pain of self-contradiction.29 What the realist above all needs to demonstrate is the falsity of this *tertium non datur* line of argument since it ignores—or perforce has to reject in keeping with its own fixed anti-realist agenda—the possibility that truth is both objective (i.e., epistemically unconstrained) and nevertheless sometimes capable, under benign epistemic conditions, of falling within human cognitive ken. There are quite a few Anglophone philosophers of science and epistemologists (myself included) who have for some time now been pursuing this project of supplying the *tertium* or arguing against that drastic and misconceived pseudo-dilemma.30 However such arguments require a lot more than the kind of wire-drawn dialectic that Meillassoux— to this extent in company with the sceptics and anti-realists—deploys in his heterodox reading of Hume and his equally heterodox (since scepticism-inducing) conception of a realism based on or conducive to the doctrine of absolute contingency. Thus any readers who endorse the arguments to be found in the first part of *After Finitude* should find themselves at odds with, or utterly perplexed by, the arguments put forward in its second part.

I think there are several reasons for what I have called this curiously broken-backed character of Meillassoux’s book. One is the multiform fixation of post-War French philosophy—starting out with the existentialist Sartre’s *pour soi/en soi* dichotomy and continued in his later Marxist-inflected distinction between praxis and the practico-inert—on resistance to what is perceived as the threatening encroachment of scientific or “positivist” methodologies into the space of human autonomy and freedom.31 This is still very evident, albeit in a heavily repressed and displaced guise, even after the late-1960s structuralist/post-structuralist turn against existentialism, humanist Marxism, and all such subject-centred philosophies. Thus it typically issues in an emphasis on infinitized textual polysemy as opposed to the methodological ambitions of classic high structuralism, on the “molecular” flows of desiring-production as opposed to the “molar” forms of self-authorized rational discourse, on the criss-crossing patterns of “rhizomatic” coupling as opposed to all tree-like (hierarchical) structures, and on that whole nexus of radically antinomian ideas that goes under the name “French Nietzsche.”32 To which might be added the way that Meillassoux blithely swings across, in the course of one short book, from a hard-line objectivist or ontological realism that takes absolutely no hostages from that Janus-faced adversary camp to a far-out speculative (quasi-)ontology of Heraclitean flux that offers no hold for any but a notional and explanatorily vacuous.


ous realism. One doesn't need to be a card-carrying Freudian in order to remark how SR manages to combine a conscious—indeed programmatic—reaction against these old anti-chosiste obsessions with a lingering attraction to them, or a residual (unacknowledged) desire to debunk any ontology that would find room for realism in any guise.

Another reason, I suggest, is the fact that SR has emerged on the “continental” scene as a kind of hot-house plant that appears all the more strange and exotic for its having taken root and actually blossomed in that improbable locale. Thus the very idea that large numbers of younger philosophers and theorists with a background (mostly) in continental thought and with distinctly “radical” leanings should now be flocking to the banner of objectivist realism is one that is still apt to raise eyebrows among those who belatedly stumble across it. However, this situation has also brought certain disadvantages, among them the marked SR tendency to ignore a whole range of significant ideas and developments within analytic philosophy of science. I have already mentioned one aspect of this, namely the absence of any adequate engagement with the debates around causal realism and inference to the best explanation, debates which are—or should be—central to its own interests. Again, there is the so-far missed opportunity of a sustained and productive encounter with the advocates of Critical Realism, an intellectually mature and broad-based movement which might supply—and among other things—a more nuanced and substantive account of the complex or variously “stratified” relationship between ontology and epistemology. Without such active exposure to currents of thought beyond its own, rather self-enclosed domain, SR runs the risk not only of neglecting important developments elsewhere but also of becoming overly attached to a set of ideas—or a canon of texts and thinkers—that are thereby exempted from adequately critical treatment.

One sign that SR has grown up in a somewhat hermetic research environment is precisely the above-noted tendency, most visible in the writings of Graham Harman, to substitute the word for the deed—or the slogan for the detailed investigative work—when it comes to that real-world object domain that supposedly occupies its main focus of enquiry. After all, there is not much point in continually reeling off great lists of wildly assorted objects if the upshot is merely to remark on their extreme diversity, or irreducible thinginess, without (as it seems) much interest in just what makes them the way they are. Thus one looks in vain for any serious attempt to link up the abstract realist-objectivist commitment with a depth-ontological or causal-explanatory account of the structures, properties, or dispositions that—according to our present-best physical theories—play that constitutive role. To some extent this can be put down to the strong Heideggerian influence on SR, and on Harman’s work in particular. After all, it is a high point of principle for Heidegger, in his joint meditation on thing-hood and the “question of technology,” to discount such science-led concerns as merely ontic and a product of the age-old Western metaphysical will-to-power over subject and object alike. To be sure, Harman has a novel take on these themes and certainly shares nothing of that downright anti-scientific prejudice. Much better is his light-touch way with Heidegger—his breezy (if somewhat routine) celebration of the sheer multiplicity of objects each flaunting its strictly irreducible haecceitas—than the Schwarzwald redneck’s solemn lucubrations. Nevertheless, Harman’s thinking has this much in common with depth-ontology in the echt-Heideggerian mode: that it finds no room for anything like what a scientist (or science-led philosopher of science) would count as a contribution to knowledge or a claim worth serious evaluation in point of truth-content or validity.

For Heidegger, of course, such objections are completely off the track and a sure sign that the objector is still in the grip of that same vulgar misconception that substitutes the ontic for the ontological, or confuses physical beings—including their scientifically determinable properties—with the issues they raise for a thinking attuned to the primordial question of Being. Although Harman eschews this heavyweight rhetoric of authenticity, he does carry over from it the idea that the thingness of things—or the objectivity of objects—is best


conserved by simply letting them be in their own, uniquely individual character rather than seeking to analyse, conceptualise, or explain their constitutive properties by subjecting them to the investigative methods developed by the physical sciences. This is no doubt why he gets into problems—having to press speculation to the limit and beyond—when it comes to the issue of causality or the question as to how all those diverse and utterly singular objects could possible enter into causal relationship. Hence Harman’s somewhat desperate recourse to a version of the old occasionalist doctrine—recast as a notion of “vicarious causation”—by way of explaining how, despite their impregnably isolated status, they can none the less be observed to act upon each other, or at least be observed to behave somehow in concert.¹⁶

Nor does it help very much to be told that this comes about through a kind of diffuse intentionality, or an agentic power whose ill-defined locus seems to involve a panpsychist appeal to quasi-mental forces somehow vested in the objects themselves. Here one really wants to say: yes, speculate all you like when you reach the limits of present-best science—and present-best philosophy of science—but do (for realism’s sake) first test its limits and see what’s available in the way of other, less whacky or credibility-stretching resources. Among the latter, as I have said, is a good amount of broadly analytic work that engages with the closely related topics of causality, rational inference, and scientific theory-selection. That SR has mostly ignored that work, or noticed it only in cursory fashion, is especially unfortunate given the vital role it might play in strengthening the realist component of the SR project and somewhat curbing the tendency to various forms of speculative excess. This might go some way toward providing a robust and reliable bridge between the continental-rationalist tradition (which SR inherits, albeit in significantly modified form) and those elements in the mainly British empiricist tradition that have striven to overcome what was, until recently, its pronounced Humean-sceptical bias. It is primarily the lack of such a bridge—the disconnect between speculative thought and that real-world object domain to which it pays fulsome but notional tribute—that constitutes the main unresolved difficulty with the SR project as presently conceived. Very probably this is attributable in part to the influence of Badiou’s set-theoretically based ontology, one which (a point often raised by commentators on Being and Event) operates at a fairly abstract or generalised level and leaves a good deal of work to be done by way of linkage to specific situations or real-world states of affairs.¹⁷

More recently, in its sequel Logics of Worlds, Badiou has set out to answer this objection by providing a more grounded ontology where situations are indexed according to the degree of “appearance” or perceptible/intelligible salience in them of various participant (or relatively non-participant) objects, properties, persons, groups, etc.¹⁸ However, compared with Being and Event, this is a somewhat discursive and roundabout—even, at times, self-indulgent—work which has some passages of extraordinary brilliance but which doesn’t have anything like the sustained argumentative power of that earlier text. Besides, it is still pitched at a pretty high level of abstraction if one takes the scientific-realist view (as endorsed by Meillassoux and, with varying degrees of conviction, by other SR theorists) that science—and physics in particular—should serve as the primary reference-point for assignments of reality and truth. My point, to repeat, is that SR has grown up in a context where the fact of its being a distinctly “continental” and markedly Francophile movement has brought certain disadvantages in terms of its genesis and reception-history. On the one hand this has tended to exaggerate its intellectual novelty—since realism has generally had a poor press among recent French philosophers—and on the other to cut it off from those developments in analytic ontology, epistemology and philosophy of science that might have helped strengthen its realist credentials. Ironically enough, given its anti-Kantian stance, there is a sense in which these problems are reminiscent of those that Kant identified in the rationalist metaphysicians of his day whose attempts to derive substantive or real-world-applicable truths by the exercise of pure (speculative) reason miscarried and thereby reopened the door to Humean scepticism.¹⁹ Such is the danger with any new movement of thought that stakes its claim against a ruling doxology and tends to take this squarely oppositional stance as sufficient guarantee of its own doctrinal rectitude. But of course SR is a young and vigorous movement, and moreover one with sufficient diversity within its own ranks to resist the lure of any single orthodox creed.

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¹⁶ See entries under Note 34, above.
¹⁷ See especially Peter Hallward, Badiou: A Subject to Truth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).
¹⁸ See Note 7, above.
¹⁹ Kant, Critique of Pure Reason.