

THE TROUBLE WITH ONTOLOGICAL LIBERALISM

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Markus Gabriel's twin books, *Why the World Does Not Exist* (2013) and *Fields of Sense* (2015), have been advertised as seeking to dissolve rote problems by innovative means and thereby making a bold departure from academic philosophy.¹ What Gabriel actually delivers is a defense of a rather classical form of humanism, by means of a position that, for all its apparent audacity, is best understood as a continuation of the historically disparate but coherent line of thought known as philosophical pluralism. The line came to prominence with William James,² and it has experienced various later incarnations, notably Hilary Putnam's internal realism and Nelson Goodman's ontological pluralism.³ A look at this tradition certainly helps in understanding Gabriel, but it is within continental metaphysics—

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1. Markus Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), translation of *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2013); Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), translation of *Sinn und Existenz: Eine realistische Ontologie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015).

2. See Jean Wahl, *The Pluralist Philosophies of England and America*, trans. Fred Rothwell (London: Open Court, 1925).

3. Despite striking conceptual similarities between them (interweaving of semantics with ontology, indetermination of criteria for individuating worlds/fields of sense), Gabriel denies affinity with Goodman (while claiming to inherit from Putnam), on the grounds of Goodman's irrealism, from which he wants to distance himself. See Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 16, 146.

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a more controversial and amorphous field that has experienced a strong renewal in the past decade, under such headings as “flat ontology,” “speculative realism,” and “new realism”—that Gabriel’s work seems to be most at home.⁴

To further narrow the scope of analysis, one can find valuable help in Peter Wolfendale’s remarkable book *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes*, which builds an extremely detailed case against Graham Harman’s object-oriented philosophy and its variants, and which analyzes, in its central chapter, the notion of “ontological liberalism,” which most aptly describes Gabriel’s stance.⁵ That term designates, broadly, any philosophical enterprise that aims to confer a positive ontological status on a wide range of objects, including those (for example, mental, social, or fictional objects) that do not fit the commonsense criteria of materiality or substantiality that usually serve to qualify for existence. The aim of ontological liberalism, in its more radical forms, is to extend existence to the greatest possible range of objects, thereby rejecting the principle known as Occam’s razor. The natural adversary of this type of ontology might be termed “ontological conservatism,” which is dedicated to restraining the ascription of existence exclusively to entities meeting proper *explanatory* standards. The contrary ambition of the ontological liberal is to achieve *descriptive* exhaustiveness, that is, to provide a complete catalog of existents without regard to their properties.⁶ Historically, ontological liberalism emerges with Alexius Meinong, who gave it an identity distinct from both traditional dogmatic metaphysics and other sorts of antireductionism (notably, Edmund Husserl’s). Confined to a marginal status following Bertrand Russell’s scathing criticism of its program, ontological liberalism as a trend crept back into philosophical circles in tandem with the general reevaluation of metaphysics that has marked the decades in the wake, on the analytical side of the aisle, of W. V. Quine and, on the continental side, of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou.⁷ Ontological liber-

4. I call it a renewal since there have always been metaphysicians and system builders in the “continental” tradition: Bergson, Whitehead and the process-philosophy school (Charles Hartshorne, Justus Buchler, Robert Corrington), Deleuze, and Badiou, as well as less mentioned figures, such as Jean Wahl, Stanislas Breton, Nicolas Bediaev, and Étienne Souriau. While not all metaphysicians in the strictest or most orthodox sense, they attest to a continuity that is frequently obscured when recent developments are discussed. On this point, see Leon Niemoczynski, “Twenty-First Century Speculative Philosophy: Reflections on the ‘New Metaphysics’ and Its Realism and Materialism,” *Cosmos and History* 9, no. 2 (2013): 13–31; and Raphaël Millière, “Metaphysics Today and Tomorrow,” www.raphaelmilliere.com/pdf/milliere-metaphysics.pdf (accessed April 5, 2016).

5. Peter Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic Media, 2014).

6. In this context, ontological liberalism should be distinguished from ontological Platonism, which defends only the existence of abstract objects (typically, mathematical entities), and from the more modest forms of antireductionism, which likewise are confined to a limited account of the autonomy of certain classes of objects, usually mental or social. I should also mention the complex relation between liberalism and the various forms of pluralism; while a proper account of this relation would stretch well beyond the limits of my present effort, let me briefly say that liberalism can be seen as one possible justification for pluralism.

7. Contemporary Meinongians include, notably, Terence Parsons, Edward Zalta, Graham Priest, and Francesco Berto. (See also Thibaut Giraud’s 2015 paper “On Modal Meinongianism,” www.academia.edu/17059266/On_Modul_Meinongianism [accessed April 5, 2016].) These Meinongian versions of liberalism are unfortunately outside of the purview of the present essay (although Gabriel touches on Meinongianism in *Fields of Sense*, 179).

alism has so burgeoned that, at least on the continental side, it is now possible to locate apparently diverse intellectual programs under its expansive umbrella, including Graham Harman's defense of substantial objects (in his book *The Quadruple Object*), Tristan Garcia's formal ontology (in *Form and Object*), and Bruno Latour's philosophical anthropology of the moderns (in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*).⁸

It is in this wider setting that the value of *Why the World Does Not Exist* and *Fields of Sense* becomes clear: the flaws of Gabriel's project enable us to see clearly those of ontological liberalism as such, which tend to remain obscure in accounts more nuanced than Gabriel's. Thus, my intent here is to provide, with Wolfendale's analysis and criticism as a starting point, a condensed presentation of those methodological and conceptual problems, focusing on Gabriel's writings as symptomatic. Since Gabriel's twin books were not yet published when *Object-Oriented Philosophy* appeared, my text can also be read as a supplement or short companion piece to Wolfendale's (hence my frequent references to his book in what follows). I should add that my account will not insist more than is strictly necessary on the evidently important differences between these authors' projects, since my aim is to address those conceptual commitments that they share.

An Ontological Bubble Ending in a Metaphysical Crash

What does it mean to say that the world does not exist? On the most basic level, the statement is a denial of any all-encompassing totality. This philosophical slogan, which epitomizes what Gabriel calls metametaphysical nihilism, is in the same league with Badiou's watchword "The One is not" and with Goodman's dismissal of a "World of worlds."⁹ From this refusal of absolute totalization, the ontological liberal is driven headlong to affirm an unlimited number of types of entities susceptible of recognition as real, hence the liberal enthymeme: *the world does not exist, therefore everything does*.¹⁰ In liberalism, the individual (alternatively, the object or the thing) is the basic unit of ontology, and the main task of ontological liberalism is to elaborate a conception, both exhaustive and consistent, of this individual unit. This task is intrinsically problematic: if everything is said to exist, what signification can the word *existence* have?—and if everything is

8. Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2011); Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. Jon Cogburn and Mark Allan Ohm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); and Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). It should be noted that ontological liberals share a book series (Speculative Realism), edited by Harman and published by Edinburgh University Press.

9. For similar declarations, see Garcia, *Form and Object*, 67; Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger, and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), chaps. 3 and 4; and Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Universities Press, 2011), chap. 6.

10. Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 79.

equally a thing, of what use is it to call them *things*? For his part, Gabriel refuses an “adverbial” concept of existence that would permit a regulated dose of variation in the concept’s usage. For him, to do so would entail positing the world as totality, as a metaphysical medium through which the different kinds of things could interact.¹¹ Having swept away this intermediary position, he states that anything that does not appear locally (in a given “field of sense”) and thus lacks an ontological “site,” cannot be said to exist.¹² In this context, to say that the world does not exist is to say that it is not an object: the world, in short, is not a thing in the world. Clearly, we need to elucidate with some precision the notion of existence here employed before shouting from the rooftops, “Where in the universe is the universe?”¹³

We are now at the heart of the problem: in order to realize the ontological equality that it espouses, liberalism is committed to finding the most minimal definition of *being* that is possible. On this front, Garcia is the most explicit of the ontological liberals, since the crux of his project is precisely to devise—by reaching an absolute point of “de-determination,” where every existent is reduced to its pure, formal, solitary state—the poorest, flattest definition of *being* that is conceivable.¹⁴ Latour advocates abandoning the absolutist search for Being, which is ineffable and unreachable, and redirecting our attention to the actual multiplicity of concrete beings.¹⁵ Harman’s philosophy of objects, in which the inner being of things exceeds all of its properties (both manifest and structural), leads him to adopt a form of apophatism.¹⁶ Gabriel’s own minimalism depends on his definition of existence as “appearance in a field of sense” (that is, “being in a context”)—a definition that renders existence necessarily local and contextual.¹⁷

11. This adverbial conception (Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 135) is fairly close to Latour’s (*Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, chap. 2); the question of an underlying monism in Latour’s pluralism is certainly a valid one that requires its own examination.

12. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 88; Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 80–81.

13. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 140.

14. Garcia, *Form and Object*, 5.

15. Latour, *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 162. Latour’s full ontology, beyond general principles, remains largely implicit in *Inquiry*, which he intends as partially experimental; since a strong philosophical stance would ruin this experimental character, he prefers to characterize his commitments as purely technical, terming them an “infra-language” (as opposed to a metalanguage). While it remains possible to unearth some of these commitments, a detailed reconstruction of Latour’s overarching philosophy cannot be accomplished here, so I will simply point to

the influence of Whitehead on his thinking. For more on Latour’s ontology, see Patrice Maniglier, “A Metaphysical Turn? Bruno Latour’s *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*,” *Radical Philosophy* 187 (2014): www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/a-metaphysical-turn. See also “*L’Enquête sur les modes d’existence forme-t-elle un système?*,” modesofexistence.org/does-an-inquiry-into-modes-of-existence-have-a-system/ (accessed July 25, 2016); in this “interview,” Latour explains some of his most crucial metatheoretical positions and counters “a metaphysical machine with a bigger metaphysical machine.”

16. Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 66–73.

17. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 158: “I understand existence to be the fact that some object or objects appear in a field of sense. . . . The notion of ‘appearance’ is just the stand in for whatever it is in each case for something to be in a field of sense. . . . ‘Appearance in a field of sense’ is just a technical version of ‘being in a context.’” See also Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 65.

But, as Wolfendale observes, what the various concepts of being underpinning these definitions (de-determination, alteration, excess, contextuality) share is their fundamentally *negative* character. They aim to provide an indefinite series of possible extensions and redefinitions, according to the needs of any particular instance, and can reach beyond tautology (“everything exists”) only by alluding to the potentially infinite reach of a concept that is, by design, incapable of internal consistency.¹⁸ We can only be thankful for Gabriel’s candor when reading his admission that existence, being multiple in its applications, “is just not generally a concept . . . , it is essentially malleable.”¹⁹ Its theoretical versatility, in other words, is its only actual content. Moreover, the concept of the object or individual as the basic ontological unit is equally unstable, doomed to shift from an implicitly restrictive definition (by virtue of having any content at all) to specific applications that undermine it by stretching it beyond recognition. Unable to describe or define its generic being in any satisfying way, ontological liberalism is reduced to mere allusion, endlessly repeating a solemn promise that will never be fulfilled.²⁰

The at best equivocal nature of liberalism’s concept of being can be understood, ultimately, as resulting from the reification of discursive features, which then are presented as fundamental traits of being. It is indeed striking that each ontology is heavily dependent on semiotic or linguistic elements. Garcia relies on the distinction between form and content; Harman, on the practice of poetical allusion; Latour, on the plurality of modes of speech—and Gabriel weaponizes the notions of context (for the fields of sense) and connotation (for his notion of sense).²¹ The promotion of a semantic category to an ontological status is nowhere advertised as such and is better understood, perhaps, as a collateral effect of abolishing the ontological distinction between words and things, which is an element common (in different versions) to all four philosophies.²²

The indetermination, on both its theoretical and semantic sides, of the con-

18. Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 256–58, 266–70.

19. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 192.

20. Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 267–69. As Frédéric Nef observes, Gabriel relies heavily on the metaphor of the field of vision to characterize his fields of sense (see his review of *Why the World Does Not Exist* at www.francoisloth.com/markus-gabriel-ou-le-constructionnisme-sans-monde-lanalyse-de-frederic-nef/. [accessed July 25, 2016]) While Gabriel claims that his definition of the individual unit is a “functional” one (*Fields of Sense*, 165), he refers as well to an “interdefinition” of “object” and “field of sense” rather than to any actually specific functional relation. In his review of *Fields of Sense*, Benjamin Norris remarks on this “in the very least puzzling” lack of definition on Gabriel’s part. Benjamin Norris, review of *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontol-*

ogy, by Markus Gabriel, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 36, no. 2 (2015): 493–96.

21. Latour has progressively shifted from semantics to ontology, moving from “regimes of enunciation” to “regimes of veridiction,” before settling on “modes of existence.” On this choice, see Latour, *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 20–22. On Latour’s evolution, see a central text of his middle period, “Petite philosophie de l’énonciation,” published in 1998 and available online at www.bruno-latour.fr/node/187 (accessed July 25, 2016).

22. See, for instance, Garcia, *Form and Object*, 43–46. Harman (see Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 327) insists strongly on the inadequacy of language, but this claim is strongly undermined by his pivotal use of rigid designators for thinking objects (88) and his adoption of aesthetics as first philosophy.

cept of being is certainly a stumbling block for ontological liberalism if its proponents want to arrive somewhere less frustrating than tautology or apophatism.²³ The immediate implication of this deadlock is even more problematic, that is, the devaluation of metaphysics as such. Since ontological liberalism cannot abide any restriction on what it means to exist, any specification of the exact workings of relations between existents, which is the central task of metaphysics (as opposed to a purely descriptive ontology), is understood to be illegitimate, for fear that it might unduly exclude some things from existence.²⁴ The manner in which metaphysics is relegated to the sidelines varies from author to author, with Latour promoting the descriptive power of an empirically minded philosophy, while Harman erects a strange introspective metaphysics.²⁵ Common to all of these attempts is a methodological deficit when it comes to formulating new insights, alternative to those of traditional metaphysics, that is perhaps clearest in Garcia's *Form and Object*. The first half of the book is intended as an intellectual or even, in Pierre Hadot's sense, a spiritual exercise, one in which thought is meant to test its own limits and realize a conceptual ascesis. In this "formal" part, every possible entity is equated under a concept of "thing" as limitation of everything else (its "world")—as a limit, as a solitary being. Having pressed the predicaments of ontological liberalism to their breaking point and thereby thoroughly put the world out of joint, Garcia then, in the book's second half, reconstructs the world according to his own preferences, introducing ad hoc solutions to perennial problems, such as those concerning temporality.²⁶ No one would doubt this book's brilliance; still, the performance is, irreducibly, arbitrary.²⁷

But how, Gabriel would respond to this assessment by asking, could such

23. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 192: "There is no such thing as an answer to the question of what it is for an object, just insofar as it is an object, to appear in a field of sense just insofar as it is a field of sense. There simply is no *a priori* property of appearance in a field of sense that is instantiated in just the same way by everything falling under it."

24. See Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 218–22, where it becomes clear that ontological liberalism inherits much of the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics.

25. This expression is used by Wolfendale (*Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 104) to describe the methodological impasse that results from Harman's peculiar hybrid of phenomenology and *a priori* metaphysical arguments. While Harman regards himself as practicing metaphysics in its traditional (and even precritical) sense, this methodological confusion is, at best, a dilution of the theoretical practice of metaphysics into an unrecognizable mélange of themes and loose arguments (see Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, chap. 2, for a detailed analysis of Harman's arguments). Latour's "empirical metaphysics" can be described as the insertion of metaphysical vocabulary into an anthropological, and therefore largely descriptive,

approach, which substitutes the de facto of anthropology for the de jure usually associated with metaphysics. On the de facto/de jure question, see Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Peter Erdélyi, *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 67; and Baptiste Gille, "L'ontologie. Une construction théorique utile pour l'anthropologie," presented in 2014 at savoirs.ens.fr/expose.php?id=1858 (accessed July 25, 2016).

26. Garcia, *Form and Object*, 182. See his introduction of the concept of "intensity" in the chapter on temporality: its justification is, within the architecture of the book, somewhat mysterious. Garcia's next book, *La Vie intense*, which will be published after this article goes to press, is devoted to an elaboration of the concept of intensity and may shed light on this issue.

27. It is therefore possible to agree with Garcia's claim that his goes further than any other form of ontological liberalism, but this is a radicalization rather than an overcoming. See his "Critique et rémission," afterword to Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *Algèbre de la tragédie* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2014).

an exercise be anything but arbitrary? Metaphysics, like the famous television show *Seinfeld*, is literally about nothing,²⁸ because the questions to which it wants systematic answers—what is the world? and what does the world mean?—are in themselves meaningless and unaskable.²⁹ There is no problem with positing the coexistence of different kinds of things (say, the historic racehorse Seabiscuit and the mythical flying horse Pegasus), since any conceivable disparity between the properties of different kinds of things evaporates once each is located in its proper context: “Everything exists, but in different fields of sense. Nothing co-exists.”³⁰ The philosopher is left to celebrate, even rhapsodize, beings in all their multiplicity, having cut himself off from any further understanding of this multiplicity beyond its mere presence and is thus relegated to a purely aesthetic stance.³¹ Ontological and epistemic humility of this sort leaves philosophy in a position to declare nothing but its inability to saying anything about anything.³²

The Circumventing of Naturalism

Having freed us, by their own criteria of success, from the shackles of metaphysics as such, ontological liberals now need to confront naturalism, which seems to be the last bastion of hierarchical taxonomies of being. Storming this castle, however, would require proposing alternative explanations to those of the natural or social sciences,³³ so liberals need, rather, to contain the reach of scientific propositions in order not to disturb other approaches, whether religious, artistic, or affective.³⁴ If we want Goethe’s *Faust*’s title character to be regarded as existing on equal terms with Mount Vesuvius or an electron, we need to maintain a strict separation between the reference domains proper to each of these types of object. From this perspective, it is not the scientist who is the liberal’s adversary: the sciences deal with just a tiny slice of the multifarious universe to which ontological liberalism professes access. It is, rather, the scientific, materialist, or naturalist philosopher—anyone who insists on the global validity of the sciences’ truth claims.³⁵ Hence

28. The reference to *Seinfeld* is a recurring feature of Gabriel’s books. See, for instance, *Fields of Sense*, 187.

29. Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 50–51. See also Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 187.

30. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 178.

31. Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 50–51.

32. On the pitfalls of epistemic and ontological humility, see Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 375–76.

33. Some, following a rather imprudent suggestion of Harman’s with regard to empirical sciences, have produced disastrous results, notably Timothy Morton in his digressions on quantum physics in *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities

Press, 2013). (See Nathan Brown’s review of Morton’s book: “The Nadir of OOO,” *Parrhesia*, no. 17 [2013]: 62–71.) Harman himself has remained more prudent, restricting himself to argumentation on the merits of epistemology, while intervening in questions of literary criticism.

34. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 128.

35. Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1978), 4: “The pluralist, far from being anti-scientific, accepts the sciences at full value. His typical adversary is the monopolistic materialist or physicalist who maintains that on system, physics, is preeminent and all-inclusive, such that every other must eventually be reduced to it or rejected as false or meaningless.”

Harman's "opinion that materialism must be destroyed," though here again it is Gabriel who puts forward the most severe interpretation of the liberal position.³⁶

Gabriel insists that he has no problem with the statements routinely produced by the sciences, because they deal with a specific field of sense—that of the "universe"³⁷—whereas ontology cannot privilege or acknowledge that any fact or field of sense is regulative over it: "Nothing in this book is supposed to be supported by, to support, or to be in conflict with any true proposition of physics or any other inquiry into the material/energetic conditions of there being spatio-temporal objects, things, or events of any kind whose nature is described by them as being instances of mathematical equations."³⁸ Thus, according to Gabriel, ontological liberalism is harmless to the claims of natural science. However, if all fields of sense are on an equal footing, ontologically speaking, the claim to general truth attached to scientific statements melts into air. The problem is not that knowledge-based truth claims cannot be restricted to a particular domain of application (living beings for biological statements, mental beings for psychological ones, and so on) but rather that, by identifying those domains with Gabriel's undifferentiated "fields of sense," it becomes impossible even to talk about knowledge, other than the strangely tautological version of knowledge in which the objects described by physics are defined as no more than that which is being studied by physicists in their professional practice and where any extension beyond this definition would be tantamount to a category mistake.³⁹

It is here that Gabriel's quarrel with naturalism reaches its most obvious limitations. It is legitimate to question the use, or even the relevance, of the term *naturalism* (as the late Hilary Putnam did, for instance) by arguing that it is overly vague and embraces everything from a hard-line physicalism to any position claiming to be compatible, or merely not directly in contradiction to, the conclusions of empirical sciences.⁴⁰ But, just as Gabriel's understanding of being is a purely negative one, so his conception of knowledge has no content other than a general imperative to refuse any attempt at unification or synthesis.⁴¹ And since

36. Graham Harman, "I Am Also of the Opinion That Materialism Must Be Destroyed," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28, no. 5 (2010): 772–90. Latour's position (as presented in *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, chaps. 3 and 4) is certainly the most nuanced, given his extensive work in the sociology of science.

37. Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 24–25.

38. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 105.

39. Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 110–11.

40. On the progressive dilution, after Quine's day, of the meaning of *naturalism* into a mere compatibility with science, see Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 310–14.

41. This aspect of his position Gabriel regards as a virtue: "But does this not mean that I am giving up any right to make a substantial explanatory claim based on the insight that to exist is to appear within a particular field? Well, it depends on what would count as a substantial explanatory claim here. The explanatory power the view has consists at least in being able to criticize positions in ontology that lead to metaphysical (hyper-substantial) claims in specific regions of philosophy or scientific discourse" (*Fields of Sense*, 192).

the individuation of and the interaction between fields of sense are not topics to which he can contribute anything but these negative conditions, he cannot raise in any way the question of articulation between domains of knowledge production.⁴² Take one of Gabriel's own examples—the issue of whether there is a specificity proper to living beings that would separate them from nonliving beings and inert matter.⁴³ Gabriel does not claim that such and such a kind of reduction (from the mental to the physical, for instance) is inadequate on either an empirical or a theoretical basis; instead he states that, given the purely *conceptual* difference between a heap of particles and a living being, we can say that, from our ontological standpoint, they are *actually* distinct.⁴⁴ The ontological radicalism yields only an explanatory void, as Gabriel is able to reify any conceivable distinction on purely a priori principles. When two accounts conflict, each is confined to a specific field of sense in order to establish an illusory peace.⁴⁵

The impossibility, even unthinkability, of any real contradiction existing between discordant theoretical accounts is the central weakness of Gabriel's position. As an antireductionism grounded on an inflationist ontology that rejects any limitation in the name of reality's fundamental heterogeneity, ontological liberalism ends up blind to any difference between the various realities that it seemingly wants to defend.⁴⁶ Liberalism, since its ontological framing of issues is ever-adjustable, has no way out of this problem of unfalsifiability. Gabriel's version of antinaturalism is extreme, to be sure, but it suggests that any resistance to ontological restraint leads to explanatory indifference.⁴⁷

A Very Relative Realism

Abjuring both metaphysics and general explanatory ambition is the price to be paid to secure what liberalism offers as an invaluable prize: an ability to account positively for all entities, whether fictional, social, or religious, that are excluded by more conservative outlooks. In other words, ontological liberalism is a kind of realism, a kind that can supplement the deficiencies of older, more modest

42. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 243–44.

43. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, chap. 1.

44. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 36, 142–43. Similarly, for Garcia, writing from a formal-ontological viewpoint, “no thing is reducible to nothing” (*Form and Object*, 8). When one has turned semantic categories into ontological ones, it is natural that purely verbal differences become ontological ones. The aversion toward reduction takes a strange form in the work of Harman (*Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 73–78) and Gabriel (*Fields of Sense*, 157), where they claim that to explain a thing using a concept amounts to identifying the thing explained with the concept.

45. In reading *Fields of Sense*, one learns, for instance, that witches, in the Inquisition's sense, do not exist but that they can be seen in Rhenish carnivals (Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 67); I can personally testify in the latter case, at least.

46. I am thinking of Latour's notion of the “category mistake” (*Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 48), Harman's concept of “levels” (*Quadruple Object*, chap. 8), and Garcia's appeal to “emergence” (*Form and Object*, 118–19).

47. Nef's review of *Why the World Does Not Exist* elaborates on this point.

realisms. The “new realist ontology” works by combining two discrete strands of realism, namely, commonsense realism (the claim that there are things in themselves, irreducible to mere constructions or representations) and noetic realism, as Wolfendale calls it (the claim that representations as such have their own specific being, with the same legitimacy as things in themselves).⁴⁸ This alliance is intended to produce a pluralist yet realist philosophy that is neither foundationalist nor reductionist, nor constructivist.

Commonsense realism is here, from a rhetorical standpoint, the most crucial strand, as it provides a “robust” interpretation of the notion of existence and thus, by its inclusion, draws a sharp line between Gabriel’s position and postmodern constructivism as he describes it, with the same rhetoric being mobilized by the other ontological liberals. The conceptual content of commonsense realism; however, is entirely dependent on the claims entailed by noetic realism: indeed, to know things in themselves, according to Gabriel, comes down to stating that appearances, insofar as they are produced by things in themselves, tell us that things in themselves appear in a certain way to us. We can know that a tree looks green, which is to say that it has the property of looking green *to us*.⁴⁹ But in this sense, Gabriel’s lofty aspirations to realism do not amount to much more than attacking the idealist metaphysics that he ascribes to constructivism (reality as entirely projected or made up by the human mind). He wants, rather, to reassure us, by repeated incantation, that his “fields of sense” are, by contrast, “objective.”⁵⁰

The only significant difference between Gabriel’s version of noetic realism and radical psychologism is obtained by the reifying approach to ontology that I already have presented: Gabriel’s fields of sense are quasi-linguistic “contexts” advertised as fundamental ontological units. This jump to the ontological level is obtained by appeal to “sense,” as Gottlob Frege defines the term, and it is only because the generation of meaning is so malleable on that level that Gabriel is able to generate a plane of construction amenable to the pluralist ontology that he seeks.⁵¹ From this perspective, however, his realism is no different from the

48. One can find a more modest version of these positions in Adrian Johnston’s *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), where he writes of the “principle of no illusions,” which, like Gabriel’s, has its roots in German Idealism (but with more convincing results).

49. Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 6; Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 81.

50. Gabriel attacks Nietzsche as the epitome of constructivist antirealism (*Why the World Does Not Exist*, 39), while simultaneously refusing any distinction between appearance and reality (*Fields of Sense*, 168; for an illuminating comparison, see Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §§54, 57).

Here again, Gabriel is extremely close to Goodman’s theory of world making, with the main difference being a rhetorical one. On the aporias of realism in contemporary philosophy, see the excellent book by Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, *Le lieu de l’universel. Impasses du réalisme dans la philosophie contemporaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2015).

51. Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference” (1892), in *Translations from the Philosophical Writing of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), 56–78. Latour shifted away from actor-network sociology into liberal, pluralist ontology by establishing the mode of the network (NET) as a primary ontological tool (*Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, chap. 2), while Harman ontologizes intentional relations (*Quadruple Object*, chap. 2; *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 135–62).

constructivism that he outspokenly denounces, the meaning of *reality* that he employs being indistinguishable from a certain kind of signifying procedure. The exit strategy through ontology appears, then, to be a matter of smoke and mirrors. His kind of realism amounts to a minimal and abstract acknowledgment that reality is neither a social construction nor a product of individual human minds.⁵²

We can trace the origins of this version of realism to Gabriel's earlier books, *Skeptizismus und Idealismus in der Antike* and (with Slavoj Žižek) *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter* (both published in 2009). Simultaneously rejecting both skepticism and foundationalism, Gabriel places himself within the spontaneous human experience of meaning in order to celebrate our direct connection to things. He thus dissolves, in a single stroke, all of the philosophical problems associated with the nature of our access to things: as an essential trait of his ontology, our access has already been reified.⁵³ Rather than take a strenuously pragmatist and deflationist stance, as do Jocelyn Benoist (whose contextualism is not without links to Gabriel's extreme version) and Hilary Putnam, Gabriel in his dismissal of the very notion of access takes advantage of the easy solutions that an unchecked appeal to ontology offers.⁵⁴ Gabriel's only substantial accomplishment at this point is his (slightly rigid) defense of the "life world" against the supposedly nihilistic ravages of naturalism. It is in that context that he makes his welcome case for the autonomy of the social sciences and for the conditional legitimacy of the religious experience (as a way of expressing the unthinkable infinity of sense).⁵⁵ None of these arguments is original, however, and many of them can be found, more persuasively made, in the works of Wilhelm Dilthey and Ludwig Feuerbach, for instance. Overall, the contrast between an incredibly ambitious ontological enterprise and its extremely limited theoretical fruits is striking. Ontological liberalism being structurally incapable of giving substance to the concept of reality beyond the meaning supplied by the practices and concrete contexts of its ordinary use, the fine-grained socioanthropological descriptions of Latour, the vast encyclopedic reach of Garcia, and Harman's lists of entities can do nothing to establish the validity of their realism, as these philosophical gestures allow no more than a theoretical simulation of a "feeling of realness" that actively deters conceptual engagement.⁵⁶

If ontological liberalism offers an ersatz realism, an undifferentiated concept of being, and an antinaturalism that works only by diluting every warrant

52. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 100. Latour provides a more useful analysis of the notion of construction; see *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, chap. 6, and his essay "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" available online at www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/120-NLH-finalpdf.pdf (accessed July 25, 2016).

53. Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 14.

54. For Hilary Putnam's definition of existence as convention, see his *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 37–43, 56.

55. Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, 142, 178.

56. For Harman's lists, see *Object-Oriented Philosophy*, 162, 268.

for explanation, the liberals (and Gabriel above all) present these flaws as positive features of their program, on the grounds that such conceptual vacuity enables unlimited applicability. Thus, the central flaw of liberalism is a confusion between liberty and license, between formal and real equality.⁵⁷ This philosophical impasse should not prevent us, however, from recognizing the real qualities inherent in each theoretician, as Latour's and Garcia's works manage to retain a considerable interest. Latour's *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* is an impressive feat, a thoughtful and creative effort to trace relations among the multifarious forms of being—and his concept of “diplomacy,” while failing to address the most pressing philosophical issues internal to his enterprise, productively turns our attention to concrete forms through which controversies may find resolution. Garcia's *Form and Object* is awe-inspiring in the rigor with which it argues, in its first half, for the flattest possible ontology—and its second half, while unable to reach the same heights, is still rife with thought-provoking examinations of an extremely wide range of topics, which is the hallmark of philosophy at its most engaging. On the other hand, the confusion caused by the blurring of lines between metaphysics and phenomenology, ontology and epistemology, undermines the central concepts of Harman's philosophy (first among them, the concepts of object and relation). There are stimulating discussions of mereology, causality, and substance, in Harman's case, and of constitution and totality, in Gabriel's; in both, there are truly original interpretations of canonical figures such as Heidegger, Frege, and Kant. Yet, ultimately, ontological liberalism has proven itself to be an unsustainable project.

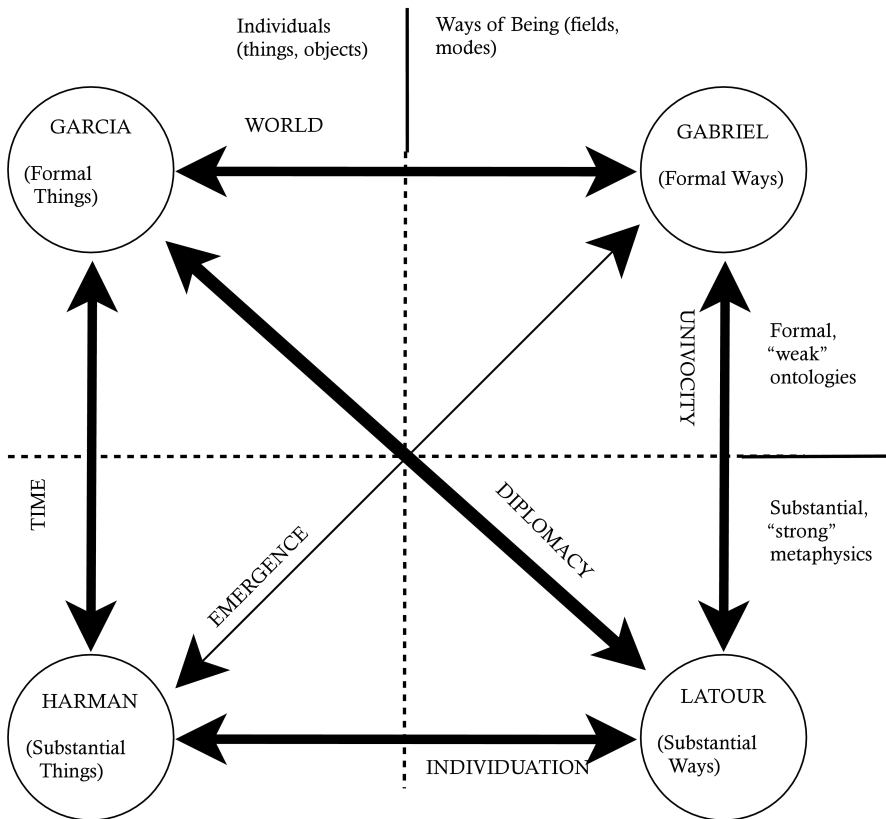
By exploring theoretical possibilities to their furthestmost implications, radical conceptual experiments like these, in both their successes and their failures, are invaluable. There is much to be learned from the deadlocks to which liberalism has led its defenders. While ontological liberalism has not attained to “the magical formula we all seek: PLURALISM = MONISM” (as Deleuze and Guattari put it), the liberals have shown to a considerable extent what does and does not lead toward success.⁵⁸ The recent renewal of interest in *Naturphilosophie* and its successors is leading some to look away from the liberals' abstract celebration of plurality as such and toward proteiform nature, in its endless process of alteration. Such overtly metaphysical enterprises as Iain Hamilton Grant's *On an Artificial Earth: Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* and, recently, Pierre Montebello's *Métaphysiques cosmomorphes: La fin du monde humain* proclaim, rather than

57. The analogy between ontological and economic or political liberalism is largely if not entirely metaphorical; even so, one stumbles across phrases like “the democracy of things” (Levi Bryant), “metaphysical anarchism” (Gabriel), or “epistemology police” (Harman, Latour) in contexts where ontological liberals are referring to their opponents. Garcia appears to be the most methodologically cautious in his deployment of these connotations.

58. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1980; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 20.

the nonexistence of the world as such, “the end of the *human* world.”⁵⁹ With tools supplied by metaphysics, the empirical sciences, and the current reframing of the concept of nature by anthropologists, these philosophers delve deeply into specifically inhuman nature, in search of the ontological structure of things.⁶⁰ It remains to be seen whether their program can be carried out in full, but as an antidote to the aporias of ontological liberalism, it might be a fruitful alternative.

Appendix: An imaginary sketch of the (hyper)object of ontological liberalism



1. INDIVIDUATION : Latour takes individuals as constituted, Harman as fundamental
2. TIME : For Garcia time-slices are things, for Harman time is constituted by objects
3. WORLD : There is no World for Gabriel, for Garcia “The World” is simply the all-encompassing Object
4. UNIVOCITY : Latour pluralises Being, Gabriel takes “existence” as univocal
5. EMERGENCE : Harman recognizes “levels” of the World ; for Gabriel all “fields” are equal
6. DIPLOMACY : Latour favors a political-empirical “diplomacy” between modes, while Garcia’s model is dialectical

59. Iain Hamilton Grant, *On an Artificial Earth: Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006); Pierre Montebello, *Métaphysiques cosmomorphes: La fin du monde humain* (Dijon: Presses du Reel, 2015).

60. See Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture: Forms of Attachment*, trans. Janet Lloyd (2006; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skafish (2009; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); and Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (1975; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).