

# Non-philosophy, the “No” Button, and a Brief Philo-fiction

Randall Johnson

**N**ON-PHILOSOPHY—AND ESPECIALLY that associated with the name François Laruelle—has in the last few years surged forward in those circles of radically-minded philosophers who seem to view themselves at some liminality of thought that is singularly new. Non-philosophy admits few, if any, philo-friends, and from those few named in-person it seems predominantly to separate itself. There is no doubt a certain pleasure in negation, a certain *jouissance* in the partitioning of the shared. I was reminded of such whole body joy of “no” by what could be argued was an inappropriate Christmas gift: a “no” button.

Fashioned as a likeness of the very successful advertising campaign of an office supply conglomerate’s “easy” button, the “no” button, when pushed, has about five or so different voicings of negation: a fairly polite but direct no; a shrill, high-pitched and irritable no; a deeper toned and emphatic no; a “no, no, no, no, no...” with a silent ellipsis of ongoingness; and a most definite “for the last time: no!” If the no-button had the voice of a non-philosopher, perhaps it would say “no-in-the-last-instance.” My non-husband and I, both child psychiatrists, gave this particular no-button, this techné of meta-negation, to our three year old great niece. Neither of us, I suspect, had anticipated her pure, unadulterated joy of negation as she continued to press the button with transfixed pleasure.

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Even though we become in a milieu, and with any luck continue to do so, we differentiate into our interiors of little selves, our emerging proto-egos, partly via the concrescences of the relational “no’s” of willful intention. Is it developmentally constructive to have these micro-separations concretized into such an odd technical object? Is this no-in-the-last-instance the commodified essence of the *nihil* of capitalist consumption: the reified thing covering over immanent relation? Leaving to one side for now the excitement of abstraction, we will simply say that the *no* bears/bares affect, in that dual sense of carrying feelings along in the very revealing that is their lived happening. Perhaps that remains in some fairly abstract generalization, however, and is not so simply stated in my excited affinity for these meta-realms of discourse, which so strive to be non-discursive in their very saying of immanent life. We will end this little diversion of a perhaps inappropriate gift with what could be a description of its reception: it’s fun to say “No!”

Initially, it is important to emphasize that the *non* of Laruelle’s thinking, however much pleasure may come with its utterance, is in no way a dismissal or simple negation of philosophy—as if negation were ever so simple as a technical object may make it seem. Non-philosophy, in its pragmatics, makes use of philosophy in general as its material, much as it similarly makes use of science. As he says in the introduction to *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*: “No doubt it will have to be said—it must already be said again: non-philosophy is not a ‘philosophy of the no’ and is even less an attempt at the nihilistic destruction or positivist negation of philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> In an interview from 2011, Laruelle characterizes the genesis of non-philosophy as being *in* and *from* philosophy, and he explains: “The first phase is very negative, which is to say that I had the feeling, at the same time as practicing philosophy, that there was a conceptual lack, as if a fundamental concept

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1 François Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 2.

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was lacking in philosophy itself.”<sup>2</sup> While extricating himself from philosophy proper, he came to identify this missing concept as the One, the One-in-One, the One-Real; and in the second phase of non-philosophy, he thinks under the condition of this variously named concept to ferret out the presuppositions of sufficiency within philosophy, in what Laruelle views as its decision to cut itself off from the Real.

So, if our acknowledgment of the pleasure of nay-saying has any inherence in the practicality of non-philosophy, this is intended neither as an indictment nor an endorsement but merely as a recollection that there is the emotive fact that, even in pure abstraction, thinking happens feelingly. Instead of a knowledge acquired through the sufficient, rational concepts of philosophical decision, non-philosophy for Laruelle becomes “...the rigorous knowledge that can ensue from a real *jouissance* or from the vision-in-One of ‘reason’ itself.”<sup>3</sup> In the 2011 interview, he describes non-philosophy as a *partitive apparatus*: “It is an instrument, yes, but a very particular one, which forms a body with philosophy, while being separated or distinct from the objects that it deals with thanks to this apparatus.”<sup>4</sup> If there is also a certain *jouissance* in the partitioning of the shared, as we indeed contend, then it is essential that the partitive apparatus of non-philosophical pragmatics engage in a more nuanced pleasure than that of the odd technical object that we have brought to the table. At this point, hinting at some axiomatic ambiguity of reversibility, we will also say that feelings happen thinkingly. This is perhaps to unveil prematurely the direction of our thinking, especially if we continue by clarifying that reversibility and unilaterality may not be contradictory, since what is unilateral-in-this-instance may be contra-unilateral-in-another-instance. Axioms merely pause the dialectic and allow time for the coherence of a concretized thought; they

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2 John Mullarkey and Anthony Paul Smith, eds, *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 239.

3 Laruelle, *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy*, 23.

4 Mullarkey, and Smith, *Laruelle and Non-Philosophy*, 241.

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cannot stop the hyper-dialectic, which some prefer to name non-dialectic.

This is to place in apposition to Laruelle a perhaps surprising interlocutor: Maurice Merleau-Ponty. There are some traces which may lend some credibility to this philo-fiction of a certain Laruellean aspect in Merleau-Ponty which we will briefly adumbrate by focusing on the lecture course he was in the midst of teaching at the *Collège de France* during the academic year 1960-1961 until the time of his death on May 3: "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel." During the first portion of the course, Merleau-Ponty closely reads sections of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in conjunction with Heidegger's essay, "Hegel's Concept of Experience." The second portion of the course is comprised of close readings of a number of Marx's writings which critique Hegel. But first, a few comments on his style.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Laruelle at various points use the word *style* to characterize modes of thinking and writing philosophy, and it is perhaps their stylistic difference that seems to me to be the most stark. Merleau-Ponty's thinking could well be described as experience-near, striving to remain in the feeling/thinking/writing of the *how* of happening more so than the *what* of that which has happened. Hence, he demonstrates the similarities between, on the one hand, the empiricist, logically tending toward various positivisms, objectified manner of thinking of certain philosophies and of most sciences and, on the other hand, the intellectualist, logically tending toward various idealisms which allow for inherent negations, subjectified manner of thinking of certain philosophies and, at times at least, of some of the so-called human sciences. He reads both modes of thinking carefully, inhabiting the thought to get to its limits—or, perhaps better expressed, to get to those aspects which over-extend themselves in presuppositions, what I understand as the presumption of what Laruelle calls philosophical sufficiency. Readers of Merleau-Ponty must be careful not to mistake his close and astute readings, his inhabitation of these conceptual thought-realms, as coinciding with his own distinct thought.

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He helps us understand the empiricist/intellectualist divide less as two Schmittian enemy camps, though it can indeed play out in this manner, than as two sides of one coin, or since coins have a thickness which could divert one’s attention to imaging the between as substantive, we will evoke the image of writing on two sides of partially transparent onion skin paper so that the two sides adhere all but immaterially. The arena of *between* that Merleau-Ponty thinks is more akin to the milieu in which this two-sided philosophical coin is spent, at times with material effect and at times scoffed at as valueless, whether its tossing lands it on its head of abstraction or its tail of praxis. This was the philosophical coin he was attempting to think during his last course, focusing on Hegel’s abstraction both *of* and *with* lived experience and on Marx’s turning this on its head to get at the very praxis of living. In some of his last lectures, Merleau-Ponty highlights Hegelian traces which are more visible on the onion skin of Marx’s thinking than Marx himself desired. Here, another simple truth made manifest by the no-button: just saying “no” does not necessarily make it so.

Merleau-Ponty’s first words for his course set the stage for this dehiscence of non-philosophy from philosophy: a negation that does not make it other, but that inheres in the one.

No battles occur between philosophy and its adversaries. Rather what happens is that philosophy seeks to be philosophy while remaining non-philosophy, i.e. a ‘negative philosophy’ (in the sense of ‘negative theology’). ‘Negative philosophy’ has access to the absolute, not as ‘beyond,’ as a positive second order, but as another order which must be on this side, the double—inaccessible without being passed through. True philosophy scoffs at philosophy, since it is aphilosophical.<sup>5</sup>

This paragraph is one of those instances when it is difficult to know if Merleau-Ponty is inhabiting the thought of Hegel to begin a thinking-with him or if he is presenting an overview of the traversal of thinking that he intends for this course

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5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel,” in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 9.

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to explore. I am inclined to read it as his distinct thought, even if it remains Hegelian, though in a sense of the Hegel evoked with sustained fidelity by Žižek rather than the one somewhat caricatured by Marx. This effort to think the *non* of philosophy as akin to negative theology also appears in the posthumously published text he was in the midst of writing at this time, *The Visible and the Invisible*. For Merleau-Ponty, the *non* inheres in the real and must do so for there to be what he will call the good ambiguities of a truly concrete philosophy.

For Merleau-Ponty, it is the Hegel of *Phenomenology* who expresses a negativity at work in contrast to the Hegel of a decade later at the time of the *Encyclopedia* when “phenomenology again becomes a discipline, i.e. a part of science.”<sup>6</sup> At this later point in Hegel’s encyclopedic systematics, the good ambiguity between experience and knowledge is conceptually fixed. Merleau-Ponty says of this ambiguity and its presumed resolution:

In truth, we have experience of knowledge and knowledge of experience. These two faces of ambiguity are abstractions. The absolute is that which is between the two: the transformation of one into the other. But this cannot be maintained except in contact with experience, with the ‘vertical’ world (of which the absolute is its ‘profundity’). The very formulation of this living ‘ambiguity’ makes experience disappear. The formulation transforms it into something said, in the positive, and makes the negative disappear in the 1807 sense—it restores the truth of identity. The Hegelian philosophy of 1807...excludes the utterance. Once uttered, it returns to identity. ... The Hegelian reconciliation would then be that there is no more living communication between the absolute and history.<sup>7</sup>

This sets the stage for the second part of the course which delves into the critiques of Marx and offers an analysis of his praxis.

And Marx engages in a polemic against Hegel in the name

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6 Ibid., 50.

7 Ibid., 52–53.

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of embodied man and ‘non-philosophy.’ But from the beginning, Marx is profoundly Hegelian. And, later, it is not Hegel from whom he distances himself, but from direct philosophy. Thus we must show that for Marx, as well as for Hegel, the failure to reunite philosophy and non-philosophy, which he wanted in the first place, is due to a domination of the philosophy of the concept over a philosophy of ‘experience.’<sup>8</sup>

Merleau-Ponty clearly has an affinity for the Marxian move from a philosophy of consciousness, and many critiques of Hegel in addition to those of Marx leave him purely in this thought-realm, to “a philosophy of man incarnate.”<sup>9</sup> The risk here that Merleau-Ponty diagnoses is that the negation of negation in Marx’s thought returns it to a positivism: “It is a philosophy to the very extent that it does not wish to be one.”<sup>10</sup>

Towards the beginning of his last lecture on May 2, Merleau-Ponty first characterizes the bad ambiguity of philosophy, no doubt having in mind both Hegel and Marx, and then sketches the direction of his distinct thinking towards a concrete non-philosophy.

How does philosophy develop a bad ambiguity? Like the *Denken* of the overview, exhaustive, possessing the thing ‘in thought,’ philosophy, wanting to be all, is nothing; it does not inhabit the things it discusses,—and, since it is not anything in particular, it is not even opposed to that which it critiques. It is neither yes nor no; it is not no, because it is not yes. Philosophy has no enemies, nor does it have any friends. It has no friends because it has no enemies. It lacks everything, both the particular and the universal. By contrast, it must have both. This thought will not have the character of an overview, the pretense of living at a distance, of seeing, haunting, contemplating—which is a yes under the flag of a no, and a no under the flag of a yes. By contrast, what is needed is a manner of thinking which is at the same time concrete and universal, in which the yes will be a no, and

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8 Ibid., 58.

9 Ibid., 68.

10 Ibid., 69.

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the no an unequivocal yes. It is not a question of returning behind Hegel, for example, towards a philosophy that renounces its comprehension of non-philosophy or towards a non-philosophy that will take non-philosophy (art, religion, nature, the State) without criticism. The problem is to succeed at that which it lacks, to create a concrete philosophy that is truly concrete.<sup>11</sup>

In this last course which specifically addresses the conjugation between philosophy and non-philosophy, it seems to me that Merleau-Ponty is in some regards becoming-Laruellean. Such a becoming of philo-fiction would hear his words here as diagnosing the philosophical decisions of these two philosophies of Hegel and Marx that suppose a sufficiency of concept and, in their final valuation, place it in some meta-position over experience and, in doing so, lose touch with the inherent *no* of the real which necessitates the contingent co-instance of the concrete and the universal. Laruelle, as his readers are frequently reminded, thinks from the One, the One-in-One, the One-Real, the Last-Instance, and he places philosophy under this condition. Is it possible to think Merleau-Ponty's elemental flesh as naming the One-Real from which thinking and practicing emerge while remaining in dehiscent separation from them, at once concrete and universal? If a reader of Merleau-Ponty can extricate herself from imprisoning his oeuvre as yet another instantiation of some phenomenological philosophy of Cartesian consciousness, as he is all too often charged—and it is my sense that his ongoing double critique of empiricist and intellectualist ways of thought, beginning with *The Structure of Behavior*, manifests our need for an ongoing extrication from this prison house—then perhaps *flesh of the world* can be apprehended as radically immanent. Laruelle was drawn towards, and hence needed to partition his thought from, the immanence of life in the work of Michel Henry, who in *The Essence of Manifestation* critiques Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* as indeed trapped in a Cartesian and therefore transcendent consciousness. Laruelle critiques

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

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Henry’s immanence, however, as absolute (rather than radical) and as remaining in philosophy. Even though I read his later thinking as approaching immanence, Merleau-Ponty retains until the end the sense of chiasmus, of intertwining, of hinging, of encroaching, frequently referencing Husserl’s use of *Ineinander*, and expresses this in various ways as the folding together of transcendence and immanence. Inasmuch as articulating the relation remains primary, Laruelle would, I suspect, diagnose this as Merleau-Ponty’s very retention of sufficiency and his decision for philosophy.

In the interview from 2011, Laruelle’s manner of speaking is slightly more accessible than the at times excessively abstract style of his writing, so we will take from this source a few more of his direct words for this dialogue of philo-fiction.

Philosophy is very abstract, by definition, but it is an abstraction closer to the concrete; this is the first degree of abstraction. As non-philosophy is a theory of philosophy, we have an abstraction in the second degree. Non-philosophy is not a philosophy of philosophy or a metaphilosophy, but a non-philosophy, which is to say that it is not based on the transcendence of a ‘meta’.<sup>12</sup>

He would, no doubt, view Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to think non-philosophy in chiasmus with philosophy as remaining a philosophy of philosophy, as remaining within philosophical decisionism. Indeed, Laruelle and his collaborators are familiar with this last lecture course of Merleau-Ponty that we have briefly adumbrated. In the entry “Non-philosophy” from *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, following the definition given by its own practitioners and in the portion of the entry which articulates how the concept is apprehended within philosophy proper, the authors write: “Merleau-Ponty’s report concerning post-Hegelian thinkers...is quite revealing when he wonders whether our century ‘does not enter an age of non philosophy.’ But the expression primarily has a negative, even devalorizing content that can become positive, like in the contemporary thinkers of difference such as Derrida,

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12 Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2007), 247.

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and especially Deleuze....”<sup>13</sup> This is an instance when the partitive apparatus of non-philosophy, if we imagine it as some grand hermeneutical technical object, too quickly covers over many nuances of thought in a rather summary judgment and, hence, too closely approaches the *jouissance* of the no-button. In one of his latest texts, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, Laruelle again mentions Merleau-Ponty directly, and these brief references do seem to reveal a bit more affinity in their disavowals than some of his more stridently partitive readings of other thinkers.

In his more recent works, Laruelle seems to be shifting from the prior term *non-philosophy* to the lengthened phrase *non-standard philosophy*, which may be a slight nod of recognition and admission to the fact that what he is thinking does in some manner and in spite of all the nay-saying remain philosophy. In *Photo-Fiction*, his effort is to think a non-aesthetics which reclaims the conjugations rather than the conflicts between art and philosophy, particularly through an art-fiction, as he calls it, of photography. In working through a way to step outside “the Principle of Sufficient Photo-philosophy,” he references “the matrix of Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, the axis of the subject/object-other with reversibility.”<sup>14</sup> In some ways he seems to read this as a valiant effort of his predecessors to extricate their thinking from such philosophical sufficiency; however, he nevertheless critiques them as “still under the final authority if not of perception then at least

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13 François Laruelle and collaborators, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 99. The definition of non-philosophy as provided by Laruelle and collaborators:

Autonomous and specific discipline of an identically scientific and philosophical type that describes—in the last-instance according to the One-real and by means of philosophy and of science considered as material—on the one had force (of) thought or the existing-Stranger-subject, and on the other hand the object of force (of) thought, which is the identity (of) world-thought. (p. 98)

14 François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. Drew S. Burk (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2012), 29–50.

of redoubled philosophical transcendence.”<sup>15</sup> A bit later he further explains that this effort to think the photographing-photographed subject=X “remains at the stage of the chiasm of the *voyant-visible* of Merleau-Ponty if even we do not know very well who thinks it or sees it and from where. The risk is thus to understand this matrix as auto-photography, whose chiasm of flesh is not too far off from the bipolar structure crisscrossed with this interior of philosophy playing the role of the third enveloped term in the universal and auto-engulfing context.”<sup>16</sup> The main methodology that Laruelle elaborates in his own efforts to think independently of some enveloping and typically transcendent third term is what he names unilateral duality. This abstraction is gradually developed throughout his oeuvre and in this text he describes this methodology of thinking immanence in conjunction with his concept of the clone:

We will distinguish between 1. the numeric and metric duality within a plane; 2. the unilateral duality, in the strict sense, of a transcendental origin deprived by scientific positivity of the third term (the transcendental), all immanence being transferred into the first term (the vector or wave, the force of vision), to such an extent that the second term (the photo as particle) is itself just as immanent as the first which is the real. Their set is the unilateral duality either on the side of vector or that of the clone. ... The semblance of the clone or its action is to create an effect of resemblance with the in-itself of the world or perception. There are two semblants and not merely one as Lacan believed: the semblant that is the clone itself (and which is the originary faith of Merleau-Ponty), and the bad semblant, the one that *makes believe* in the in-itself.<sup>17</sup>

The parenthetical mention of Merleau-Ponty and his originary faith again seems to be both in affinity with and in separation from this preceding phenomenological thinking,

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15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 51-52.

17 Ibid., 68-69. The translator notes that *makes believe* is in English in the original text.

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and it may be no surprise that at the start of the very next paragraph Laruelle again sees the need to distinguish his own approach to immanence from that of Michel Henry. Even though we would argue that Merleau-Ponty, in addition to the good clone of originary faith, does indeed think the bad semblant who *makes believe*, especially in his later thinking which approaches his own concept of non- or negative philosophy, we would likely be accused of remaining too entangled in the chiasm to know truly the abstract purity of unilateral duality. (And, we will not dispute the probable accuracy of any such claim.)

At the conclusion of his last lecture the day before his death, Merleau-Ponty states:

Philosophy and non-philosophy: a detached philosophy always reappears in disguise. What is needed is a negation of the negation which we do not fix either in negativism or positivism. ...—The renunciation of philosophy must be a consciousness of these difficulties in the nature/history opposition.<sup>18</sup>

I wonder if Merleau-Ponty would suggest that Laruelle's thinking risks fixation in both these regards: that is, in its double abstraction, which at times seems to reach abstruse points of conceptualization that forget experience altogether, his thinking may inadvertently lose touch with both nature and history—and hence lose its presumed touch onto the Real.

But this philo-fiction will not give some final words of thought-judging to either. Instead, we will point towards what seems to be an arena of congruence in the two thought-realms: striving towards a praxis which, echoing Marx, can feelingly think the becoming nature of human and the becoming human of nature. This is in the sense of human as transindividual, to evoke Gilbert Simondon as perhaps an interesting intra-locutor with the two. The thinking towards such a practice is described by Merleau-Ponty, in a number of his later writings including this last lecture course, as an anti-

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18 Merleau-Ponty, "Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel", 83.

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humanistic humanism; and towards such a praxis, Laruelle invents the term *Humaneity*. Perhaps both would allow us to call it a gnosis for heretical humanism. Merleau-Ponty’s notes for the lecture dated April 17, 1961 ends with the mention of the texts for three future lectures, the last of which was to be on May 8: “a text by Kierkegaard and one by Nietzsche.”<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, this lecture remains in the future, and there are no notes for it. However, returning to the first lecture of the course, this synoptic paragraph may give us a hint about this lecture-to-come:

The problem of Christianity. —Philosophy as the negation of a detached philosophy; religion as the death of God. —Death of God: Hegel’s word, Marx’s theory of ideologies, Kierkegaard’s Pharisean Christianity, Nietzsche’s word. —This does not mean (according to Heidegger): *es gibt keinen Gott*. —It does mean: the absolute must be thought by a mortal (capable of dying). This is not death in the sense of beings which are merely alive and which are uprooted from existence by an external cause. Rather it is death in the sense of human death, prefigured in man because conscience (*Er-innerung*) is negativity offered as proof of itself. —The absolute requires all that in order to avoid being ‘solitary’ and ‘lifeless’ (Hegel).<sup>20</sup>

Laruelle’s thinking in *Future Christ* towards the practice of a heretical gnosis and his thinking towards Real Utopia in *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy* seem to wander in the thought-direction of a not dissimilar future to that evoked by Merleau-Ponty. We will allow this brief response of Laruelle from the previously mentioned interview to characterize this direction for the future:

This is the idea of the-last-instance: in Marx the last instance is more a predicate, an adjective, than a subject. Productive forces determine ‘in the last instance’, which means that determination is understood as a being in the last instance. But for me the last-instance is not a predi-

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19 Ibid., 68.

20 Ibid., 13.

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cate; it is the subject itself. It is generic humanity, humankind. Only humankind can be in-the-last-instance. Neither the philosopher nor the ideas of the philosopher can. So it is a subject and not a predicate: it must invert and modify the relation unilaterally. This has recently been radicalized in *Philosophie non-standard*: in so far as this apparatus [*dispositif*], this instrument, is what I call the generic matrix, this generic subject is humanity which transforms philosophy but which is not exhausted in that transformative act. There is something irreducible within man, within human beings, which is not reduced to object, predicates, circumstances, etc.<sup>21</sup>

It is in the congruence or conjugation of these last co-instances that both Merleau-Ponty and Laruelle manifest a radical immanence for a non-philosophical *how to live*, which for the most part refrains from concretizing its happening into a philosophical transcendence of Life, imprisoned in some sort of meta-physical name-calling. We will conclude with one last, little ethic gleaned from our employment of this inappropriate gift of an odd technical object: there is a very fine line of living that can endure the *jouissance* of the no-button without becoming fixated on its last-instance. Do we dare evoke a possible concept for an experiential axiomatics of the feeling/thinking of life's happening? *And risk its consequences?*

No, no, no, no, no...in *this* last instance.

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21 Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy*, 245.