

THE REAL AND THE ALL-TOO-HUMAN

Joseph Vogl, translated by William Callison

The more one hears the vocabulary of the “real,” the more a suspicion arises that something in reality isn’t right, as the high frequency of real-signifiers suggests some turbulence in the very sense of reality. The situation is similar with the crises and speculation of the financial industry: given the uncovered credits in financial markets, the dirty assets of the so-called real economy can still appear all-too attractive and idyllic.

It might thus be that what has recently been called “realism” or “speculative realism”—an emergence that has already made claim to a new branch of philosophy—not only represents a recent symptom of crisis, but also operates on the basis of a sort of covering-problem. Or at least this appears to be integrated into speculative realism’s central theses, which are (at least temporarily) shared by different programs and authors.

A two-part profile can be found within these theses. The first part arrives at various consequences by pulling from a few philosophical dogmas since Kant and claiming that there is a world or a reality out there that holds its own—i.e., unmoved, indifferent, self-sufficient, sovereign, and fully independent of concepts and thought processes. What happens there does not depend on subjects, brains, and mental operations; what happens there does so with qualities that remain imperceptible and unthinkable for us. Herein manifests an uncircumventable break between thought and being.

Alternatively and in the second part of the profile, this outside, this inaccessible world must be grasped as an in-itself fixed reference point, as something on which every philosophical doubt will break. It surfaces in natural-scientific assertions, as seen in sentences like “the universe came into being 13.5 billion years ago” or “earthly life began 3.5 billion years ago.” And precisely because this or that happened out there (and before all human time), because this or that could occur (or perhaps not), it must appear—as Quentin Meillassoux says—as a reservoir of “eternal truths.”¹ Because there is a human-free event that one knows took place one way or another—and thus contingently—a claim can then be made about the character of the Absolute: there is no doubt that something happened or will happen without us.

In short, this entails three consequences. First, it means that, when confronted with this great Outside, all of our concepts, narratives and valuations collapse. This bears on all of those trying attempts that were once believed capable of controlling relations with the world and the limits of knowledge. From this perspective, even the transcendentals and the forms of intuition, even the categories and a priori’s of thought can appear only as contingent and untenable; at best, they attest to a narcissistic thought-entwinement of the subject with itself. Second and conversely, thought has here won new speculative freedoms: the less the world is conceivable, the more it summons thought to fabulate, to feign, to fantasize. Every attempt to think and conceptualize the world is forcibly speculative. Just as the literary realism of the nineteenth century once made fantasy and speculative fiction possible, so contemporary speculative realism engenders a new philosophical fantasy. Third, all of this is only possible because a new pivot, a new measure of value could be set with the Real: all constructions and constructivisms, all self-references and language games are fixated or even covered over by the vertical axis of the Real-Absolute or the Absolute-Real. Speculation has found its anchor, as it were, in a kind of philosophical gold standard. Against the relativisms in thought, it is the restoration of an old philosophical order and (as Ray Brassier put it) it is the hope that—with the tested dualisms of meaning and being, knowledge and feeling, concept and object—undiluted reason will once again take the throne.²

Even if I can only quickly and corruptly sketch out this philosophical scenario here; even if these blueprints give the impression of being more interested in providing answers than they are in asking questions; they nonetheless attempt to present a few turns that capture our time in thought [*unsere Zeit in Gedanken erfasst*]. A few problems are at hand, problems that bring us to the question of what thought [*Denken*] means today. Let me address a few problems in this list, then, while also making a few side remarks about speculative realism. The first question and problem-figure naturally concerns the relation of “thought and the outside.” Even if, within the ambit of speculative realism, one laments that the outside has gone missing in philosophy, it is nonetheless conspicuous how such a cardinal philosophical position has already been staked out in the outside of thought. Martin Heidegger had already localized the task of thinking in the relation between thought and the unthinkable. In his essay “What Is Called Thinking?,” not only is philosophy attributed a constitutive beginninglessness, not only is the most “thought-provoking thing” [*das “Bedenkliche”*] marked by the always-withdrawn element of thought. But beyond this, Heidegger also grasped the mere abstract possibility of thought as the possibility of that which “we are not yet thinking.”³ Just as thought thus remains foreclosed from every practice of knowledge, so it conversely becomes the problem of a precarious act—that is, one which cannot be grasped through forms of imitation, through reproduction, through the similar and the analogous. The new realism obviously shares this intuition, the sharpest formulation of which can be found in Gilles Deleuze. For him, thought does not progress in the mediation between knowledge and non-knowledge as if in a never-ending process. There is no analogy, no isomorphy, no natural tendency, and no *philia* between thought and the outside;⁴ and it may be, write Deleuze and Guattari, “that believing in this world, in this life, becomes our most difficult task.”⁵

At issue here is nothing less than the form of encounter between thought and being, and here indeed looms a fundamental bifurcation. On the one side, the main concern of this so-called realism is the establishment of a philosophical discourse that “attempts to think what is there, where thought isn’t.” Not only does this secure a dualism that consolidates thought as consciousness and consciousness as human consciousness; it also gives the outside the position of the first principle, the post of an absolutely necessary contingency. The relation of thought and the outside is thus grasped as a problem of representation: the unrepresentable outside receives its place and its reference in the propositions of science. What cannot be thought is represented as outside of thought.

By way of contrast, for Deleuze, this is about a form of encounter that possesses all the features of violence. This in turn ruptures a dogmatic picture of thought that makes reference to the interiority of consciousness. In the encounter between thought and the outside, a contingent event escalates; since thought “has only involuntary adventures,”⁶ the outside of thought becomes manifest as violence, compulsion, and emergency in thought. Thus at the beginning of thought there is no aporetic relation to the outside, but rather a thought that has become

foreign to itself in contact with the outside. “Thought,” writes Deleuze, “is primarily trespass and violence, the enemy, and nothing presupposes philosophy: everything begins with misosophy.”⁷ The relation of representation is thus confronted with a relation of effect or action.

This leads directly to a second problem-figure, to an issue I would like to pose as a question of “the idiotic in thought.” In contrast with the new realism, the relation between thought and the outside need not be exclusively understood as a relation of exclusion. Rather, as authors like Blanchot, Deleuze or Foucault have advised, the seam between thought and the un-thought must be conceived as the inclusion of the outside in thought and thus as the end of representation. This carries several implications for the picture where thought makes itself from itself and confronts itself, as it were, in a shattered mirror.

On the one hand, this means that the modern Cogito is exposed to a manifold violence, which, with the breach of finitude and the external world, interrupts the self-certainty of consciousness and the arbitrariness of its acts. Foucault described this as the discovery of those elusive and unobtainable powers of the outside: the emergence of the powers of life, labor, and language, which distend man to his own empirico-transcendental doubling and which hinder the re-location of the “I think” in the “I am.”⁸ Here is neither interiority nor consciousness, but rather a thought of the outside that recognizes in the self-presence of thought only alterity and the maximal distance of thought to itself.

On the other hand and connected to this is the question that Deleuze and Guattari once posed: “What violence must be exerted on thought for us to become capable of thinking?”⁹ Thought emerges out of the unthinkable; however, this cannot be exorcized as mere negation, as factual obstacle, as error, deception, or illusion. It rather assumes the character of a constitutive powerlessness, which positions itself as the utmost outside on the inside of thought. Modern thought has its own lapses and misadventures in such moves, and the problematic diagram of that which is called thought is found less in a *Discours de la méthode* or in a *Kritik*. Rather, already available in the efforts of Daniel Paul Schreber, Antonin Artaud, or in other archives generated by psychiatry, is something psychiatry has applied: stereotypes, an endless rumination, an acephalus in thought, or simply the inability to have any sort of thought.¹⁰ Thus does something non-human, bestial, or idiotic spread itself out in the middle of thought. The edifying equation of human, subject, and consciousness thus shatters in the athletics of thought; and the appeal to a thinking faculty is haunted by a becoming-transcendental of stupidity or idiocy.

Associated with this is a third problem-figure that occupies a systematic character. If the break between thought and being always poses the question of boundaries and transgressions, of the establishment of the one in the other, then what hangs in the balance are those continents that have been named the empirical and the transcendental. And here modern philosophy runs into a crossroads that has produced not only different philosophical styles but also an intellectual incommensurateness. The one end is reclaimed by the most recent speculative solution. Here, if I see it correctly, the territory of the transcendental is constrained through an empirical field, which is itself characterized not by possible experience but by a necessary nothingness in experience. This would be what Meillassoux has called the ancestral: the territory of those pre-human dates and facts, which arrive in our world of experience with the formulas of science, but which only indicate the transcendental impossibility of empirical experience.¹¹ What occurred or occurs outside will never be able to be an object of possible experience for us. In the ancestral, the transcendental obtains an empirical repartee, as it were. Put differently: the subject of possible experience (or of recognition) remains undisturbed, though it must resign itself—in favor of its final foundation in the Real—to the holes of impossible experience.

A different and opposed path is proposed by Deleuze, a path that at once eschews the question of a speculative foundation and yet holds to the dissimilarity between the empirical and the transcendental. Here the empirical field is not just any milieu in which one moves from the manifold to the object of intuition, from the sensory to the intelligible; it is not the field of recognition. It rather concerns an empirical field that precedes any empiricism and in which the sensory is given neither to objects nor to a subject. Here the condition is no longer grasped as the conditioned; and what Deleuze calls “transcendental empiricism” does not inquire into the

conditions of possible experience, but rather into the real preconditions of actual experience. Deleuze says: “Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. [...] We ask, for example: What forces sensibility to sense? What is it that can only be sensed, yet is imperceptible at the same time?”¹² What forces sensibility and what is it about sensibility that forces toward thought—in Deleuze, this leads to a differential theory of the faculties, which do not work together in the form of a *sensus communis*. They rather advance an increasing intensity: from something that can only be experienced and yet that remains non-sensory when considered from an empirical standpoint, to something that must be thought and yet also remains unthinkable.¹³ The ground of thought thus lies neither in the subject nor outside, but rather in an empirical-transcendental field of immanence where thought and being are entangled before they develop into subject- and object-worlds. Here recurs in thought itself the very relationship that relates thought to the Outside. And this would be the incongruity: the metaphysical attempt to think the Outside as the Absolute is confronted with all of the tribulations entailed by the thought of immanence.

If this is correct after all—namely, that a turn from epistemology to ontology has been consummated in the new realism—then this makes up a fourth and final problem-figure: the question of what kinds of modes-of-being [*Seinsweisen*] one refers to in such a move. Here a peculiar kind of questionlessness breaks onto the scene, which constitutes some varieties of realism. And so, for someone like Quentin Meillassoux, the weight of real being is not only displaced into the lost region of the ancestral, whose existence can express only the inexistence of the human. Its activities are thus limited, depending on the shape in which scientific propositions are incurred in the human world, and thus in the form of sentences that, in any case, demand interpretations.¹⁴ The utmost Real is indeed available [*vorhanden*], though it remains active only for itself.

For the sake of comparison one could—at least briefly—recall Martin Heidegger’s tool-analysis, which can be understood as an ontological key scene. For him, the existence [*Vorhandensein*] of things is no mere givenness [*Gegebensein*] but rather the result of a process in which their thing-character, their undetected being-at-hand [*Zuhandensein*] dissipates and wins, in their very non-presence-at-hand [*Unzuhandenheit*], a mode of resistance, conspicuousness, and recalcitrance. It is precisely in its presence-at-hand [*Vorhandenheit*] that the world of things [*Dingwelt*] has its treacherous and rebellious character. It is only present-at-hand because it gives itself access to this outer region; it places itself at an extreme distance when one wants to grasp it. And if (according to Heidegger) Dasein is roused in its ontic daze, in its familiar being-in-the-world, this means that these things of the world [*Welt-Dinge*] never existed as isolated and unmoved. They are rather the productive forces of Dasein itself. The things-at-hand are defective tools and serve as a reminder that subjects are only begotten in grappling with things.¹⁵ Accordingly, the Real would not be outside; rather, it further involves products and productions that embody themselves in the subjects. Put differently: the quality of the ontological question is determined in whether and how it refers to that which is given [*Gegebenheiten*] or to that which is made [*Gemachtheiten*].

Those would thus be a few questions that are given with the actuality of speculative realism: the kind of encounter between thought and being; the inquiry into those forms of impotence that thought generates in itself; the way that the areas of the empirical and the transcendental are distributed; and the question of a kind of eventfulness that takes effect in the mode of being itself.

Let me then proceed to the conclusion. The present of new realism probably lies in the realization of a question that inheres in modern philosophy and from which it cannot break loose: the question of thinking contingency. At issue here, not least, is a predicament where the thought of contingency cannot be released from the question of decision; it remains stamped by a decisive, decisionistic tension. Here two ways of thinking separate themselves irrevocably and for last time. The one, dogmatic way follows an eschatology of the Real and, with its decision for the universality of the contingent, disposes with the undecidable and accepts that it can only be newly decided in the sentences of science. The other, critical way is unholy, as it were, and finds in the thought of contingency only the contingent (i.e., restricted) place of its historical being. The finitude of the all-too-human is sought in the human itself: with the question of the positive constraints of that which makes possible

events of the universalizable. Here the thought of contingency raises a claim on unredeemability; it concerns itself with the place and the effectivity of singular (i.e., contingent) events in that which manifests itself as universal, necessary, and binding.

HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1. Quentin Meillassoux, "Metaphysik, Spekulation, Korrelation." *Realismus Jetzt. Spekulative Philosophie und Metaphysik für das 21. Jahrhundert*. Ed Armen Avanesian. Berlin: Merve, 2013, 23.
2. See Ray Brassier, "Begriffe und Gegenstände." *Realismus Jetzt. Spekulative Philosophie und Metaphysik für das 21. Jahrhundert*. Ed Armen Avanesian. Berlin: Merve, 2013, 182.
3. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* Trans J. Glenn Gray. New York: Harper & Row, 1976, 4.
4. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 145.
5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Trans Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 75.
6. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 145.
7. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139.
8. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1994, in particular page 322.
9. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 55.
10. See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 147.
11. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans Ray Brassier. New York: Continuum, 2009, 1-27; and Meillassoux, "Metaphysik, Spekulation, Korrelation," 25.
12. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139, 143.
13. See Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139.
14. See Chapter 1 in Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.
15. See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer 1967, 68.