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On *Pleromatica* and its Harmonics¹

The author of the long-awaited *Pleromatica, or Elsinore's Trance* reflects on science and philosophy, speculative realism, German Idealism and Christianity, and the very personal origins of this groundbreaking work of transcendental philosophy

Since *Pleromatica, or Elsinore's Trance* is a non-academic and to a large extent a very personal work, I will indulge in some remarks about some of the experiences that inform it. In particular, I will start by focusing on some rationalistic overtones of this work associated with my relation to science, and on some more visceral undertones related to my assessment of the philosophical movement in contemporary continental philosophy known as *speculative realism*.¹

Since the very beginning of my intellectual life I have had two great passions, science and philosophy, and in a sense, in my own academic training I had to face an important question of modern philosophy, namely: *What role can philosophy play at a historical moment in which science is effectively performing such an amazing expansion of the limits of human understanding? What is the 'necessity of philosophy' when the frontiers of rational knowledge are receding at the highest speed that we have ever known?*

I dedicated my dissertation in philosophy to this problem. In order to fix the coordinates for my work, I decided to submit myself to the constraint of

1. This text is a revised version of my presentation of *Pleromatica or Elsinore's Trance* (Falmouth and New York: Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2023) given as part of the event 'TransLatin Diagonals', Casa São Roque, Porto, Portugal, on June 18th, 2023.

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avoiding at all costs any form of relation of dependence between science and philosophy. In Badiou's terms, the task that I wanted to confront was that of uncompromisingly *desuturing* science and philosophy by undoing both *philosophical attempts to dominate science* on the one hand and *the submission of philosophy to science* on the other. Rather than yielding to the temptation to establish a relation of dependency between them, to mix them, or to create hybrids (e.g., philosophy of science, philosophy as rigorous science or first science, analytic philosophy, etc.), my project consisted in trying to reassess their definitions in order to maximise the distance between them, to radicalise their heterogeneity, to guarantee their independence. By doing so, I hoped to be able to distil the singular and irreplaceable horizons of possibility of modern science and philosophy as *radically distinct* modes of human thinking and practice.

The first orientation that I wanted to avoid at all costs was *the subordination of science to philosophy*.

Modern philosophy has tried by various different means to exhibit the supposedly in-principle limits of science and to prove that philosophy can take over from there and explain what science cannot. For instance, different modern philosophers have argued that science is restricted to the empirically given but cannot critically reflect on its own transcendental conditions of possibility, that science studies natural phenomena but cannot reach the things-in-themselves, that science inquires about the multiplicity of beings and the corresponding regional ontologies but cannot think the very Being of these beings, that science studies different domains of objectivity but cannot think the uncorrelated principle that grounds the subject-object correlation, and so on. In doing so, philosophy justifies its existence by trying to localise a stratum of the real that is supposedly subtracted *de jure* from scientific knowledge (e.g. the noumenal realm, Being qua being, an absolute principle, etc.). As I have written elsewhere, faced with the implacable progress of modern science, the philosopher—like the priest—is forced to constantly redefine their own task and to pathetically crawl into niches of the real each time more profound, more transcendent, and more absolute. In the worst case, the claim of philosophy to be the first science *par excellence* allows it to justify its *docta ignorantia* and to abstain from the patient and arduous work of the genuine sciences (mathematics, physics, biology, etc.). Now, to me, subordinating science to philosophy seemed like a way of not acknowledging that in modern times philosophy can no longer be understood as a theoretical discipline that provides rational explanations about the experiential field in which we are embedded, its ontological or transcendental conditions of possibility, or any other dimension that can be the target of a rational inquiry. Paraphrasing a contemporary philosopher, we might say that, in the dimension of understanding and explaining the ‘world’ by rational means, science is the ultimate measure of all things and that philosophy should humbly withdraw its theoretical pretensions. The attempt to establish the limits of science in order to define philosophy’s proper domain of action seemed to me like a desperate symptom of a philosophy that did not want to lose its dominating position of explanatory power.

The second option that I wanted to avoid at all costs, though, was *subordinating philosophy to (the ideal of) science*, which was for me the main weak point of analytic philosophy or of any attempt to make

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of philosophy a scientific discipline. Subordinating philosophy to science by trying to imitate science was simply uninteresting to me. Since I was already engaged in a scientific practice (namely, theoretical physics), I wanted philosophy to be something else, something radically different, released from the inferiority complex of not being a science. If one is fascinated by science, if one embraces the radical rupture inscribed by the modern scientific revolution, then one can just humbly and patiently engage in actual scientific practice rather than trying to imitate science, to become an unrequested advocate or valet of science, or to extrapolate a brave new ‘philosophy’ out of the latest scientific discovery.

In order to overcome these correlative forms of dependency between science and philosophy I adopted a characterisation of philosophy that can be traced back to Whitehead and Badiou among others. According to this current of ideas, ‘modernity’s specific dignity’ (Habermas) depends upon its capacity to separate the different ‘interests of reasons’ or ‘value-spheres’ (theoretical, practical, aesthetical, religious, etc.) and clearly demarcate their ‘validity claims’, their regulative ideas, and so on. This autonomisation of the different kinds of modes of thought and practice by means of which human beings can speculatively mediate the transcendental limits of their experience splits the unity of human ‘reason’, and it is here that ‘the need of philosophy arises’ as Hegel writes in the *Differenzschrift*. Experience is said in many abstract senses, as theoretical experience, as affective experience, as sensorial experience, as interpersonal experience and—we could say with Spinoza—according to other infinite ‘attributes’. Whereas sciences, arts, politics, religion, etc. explore the field of experience along these abstract ‘attributes’, the proper task of philosophy is to sublimate the transcendental limits of the corresponding phenomenological horizons by *addressing experience in its full concreteness* (in its philosophical *stonedness*), that is, without performing a prismatic

decomposition into abstract attributes. Philosophy can then be understood as a kind of democratic concertation of speculative practices to which science certainly belongs, but in which science does not have any privilege whatsoever; as an *organon* of an expanded reason that cannot be reduced to scientific rationality and that holds space for other important dimensions of human experience including emotional life, aesthetic experience, political practice, ethical values and norms, the varieties of religious experience, etc.; as a sort of Nautilus thanks to which we can delve into and explore the phenomenological stream of concrete experience, which is always already an impure and turbulent mixture of percepts, affects, concepts, and other types of experiential modes.

Now, I defended my dissertation in philosophy on this topic during the period in which the so-called ‘speculative realism’ movement took off. In what follows, I will focus on my assessment of certain particular claims in this trend that were challenging for me. Very briefly (and I apologise for the extreme simplification), the structuring stance of speculative realism is that philosophy has to resume and radicalise the project of trying to jump over our own transcendental shadow, so to speak—that is, the project of overcoming the critical limits on the scope of human understanding drawn up by Kant. On the one hand, I was very interested in this movement since it was perfectly aligned with my own interest in defining a speculative conception of philosophy that does not accept the existence of a priori fixed limits to the scope of human experience. On the other hand, I was very challenged by speculative realism, since the main positions within it were to a large extent the opposite of certain positions I was trying to articulate and defend. In particular, I recognised in speculative realism the two extreme positions that I have just described, namely a subordination of science to philosophy and a subordination of philosophy to science.

I was challenged by what appeared to me as an extreme form of philosophical contempt for scientific thinking

On the one hand, I was challenged by what appeared to me as an extreme form of philosophical contempt for scientific thinking. By completely abstracting

from science itself, one branch of speculative realism seems to be claiming that philosophy could reach some sort of ‘absolute truth’ about the nature of everything. In particular, one of its exponents claimed that he had proven an exorbitant statement about the very nature of the rational structures—the so-called ‘natural laws’—unveiled by scientific understanding. Whereas I was completely fascinated as I painstakingly tried to understand the rational necessity and mathematical structure of theories such as mechanics (in both its classical and quantum phases) or the vast project—begun by Galileo and Newton and completed (to date) by Einstein and Weyl among others—of providing a geometric description of the fundamental physical interactions, this philosopher, ignoring everything about physics itself, was claiming that physics was a mere nomological organisation of empirical facts—a kind of inductive stamp collection—deprived of any form of rational necessity. I do consider Quentin Meillassoux’s book *After Finitude* a fascinating, challenging, and inspiring piece of theory-fiction (and even more so *The Number and the Siren*, his masterpiece on Mallarmé), but I just could not believe that these kinds of claims were still possible in contemporary philosophy.

The ultimate problem (at least for me) is the thesis that finitude is a sort of flaw which we should try to get rid of via some sort of speculative acrobatics

Moreover, this philosophical position was based on what I considered to be a huge distortion, namely the claim that speculative thinking relies upon a wholesale rejection of Kantian critical philosophy. Kant argued that the very subjective structures that make human experience possible fix the limits of this experience. For instance, we can have an optical experience because we have eyes, but the very singular physiological structure of the human vision system fixes the limits of what we can see (for instance, infrared and ultraviolet radiation are out of reach). Now—and I do not really understand how this could happen—speculative realism, by arguing that such a critical reflection on the subjective structures that make human experience possible is a form of anthropocentrism, made of Kant a straw man.

After two centuries of historicisations, relativisations, deconstructive refinements, existential radicalisations, and speculative instrumentalisations of Kantian critical reflection, all of a sudden Kant—the transcendental exponentiator of the Copernican revolution—was simply ‘cancelled’ out as the figure who bore ultimate responsibility for having performed a ‘Ptolemaic counter-revolution’ aimed at reducing the Copernican excentring. After reading this, I went to leave some flowers at the grave of Michel Foucault, a philosopher who clearly explained in black and white that critical reflection on the transcendental structures that make human experience possible is the condition of possibility thanks to which we can effectively perform differential mediations of the limits of this experience (rather than hypothetical jumps into a fantasised ‘great outdoors’). Even worse, I was exasperated by the very title of the book, *After Finitude*. Really? Here, the ultimate problem (at least for me) is not so much the pre-critical relapse according to which we could somehow jump over the transcendental conditions of possibility of human thinking and gain access to some kind of absolute principle, but rather the very idea that this is even desirable, that is, the thesis that finitude is a sort of flaw which we should try to get rid of via some sort of speculative acrobatics. May Kant save me from having to experience the absolute (‘Too bright for our infirm Delight!’)² without transcendental filters or noumenal sunglasses! For me, all of this was not the post-Kantian speculative philosophy I was longing for, but rather a reactive form of pre-modern philosophy; ‘a curious realism: one without experience and without magic [...] pure speculation from a Parisian bistro’, as Jean-Christophe Goddard writes in *A Scabby Black Brazilian*.³ Whereas this kind of ‘speculative’ philosophy does not deign to descend from the supra-empirical heights in which absolute truths uncontaminated by empirical data, unframed by any transcendental window, can be ‘proved’ once and for all, science continues to probe the field of experience in all its rational sumptuousness, scanning it across diverse spatial and temporal scales, telescoping exotic dimensions, attuning to previously unheard-of rhythms, wide opening the doors of perception, enhancing our capacities to read the ‘prose of the world’, unlocking channels

of communication with lifeforms of different transcendental types (mineral, vegetal, animal, extra-terrestrial, etc.), reaching undreamt-of summits of conceptual sophistication, teaching us some humility. Confronted with this form of ‘speculative’ philosophy, I confirmed my strong commitment to science: I will always prefer the tiniest piece of transcendental-dependent scientific understanding to the ‘decorrelated’ claims of armchair philosophy.

Science has always been for me a kind of instrument by means of which we can tune in and amplify the extreme delicacy, beauty, complexity, and rational magnificence of the universe in which we live and its relentless capacity to produce meaning and value

Now, also within speculative realism, I found another thinker that was at the opposite extreme of the spectrum, in the sense that he was so committed to science that he was ‘more Catholic than the pope’, so to speak. According to this second orientation, science is not just a particular form of experience among many others, but has the prerogative of providing the ultimate coordinates of our existential situation. As if our capacities to orient ourselves in the new existential conditions triggered by modernity were only a matter of Truth, and not also a matter of Beauty, of Justice, of Love. And the conclusion was that science necessarily performs a ‘disenchantment of the world’. According to this second speculative orientation, nihilism is the unique existential position attuned to the modern scientific revolution. And I do agree that modern science left humanity hovering in the middle of a vast, silent and dark abyss, while at the same time modern secularization left us with no spiritual resources to cope with the concomitant trauma. We can indeed say that, now, more than five hundred years since the beginning of the modern scientific revolution, we are still stunned, mesmerised, and paralysed by this new existential situation. And of course nihilism is a legitimate philosophical position, and we can certainly explore the philosophical and existential consequences of premises such as ‘we are already dead’ or ‘being alive is not all right’. But I will always contest the idea that nihilism is the ultimate philosophical or existential stance faithful to the modern

2. E. Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. T.H. Johnson (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1960), 506.

3. J.-C. Goddard, *A Scabby Black Brazilian*, tr. T. Murphy (Falmouth: Urbanomic, forthcoming 2023).

scientific revolution. On a very different wavelength, science has always been for me a kind of instrument by means of which we can tune in and amplify the extreme delicacy, beauty, complexity, and rational magnificence of the universe in which we live and its relentless capacity to produce meaning and value. And in the last instance, the infinite idea of Truth that orients scientific practice does not entail any prescription regarding the use of science or the existential affects elicited by it: we can place science in the service of the ‘frenzy of destruction’ (as we do, to a great extent), or we can place science in the service of life; we can accept and contribute to the capitalist instrumentalisation of science (i.e. the extractivist-pharmaceutical-biotechnological-financial-military complex), or we can use science as a tool for emancipation; science can be ‘capitalised on’ and used to deepen inequality, or it can be understood as the collective construction of a common wealth which by definition cannot be privatised; science can be a source of melancholy and desperation or a ‘gay science’, a ‘joyous cosmology’; science can be used to deepen the cosmic trauma or to collectively engage in an ecstatic experience of cosmic dimensions. In my own case, I took my ungrounded decision, namely—to paraphrase Nietzsche—that *I would do my best to serve science only to the extent that science serves life.*

Rather than being seduced by this ‘thirst for annihilation’, this ‘will to nothingness’, this ‘truth of extinction’, this ‘exultation of dissolution’, and this speculative thanatropism, I just wanted to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction

All in all, we had on the one hand the thesis that speculative philosophy can discover an ultimate absolute truth, with a complete disdain for scientific rationality. And on the other hand, we had the thesis that nihilism is the proper outcome of the modern commitment to scientific naturalism. So for me, ‘speculative realism’ could be summarised in these two expressions: ‘after finitude’ and ‘we are already dead’—either the elimination of death or the omnipresence of death. In the last instance, these two positions converge. Since life always manifests itself

through the institution of *finite* forms of life, the elimination of finitude (of which death is one of the declensions) is also the elimination of life. Without finitude, there is no science, no speculative philosophy, no values, no meaning, no desire, no life at all. As Heidegger made clear, the existential structure of (speculative) transcendence that characterises human existence is concomitant with the finitude of such existence, with its being-there, native and mortal. Whether by dismissing finitude or by seeing death everywhere, these trends of ‘speculative realism’ were surreptitiously endorsing the most reactive otherworldly contempt for *this* finite life, a kind of neo-gnostic refusal of this living world. I do not think it is by chance that the principal aesthetics associated with ‘speculative realism’ are those of (Hamletian) melancholy, (Lovecraftian) cosmic horror, and (Pascalian) despair. Rather than being seduced by this ‘thirst for annihilation’, this ‘will to nothingness’, this ‘truth of extinction’, this ‘exultation of dissolution’, and this speculative thanatropism, I just wanted to run as fast as possible in the opposite direction. As Eduardo Galeano said: ‘Let’s leave nihilism and pessimism for better times.’

Faced with the spectacle of this supposed revival of speculative philosophy, I renewed my admiration for what I consider to be the greatest philosophical sequence of modern times, namely the sequence that goes from Kant to the post-Kantian philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. On the one hand, I found in German Idealism the Kantian heritage and the concomitant focus on cognitive and existential finitude. None of these thinkers claimed that speculative thinking had to be based on a rejection of Kant, and none of them claimed to think ‘after finitude’ (which does not mean of course that the Kantian system did not have to be submitted to an uncompromising critique of the critique). The speculative dimension of their philosophical work does not depend on the illusion that we could free ourselves of transcendental correlations and overcome our finitude once and for all, but rather on the fact that the transcendental limits of experience can be differentially mediated and displaced (even if at least one of them, as Heidegger notes, gave in to the Icarian temptation of trying to jump over one’s own transcendental shadow by plunging into the sun itself). As Fichte writes in *The Science of Knowledge*, ‘The self is finite, because it is subjected to limits;

but it is infinite within this finitude because the transcendental boundary, far from being fixed, can be always [speculatively] displaced. [...] ‘Everything finite’, Hegel continues, ‘is the sublating of itself.’

On the other hand, German Idealism incorporates the Spinozist heritage. I found in these thinkers an ecstatic experience of the infinitude, the exuberance, the prodigality, and the overabundance of life, of a life that endlessly produces new finite forms of life, new forms of subjectivity, new transcendental horizons of experience. And consequently none of these thinkers endorsed any form of nihilism. They were all intoxicated Spinozists who had drunk the entheogenic substance to the last drop. So in a sense, everything was already there, both Kantian critique and Spinozist ecstasy or—in more contemporary terms—transcendental pheno(u)menology and immanent vitalism.

I also found in German Idealism a mysterious third component, namely *Christianity*

But there was more in German Idealism than Kantian critical precaution and the Spinozist will to live and reveal. I also found in German Idealism a mysterious third component, namely *Christianity*. That was extremely weird to me. Were not these philosophers—as good post-Kantians—vaccinated against the ‘transcendental illusions’ of religion? How is it possible to be modern and to endorse at the same time the most reactive forms of obscurantism and superstition? Should not we get rid of religious illusions as soon as possible in order to radicalise the project of modernity? Or perhaps we have too quickly deduced from the modern scientific revolution a sheer rejection (rather than an uncompromising reconceptualisation) of religion? Personally, I do not have any kind of religious background, and my commitment to science has always been concomitant with a rationalistic rejection of the ‘opium of the people’. In addition, I have always associated Christianity with the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, with the Conquest and Colonisation of the so-called Americas by the Spanish and the Portuguese Empires among others, and with the corresponding genocides of indigenous peoples. And of course I am well aware of the fact that Christianity is just one

variety of religious experience among many others, a variety that is historically, geographically, and culturally situated. If we attempted to use Christianity to try to think anew the role that religion can play in modern times, would we not be perpetuating a form of Eurocentric myopia to which modern philosophers were certainly prey? On the top of all this, it was difficult for me to understand how a human being who is tortured to death on a cross can be converted into a symbol of the sacred. So, what was I supposed to do with this central presence of Christianity in the most daring sequence of modern speculative philosophy?

I was struggling with these questions when I had an important philosophical encounter, namely my encounter with the work of the French philosopher Jean-Christophe Goddard. Among other things, Goddard is an important Fichte scholar, and by reading the main book that Goddard wrote on Fichte, *La philosophie fichtéenne de la vie*, I began to understand the at once essential and necessary role that Christianity plays in German Idealism, and the singular features of this religion that are instrumental to the project of conceiving the possibility of an absolutely modern religion. First, I understood that religion could be conceived as a *practice of re-ligation* with the immanent life in which ‘we live and we move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28), with the life that is in and for itself ‘always already with us’ (Hegel); a kind of therapeutic practice oriented by the regulative idea of Love and intended to strengthen and deepen our intricacy with the vital fabric in its threefold (or Trinitarian) impersonal, personal, and transpersonal dimensions. Such a possibility of human existence—the possibility to ‘re-exist’ the illness of disligation—legitimizes itself insofar as it is nothing but an effective practice that depends neither upon any theoretical thesis about a supposed super-entity or otherwise-than-being X called ‘God’ (or any form of hypothetical explanation about the ultimate origin and nature of the experiential field in which we are immersed) nor upon any subjective belief. Once again, in modern times theoretical explanations are tendentially provided by science and both philosophy and religion must humbly withdraw all explanatory pretension. Second, I understood that the properly modern element in Christianity is the thesis that finitude in all its forms (theoretical finitude, existential finitude, perceptual

finitude, emotional finitude, and even our finite capacities to fully embrace finitude) is not a flaw that we should get rid of, but rather the burning fuel that propels life and its immanent process of self-revelation. According to this perverted reading of Christianity, the fact that this religion does not offer any form of 'salvation' whatsoever with respect to finitude—that is, the fact that finitude occupies a central place in the Christian trinity that cannot be dialectically sublated—is an important contribution to the project of conceiving a modern religion that does not condescend to obscurantist superstitions about an afterlife or to any other Promethean project intended to foreclose castration and achieve some form of painless immortality or eternal nirvana. As Nietzsche writes in *The Antichrist*, 'Nothing is less Christian that [...] a "kingdom of life" that is yet to come, a "kingdom of heaven" in the *beyond*, a speculative life 'after finitude'. Rather than sublating finitude, Christianity brings forth the possibility of thinking what Hegel calls an 'absolute transfiguration of finitude', which means that the finite as such—in all its transient, painful, and limited existence—is completely *traversed by* and *immersed in* the actual infinity of an overabundant life.

Christianity brings forth the possibility of thinking what Hegel calls an 'absolute transfiguration of finitude'

In his *Adieu*, Rimbaud urged us to be absolutely modern. *Pleromatica* can be understood as a precarious and uncertain attempt to take the unprecedented existential condition triggered by the modern scientific revolution at face value and to reassess and mobilise the heritage of both Kantianism and Spinozism in order to reorient ourselves in existence in a manner that avoids both the black hole of nihilism and any kind of relapse into a pre-modern scenario. One might say that I tried to honour in *Pleromatica* what I call *The Shortest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, namely *to celebrate a wedding between Kant and Spinoza in a carnivalised Christian Church*. I understand *Pleromatica* as my wedding gift.
