

### Editorial Introduction

Robin Mackay

This volume comprises a selection of texts, some of which would not have existed, others of which may not have been published, and none of which would have ended up in such odd company, were it not for the underlying vision of **COLLAPSE**, which seeks to generate and to bring together philosophical writing from varying perspectives with work drawn from other fields, in order to challenge institutional and disciplinary orthodoxies and to set in motion new syntheses. This second volume has emerged, as did its predecessor, from the combination of this overall vision, a collaborative process with the authors, and a set of happy coincidences. The result is, we hope you will agree, a rich and rewarding set of conceptual conjunctions.

The first part of the volume coalesced into a ‘dossier’ centring on the work of **QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX**, whose

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recent book *After Finitude*<sup>1</sup> is a work designed to fundamentally disrupt that dubious consensus within continental philosophy which emphasises the primacy of the relation of consciousness to the world – however that may be construed – over any supposed objectivity of ‘things themselves’. It may seem that, in the wake of Kant’s Copernican Revolution, this ‘correlationist’ credo – the injunction that, unable to know things ‘in themselves’, philosophy must limit itself to the adumbration of ‘conditions of experience’ – is unassailable, something that only the most unsophisticated, ‘pre-critical’ thinker would seek to challenge. And yet, once this consensus is broken, the consequences are startling.

In ‘The Enigma of Realism’ RAY BRASSIER gives a lucid exposition of this transvaluation of the stakes of contemporary philosophical thought. However, questioning whether Meillassoux is right to single out the ‘arche-fossil’ as the privileged site of this contestation, Brassier ultimately suggests that the curse of correlationism runs deeper still, and intimates that an even more thoroughgoing ‘decontamination’ of the tools used to critique the current *doxa* might yet be necessary. Brassier’s text already takes us beyond the scope of Meillassoux’s book, identifying a number of serious problems which he identifies as issuing from a ‘fundamental dilemma’ relating to Meillassoux’s proposal to reinstate some form of intellectual or mathematical intuition. Brassier’s text almost tends toward a dialogic form, as Meillassoux responds to subsequent objections with further refinements of his own position.

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1. *Après la Finitude: Essai sur la nécessité de la contingence* (Paris: Seuil, 2006). English translation *After Finitude* (trans. R. Brassier) (London: Continuum, forthcoming 2008).

Meillassoux's audacious countermanding of philosophy's historical abjuration of speculative rationalism proceeds via the positing of the 'necessity of contingency' indexed to an absolute time. In 'Potentiality and Virtuality' he sketches a route to this principle via a discussion of Hume's problem of causality. With admirable panache, Meillassoux rescues this perennially abandoned problem from its alleged epistemological dissolution and restores it to its most potent ontological form. This is a question of resisting the pragmatist referral of ontological problematics to heuristic solutions rooted in empirical consensus: the apparent necessity of a recourse to an empirical *genesis* of the law rather than a metaphysical *grounding* for it, Meillassoux suggests, results from supplementing the terms of the problem with a 'common-sense' judgement that is in turn rooted in an inappropriate application of probabilistic thinking. Conversely, a philosophical enterprise with the courage of its conviction in rationality would refuse to concede this 'defeat of reason', daring to affirm on the contrary that there is in fact no reason to postulate the constancy of natural laws.

Thus Meillassoux sketches the contours of a bold reclamation of rationalism issuing from the refusal of particular forms of (probabilistic) reasoning embedded in 'common-sense'. Rather than seeking a 'meta-law' to subtend the laws of reality, Meillassoux instead loosely binds reality within the singular rational principle of an 'absolute contingency'.

It is perhaps owing in part to his relative independence from the philosophical issues at stake here that our interview with theoretical cosmologist ROBERTO TROTTA

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serves in many ways as the centrepiece of this discussion. Following as it does upon the more abstractly philosophical discussions of the previous two papers, and yet circling around essentially the same issues, this interview serves to lend instructive insight into the transformation which ostensibly purely *a priori* philosophical problems undergo when transposed into the concrete contexts of scientific research programmes. It would be impossible here to provide more than the barest sense of the content of this lengthy conversation, which we feel sure will repay repeated reading. Fully confirming our faith in the potential of the interview as a (sadly under-exploited) form of contemporary intellectual engagement, this conversation provides an invaluable perspective upon the problems surrounding the determination of ‘ancestral phenomena’ (Meillassoux’s ‘arche-fossil’) from the privileged ‘insider’ vantage-point of someone immersed in their empirical study and scientific interpretation on a daily basis. Touching as it does upon everything from the evidence for and ontological status of ‘dark matter’ through string theory, anthropic reasoning, inflationary cosmology and the meaning of concepts of time and space in cosmological contexts, this interview not only lends a much-needed sense of concreteness and specificity to the problems introduced by Brassier and Meillassoux, but also provides a helpful and readable introduction to the most up-to-date problems and findings of contemporary cosmology.

If Meillassoux’s neo-rationalism draws upon the resources of transfinite mathematics and set-theory in order to precisely locate the fundamental parameters of rational thought itself, GRAHAM HARMAN’s contribution aims at a

different kind of precision, one which perhaps has more affinity with Bergson's critique of dialectical concepts as being 'too large', 'not tailored to the measurements of the reality in which we live'<sup>2</sup> – 'baggy clothes'<sup>3</sup> which, covering everything, reveal little and stifle movement. If Harman, no less than Meillassoux, seeks to escape the prevailing *doxa* which would see in the relation between consciousness and world the primary hinge of any philosophy worthy of the name, and if both thinkers are equally intent on resuscitating a 'speculative realism' long-since left for dead by the philosophical mainstream, it would yet be difficult to find two more starkly contrasting styles of philosophizing.

Harman's inquiry bears no less than Meillassoux's upon the problem of 'correlationism', however. Against Meillassoux's positive desertion of a philosophical demonstration of causality, in 'On Vicarious Causation' Harman seeks to revive the problem of causation itself in all its specificity, beyond the question of whether it can be known or justified, and claims that the revival of this problem entails the rejection of Kant's Copernican turn 'and its single lonely rift between people and everything else'. Whereas for Meillassoux the problem is the apparent facticity of the 'correlationist gap', Harman sets out to generalise this gap, shattering the cosmos into absolutely disjunct objects. Through his generalisation of Heidegger's famous tool-analysis in *Being and Time*, Harman attempts to maintain a recognisably phenomenological commitment to the ontological

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2. H. Bergson *Oeuvres (La Pensée et le Mouvant)* (Paris: PUF, 1963), 1/1254.

3. G. Deleuze *Bergsonism*, trans. H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 44.

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anteriority of the ‘manifest’ over the ‘scientific’ image of the world whilst simultaneously acknowledging the chronic futility of anti-scientific philosophies of presence. If here philosophy engages ‘the same world as the various sciences’ but ‘in a different manner’, it is not through a meditation on the presencing and absencing of Being, but rather through a tracking of the ‘grain’ of the immediate phenomenon in which a new ‘first philosophy’ is announced in the guise of an aesthetics.

In blazing this trail Harman introduces a refreshingly novel philosophical language which is still a work in progress. It is already, however, a work that finally goes beyond those interminable mantras preparatory to phenomenology in which the Heideggerian corps has by now been drilled for decades. Harman sets out, with a hard-won philosophical innocence, to *do* phenomenology in an entirely new way, a way which conjoins the immediacy of the phenomenon with the affirmation of the reality of the object. The future of this enterprise deserves to be followed closely.

Neurophilosopher PAUL CHURCHLAND has no qualms about cleaving to the scientific image, and in our informal and wide-ranging interview makes it entirely clear that, at least in his own area of research, the sense of unfamiliarity that gives rise to its traditional description as ‘cold and machinelike’ (Harman’s ‘grey matrix’) should not be yielded to. Part of what is most intriguing in Churchland’s take on the theme of common-sense and science is that, rather than seeing the two in a relation of dramatic rupture, he proposes that as the work of science continues, the corpus of folk-theory will gradually absorb its *prima facie*

paradoxical statements.

Much of our discussion with Churchland relates to the problem of so-called ‘qualia’ – the supposedly irreducible subjective components of experience which have been for many years a touchstone for the relation between philosophy and science – and it is instructive to observe that these putatively *sui generis* elements also raise their head in Meillassoux’s contribution in this volume. Having criticised advocates of so-called ‘anthropic reasoning’ for championing a neo-finalism on the grounds of ‘astonishment’, and having castigated Goodman for justifying induction on the grounds of the ‘absurdness’ of the alternative, Meillassoux himself ratifies his radical retraction of the Lucretian principle that ‘nothing can come from nothing’ with an appeal to ‘new situations, whose qualitative content is such that it seems impossible to detect, *without absurdity* [emphasis added], its anticipated presence in anterior situations’, giving as an example the fact that ‘a life endowed with sensibility’ could not, ‘short of sheer fantasy’, emerge from matter as conceived by mathematical physics.

How not to see in this dedication to radical novelty the ‘good sense’ – however exalted – of a grand style in French philosophy which has ever striven to reconcile a rigorous engagement with modern science with the moral exigency of an absolute sovereignty and freedom of thought? As Brassier points out, correlationism runs deep, and it may be difficult to break its circle without also subverting this neo-Cartesianism. And the requisite lifting of the proscription on the ‘objectivation of thought’ would require that philosophy take seriously the research

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programmes of neuroscience and cognitive science, and hold in abeyance any decision as to thought's putative 'irreducibility'.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, Churchland holds any such rash decision in suspense, arguing that a study of the history of science gives us every reason to bracket our local conditions and to say with him: 'I agree ... it is *hard to imagine* ... [b]ut I am unimpressed by this'. One cannot help but feel that Churchland thus modestly inherits the boldest speculative enterprise of philosophy in the twentieth century: to reconcile scientific realism with evolutionary epistemology; to capture the vagaries of 'our' access to things as a *datum* rather than exalting it as an insuperable 'condition'; to reverse the humanity-function so as to accede to an unconditioned knowledge of nature 'itself'.

The apparently pleonastic 'speculative realism' only makes sense when we realise that here the ouroborian figure philosophy has grappled with since the birth of Galileanism is negotiated not by asserting the 'primacy' of one part of the unbroken circle over another, nor by anticipating an eventual accomplishment and unification, but rather by focusing on the process of autophagy itself in action. The two moments of such a programme are, firstly, the account *as datum* of the real conditions of our experience (a technical task descended from Kant's 'transcendental philosophy' as 'the idea of a science')<sup>5</sup> and secondly their effective neutralisation within our self-image (a cultural process). In two different ways – in the resistance of nature to our scientific theorising, and in our

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4. On these points, see also our interview with Alain Badiou in *Collapse* Vol. I.

5. *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. K. Smith (London: MacMillan 1929), A13/B27.



own intuitive resistance to the absorption of those theories – it is the recalcitrance of our cognitive constitution that poses a natural obstacle. But as Churchland insists, there is no reason to think this obstacle insuperable in principle.

Just as the philosophical contributors to this volume draw afresh upon the philosophical tradition, so CLÉMENTINE DUZER and LAURA GOZLAN in their film *Nevertheless Empire* have returned to the traditions of expressionism and *noir*, as well as to later enigmatic figures such as Tarkovski, in order to create a science fiction which – as an exemplary instance of the genre – is a speculative portrait of the present, an extrapolation of the twenty-first century amalgam of social dysfunction, generalised fear, and techno-medical monstrosity. As well as maintaining that cinema was itself a very particular way of thinking, Deleuze wrote that ‘a book of philosophy should be in part [...] a kind of science-fiction.’<sup>6</sup> To present a film, in a volume of philosophy, as a series of stills, represents a further convolution of this complex relationship between thought and image. But this ‘stuttering’ finds its own consistency on the page, the momentary glimpses reforming in new depths.

In his contribution ‘Islamic Exotericism’, as in Volume I’s ‘ Militarization of Peace’, REZA NEGARESTANI petitions for the adoption of the term ‘affordance’ into the philosophical vocabulary. Negarestani traces the asymmetry of the ‘War on Terror’’s landscape of fear, and the shifting apocalyptic narratives engendered by the situation, to the refusal of affordance implicit in Islamic theology.

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6. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994), xx.

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KRISTEN ALVANSON's photo/diagrammatic essay emphasises a concrete locus for this difference in the theological image of thought: the graveyard as a 'staging of ontology' betrays once again the patterns of affordance, the exigency of survival inherent to Western thinking even in death. Alvanson's inquiry thus forms a concrete counterpart to Negarestani's theological disquisition.

According to Negarestani, through its spatial and temporal approaches to God and Apocalypse, Islamic theology formulates a methodology for the construction of a politically profound tool capable of turning theology itself into heresy. Where Meillassoux uses a rationality unbounded by real necessity to absolutize its own limits, 'touching' itself in a movement of intellectual intuition, Negarestani shows how theology can be reinvented as an epistemological tool for confronting a pure externality, without reducing it to ontological possibilities or to an object of 'affordance'. One might then say that the insubordinable externality Negarestani describes is cognate with the absolute time proposed by Meillassoux – a beyond of chronology, from which irrupt events in principle unpredictable by statistical or economical reason. This is perhaps the most surprising of the many subterranean connections linking the various contributions to this volume of **COLLAPSE**: Do a desacralized thinking of the infinite subtracted from the expectation of mystical union and a proper place for man, and a hyper-rationalism which refuses to bend to real necessity, deliver us to this Now of eternal externality, from which nothing may be expected? Does the conversion of god into a heresy invoke the divine inexistence?

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Obviously, it has only been possible in this brief introduction to give a very selective and superficial survey of a volume which suggests so many rich vectors of philosophical thought and so many fascinating possibilities. But we hope to have lightly sketched a portrait here of the underlying conviction, expressed forcefully in so many different voices – and in an age where institutions and publications seem to take pride in cleaving to narrow specialisms – that philosophy, in gloriously unqualified form, is still possible.

In concluding, we would like offer our thanks to our contributors for their generous collaboration on this volume, and to our readers for their enthusiastic response to Volume I. This reception encourages us in our belief that our experiment constitutes a necessary eccentricity in relation to the mainstream – and that in some way it helps set free some of the latent force of philosophical thought – once more ‘to resume the offensive’.<sup>7</sup>

Robin Mackay,  
Oxford, February 2007.

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7. G. Harman, present volume, 174.