

DANIEL SACILOTTO
REALISM AND REPRESENTATION
ON THE ONTOLOGICAL TURN

§1 - THE TWO MEANINGS OF THE "ONTOLOGICAL TURN"

The views associated with the title "speculative realism" are often coordinated with a so-called "ontological turn" that is said to have taken place in recent Continental philosophy.¹ Yet it is rather unclear what exactly such a turn is supposed to entail. If, as Meillassoux argues, it is Kant's name that sets the horizon for the anti-realist denouement that presumably characterizes both correlationism and idealism, then something like the overcoming of the critical turn in philosophy would seem to be centrally at stake.² The turn towards ontology proposed by the new realists would then be the obverse of a turning away from Kantian epistemology and its implications. And, yet again, there are at least two historical vectors which we can intuitively link to an "ontological turn," conceived as the overcoming of the critical paradigm.

We can trace one vector as proposing a *radicalization* of the critical method, in complicity with what Meillassoux calls *strong correlationism*. For this orientation of thought, the incipient problem with the critique of metaphysics is, put simply, that it is not taken far enough. The critical attempt to undertake a transcendental investigation into the conditions of possibility of metaphysics ends up, in the form of an epistemology, harboring all sorts of undetected commitments of its own. Paradigmatically, Heidegger questions whether the investigation into the problematic of the subject's representational access to the world must not already be contaminated by metaphysical prejudices, ultimately partaking in the amnesia of a tradition which he defines through the label "metaphysics of presence."³ A tradition,

¹ I would like to thank the editors of *Speculations* for the opportunity to participate alongside such distinguished authors in this issue of the journal. Also, I would like to specially thank Ray Brassier for his generosity and intellectual guidance, which has helped orient my thinking into new, exciting directions. Also, the insights in this paper would have not been possible without the dialogs I have had with Pete Wolfendale during these past couple of years; an ongoing conversation that has been nothing short of transforming in many crucial ways.

² Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2006).

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquar-

rie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962).
that is, which unquestioningly privileges a certain temporal modality in its understanding of being. The existential analytic of Dasein carried forth by phenomenology is thereby supposed to supplant the representational account of reason advanced by critique, suspending the equation of being and substance to which Kant would have remained beholden to.⁴ This investigation is said to be *ontological* then not in overcoming the question of access or in having resolved the quandaries concerning the relation between man and the world. Rather, it purges this problematic from philosophical centrality by showing how the question about the *disclosure of being* is necessarily propaedeutic to the question about the *knowing of being*. But since Dasein's own being is defined by being the agent of this disclosure, phenomenology is nothing but *fundamental ontology*. At the end of this vector of radicalization, we see the repeated operation of a "hermeneutics of suspicion," progressively revealing further prejudices in the philosophical text, pushing critique towards the limit of self-reflexivity, e.g. Derrida's deconstruction of the phallogocentric tradition, Levinas' avowal for the primacy of ethics and infinity against totality, Foucault's archeology of knowledge, Laruelle's non-philosophical avowal of radical immanence against philosophical Decision, etc.

The second vector of thought we can trace historically does not propose a radicalization of critique as much as an *overcoming* of critique in the name of ontology. For these thinkers, the ontological turn designates a metaphysical return or, more precisely, the *return of metaphysics*. Some of the canonical names in this vector are Hegel, Bergson, Deleuze and Badiou.⁵ Indeed, rather than seeking to expunge the residual metaphysical assumptions from thought, or fatally indulge in our inevitable immersion within the contaminated waters of discourse, these thinkers aim to recover the propriety of metaphysical

rie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962).

⁴ This holds true even if, for Heidegger, Kant's business was indeed never to undertake an "epistemology." For Heidegger, the transcendental enquiry that is "laying the ground for metaphysics" cannot but be ontological, insofar as it asks how it is that being appears to, or is disclosed by, thought. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁵ One might be weary of characterizing Hegel as a metaphysician, since in identifying logic with metaphysics, one might argue that what he offers is indeed a dialectical resolution of the split between epistemology and ontology, or concepts and objects. Below I will specify why I think this operation of identification or indistinction amounts, finally, to an avowal of idealist (or subjectalist) metaphysics.

speculation, a positive and systematic account of the Real as such.

But whereas the “strong correlationist” tendency of the first vector sought to explore the necessary disclosure of being by human Dasein, the metaphysician of the second vector lays claim before the absolute in some form or other. For example, the Bergsonist vitalist or (to use Meillassoux’s term) “subjectalist” absolutizes the psyche’s power of disclosure itself, and disseminates intuition’s synthetic potency across the non-human domain, thereby avowing *panpsychism*. The Ideal synthesis of the psyche is immanently folded back onto the material, rather than serving as the transcendental condition for the representation of the material. Epistemology is once again superseded, but this time in the name of a *dissolution* of the question of access, requiring the disarming of conceptual intellection and finally of the fourfold axis of representation.⁶ Alternatively, for Badiou, philosophy assumes the meta-ontological task to suspend the inaugural identification of being with the One, a historical decision that requires the identification of ontology with mathematics, and which sets out to think for the first time being *qua* being as pure multiplicity. The formal vacuity of mathematical inscription promises to prove adequate to advance a radically anti-phenomenological and anti-subjectivist conception of being, where the latter is no longer defined in terms of its being-for-a-subject.

It is clear that, however divergent in their ultimate vision, these two vectors of thought are not without profound connections. The proposal for a new metaphysics or ontology in the second orientation is also consciously an attempt to overcome the Heideggerean diagnosis against classical metaphysics or ontotheology. And insofar as they attest to the primacy of the multiple both Deleuze and Badiou seek more than a mere return to the naive realisms of pre-Kantian thought. By the same token, it is just as clear that these thinkers are motivated by what cannot but be in their eyes a steadfast suspicion that those who radicalize critique cannot but continue to dwell in its shadow, risking the ruin of philosophy itself. Thus, for Badiou, the critique of metaphysics which begins with Kant ends in the post-modern scenario announcing the death of philosophy, which surrenders thought to the coquetry of the “new sophists.”⁷ Against the dismantling of philosophy following its relativization to subjective,

cultural or discursive conditions, these thinkers align their ontological vocation in the name of a sort of *materialism* that would in turn disarm the paralyzing drudgery of critique. At the other end, those who insist on the pertinence of a critique bloated in the form of a generalized hermeneutics of suspicion routinely cast doubt over the innocence of a return to metaphysics or ontology. A return that, they deem, short of taking at heart the lessons of critique, chiefly works to reassert the authority of philosophy and its dubious legacy.⁸ The labor of the negative is tethered to a state of perpetual vigilance, curbing the pretences of philosophical affirmation in the name of a matured historical, ethical and political consciousness.

In light of these two senses of what an “ontological turn” would imply, it is not difficult to see how the four inaugural figures associated with the label “speculative realism” would, in a self-declared gesture against post-Kantian anti-realism, be distributed disparately along this axis. In continuity with the second vector outlined above, Meillassoux readily endorses a kind of mathematical Platonism inspired by Badiou’s appropriation of the dialectical method, arguing for a materialism that would be both rationalist and “speculative” rather than (naively) metaphysical or ontotheological. The correlationist scenario that follows the radicalization of critique appears under the revived promise of an absolute accessible to thought not only as a regressive gesture, like Badiou claims, reinforcing the straightjacket of the human in a sophistic triumph of relativism. More dramatically still, the reification of the correlation ends up enacting a counter-revolutionary “Ptolemaic turn” against modern science, which brandishes an experience of the mystical beyond the saying of the word and which is recalcitrant the imperatives of reason. The saturation of being to the rational is thereby not only an affirmation of subjective creation above the ideological shackles of the sophists, but a purported reconciliation with the de-anthropomorphizing turn that modern secularism enacts over against Kant and his successors’ attempts to domesticate the discoveries of science.

On their part, Harman’s ontology of objects and Grant’s philosophy of nature likewise set out to return to the metaphysical task, in the side of a reactivation of the category of substance, or of a neo-Schellingean process-metaphysics, respectively. Finally, Brassier’s early transcendental realism sought to re-appropriate back into philosophy the

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press: 1995), Chapter I.

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 1992).

⁸ For an example of such an accusation, see Francois Laruelle, *Anti-Badiou*, trans. Robin McKay (London: Continuum, 2013)

non-philosophical work of Francois Laruelle, motivating a postural realism against the iterations of correlationist-idealist thought. In doing so, Brassier pursued realism in continuity with the first, radicalizing vector of thought against the propriety of metaphysics, embracing the vacuity of being in nihilist spirits.⁹ At the limits of critique, distilling the structural invariance of every correlationist philosophy, the immanence of the Real awaits, however purged of positive content, and however resistant to metaphysics.

Once this stock of positions has been shown to share nothing more than an antipathy to post-Kantian anti-realism, it might seem reasonable to simply let the apparent congruity of “speculative realism” whither in the vine, and accept that the term coins nothing but an exceedingly vague family resemblance, rather than a concept announcing the advent of a new philosophical epoch, or a reformation of Continental thought. Even more so considering that there is profound disagreement between the original proponents as to whether the other “members” would indeed in any sense be meaningfully characterized as either “speculative” or “realist,” their self-assessment notwithstanding.

§2 - REPRESENTATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Is there nothing more to this story? A misguided enthusiasm for a new savory term, “correlationism?” This is a word that has become, after all, easily deployed in the trenches to castigate the tradition and fashionably claim for philosophical radicality. Having diagnosed the antipathy to correlationism as the singular defining trait behind SR, one might be compelled to see just what exactly those proponents of the ontological turn think the original Kantian gesture did that was so wrong. From our tentative diagnosis of the two historical vectors leading to SR, what originally binds them appears first to be a rejection of transcendental philosophy understood as critical epistemology, and indeed a sustained attack on the concept of *representation*. Both sides of the story essentially agree on one thing: representation, along with its mother discipline epistemology, needs to be overcome. But what exactly is “representation,” after all? As it turns out, the meaning of this term is no less ambiguous for those who claim to reject it than “ontology” was for those who claimed to endorse it. In any case, two senses can be distilled as being of particular relevance to the debates in-

⁹ And it must be emphasized that this is only a characterization of Brassier’s early work since, as we should briefly indicate below, it is his work that opens up a “third way.”

forming the dual post-Kantian orientation that we have traced above.

In the first, narrower sense of the term, representation is understood as a distinctively *modern* concept, specifically labored to rethink the relation between reality and appearances.¹⁰ In this sense, representation sets itself against the pre-modern view that truth obtains when appearances *resemble* the Real. Resemblance is, in turn, understood in terms of how distinct items have shared properties or qualities. To give a paradigmatic example: a picture resembles *that which* it pictures if and only if they both share the same colors and shapes. Conversely, if the picture does not share these same properties with its object, that is, if it does not resemble it in the relevant aspects, it will be said to be a false appearance. Correspondence between thought and the Real entails thus the sharing of *qualitative properties*; the appearance is *like* that which it is an appearance of.¹¹

But the Copernican revolution disrupts the cogency of this model. Behind the appearance of an unmoving Earth and a circling sun, there lies an orbiting Earth and an unmoving sun. It is within the bounds of such misleading appearances that we discover truth; the relationship between reality and appearances must then be more contrived. Following Galileo’s insights, Descartes’ notion of representation worked then to explain how the distinction between appearance and reality could be mapped onto the distinction between algebra and geometry. The basic idea was that the discursive inscriptions of algebra could serve to calculate the structural features of geometrical figures, even if no resemblance could obtain between the inscriptions and the actual phenomena:

Treating something in linear, discursive form, such as “ $ax + by = c$ ” as an appearance of a Euclidean line, and “ $x^2 + y^2 = d$ ” as an appearance of a circle allows one to calculate how many points of intersection they *can* have and what points of intersection they *do* have, and lots more besides. These sequences of

¹⁰ I follow Robert Brandom’s helpful construal of these issues below. See Robert Brandom, *Conceptual Realism and the Semantic Possibility of Knowledge*, the 2011 Munich Hegel Lectures, available at <http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/downloads/KR1%20CRSPK%2011-5-29%20a.doc>. (accessed February 4th, 2013).

¹¹ Notice that resemblance is silent as to how to map the distinction between reality and appearance onto the distinction between the Ideal and the sensible. Thus, rather than asking whether the Idea conforms to the reality of the sensible, Plato inverts the stakes and claims that sensible appearances participate in the formal reality of the Idea.

symbols do not at all resemble lines and circles. Yet his mathematical results...showed that algebraic symbols present geometric facts in a form that is not only (potentially and reliably) *veridical*, but conceptually *tractable*.¹²

The crucial break with the pre-modern vision here is the shift from *resemblance* to *isomorphy*, i.e. the mathematization of nature consists in understanding how geometrical figures correspond to algebraic formulae by the *formal properties* that they share at a *structural* level, rather than by the *qualitative properties* they share at the *metaphysical* level. The concept of form at work here is no longer conceived in terms of an archetype modeled predominantly on vision as a paradigm. Rather, it defines how the axiom-governed manipulation of syntax (the algebraic symbols) can be correlated with the possibilities that define the structure of geometrical figures, quite irrespective of the material properties of the writing medium or the metaphysical status of spatio-temporal objects themselves. As Robert Brandom puts it, “[I]n the context of such an isomorphism, the particular material properties of what now become intelligible as representings and representeds become irrelevant to the semantic relation between them.”¹³ The possibility of thinking a correspondence between thought and the Real would then be amplified to be understood in terms of the isomorphy between a perspicuous formal ideography and the structural dynamics of spatio-temporal systems in the real order.

The second sense of representation that concerns us is broader, as is the scope of the critiques leveled at it. It is supposed to range over the whole of philosophical history, and would not be brought into question, at least, until Nietzsche. According to such a notion, representation amounts to the clarification of the relation(s) between two entities or domains, where one term is supposed to access in some way the being of the other. Put differently, representation would track any purported correlation between mind and world, though not only those relations said to inhere in correlationist philosophies. The distinctions between appearance and reality, mind and world, concepts and objects, statements and facts, would all partake thus of this more general concept. Accordingly, both species of correspondence, qualitative resemblance and formal isomorphism, would be characterized as species of representational relations, in virtue of still clinging to the “connection problem” at the very center of philosophical thinking, and quite irrespective of

¹² Robert Brandom, *Conceptual Realism and the Semantic Possibility of Knowledge*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

whether they claim in their particular iterations to be realist, idealist or correlationist.

Those who deploy the broader notion generally do so in order to question the very conditions under which a connection problem becomes the central philosophical concern, with the common diagnosis that, whatever representation is taken to be, it does not exhaust the possibilities open to thought. Thus, in this sense, the concept of representation does not so much work to avow a cognitive *achievement*, but works towards a diagnosis of how philosophy has privileged a particular modality of thought, since (at least) its Greek inception. So, for example, Heidegger’s construal of representation (*vor-stellung*) as the pure objectivity of presence-at-hand (*vor-handenheit*) designates not a local *theoretical break* with the pre-modern age, but merely a particular *modality of being* to which Dasein can comport existentially, and which obtains upon the *practical malfunction* of equipment (*zeug*). The world presents itself as an external object *for thought only* once it is wrested from its holistic integration, and not fundamentally or at all times, as metaphysicians surmised. Representation designates thus the perfunctory abstraction of reason, where only pure presence gives itself forth in obstinacy. And since being’s disclosure is not fundamentally *cognitive-essential*, but *pragmatic-existential*, the view that being must appear to thought in the guise of the Idea as the *represented* is thereby suspended. Similarly, for Deleuze, representation characterizes an entire configuration of thought to which philosophy has remained submitted since Greek antiquity, according to the hylomorphism articulated in fourfold axis of identity in the concept, contrariness in the predicate, resemblance in perception, and analogy in judgment.¹⁴ It constitutes a *form of thinking* whose philosophical prominence is symptomatic of a historical impasse. Or, again, for Badiou, representation merely designates the generalized conservative protocols through which the State seeks maximal equilibrium between inclusion and belonging, between the parts and elements of a situation, so as to stave off the disruptive (subjective) force of the supernumerary event and the subtractive operation of generic Truth.¹⁵

With this in mind, we are in a better position to address what exactly the proponents of the ontological turn feel is wrong with representation. With regards to the narrow conception, Brandom argues that Hegel was the first to clearly advance

¹⁴ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Chapter I.

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006).

a supersession of it in his attack of the so called “instrument-or-medium” conception of reason.¹⁶ In short, Hegel does not take issue with the idea that discursive structures might be isomorphic to reality, but rather disputes the possibility of knowledge once one separates strongly between ontological domains. Yet this is precisely what is said to happen when in developing the concept of representation one makes an ontological difference between *kinds* of things by distinguishing different modes of *intelligibility*. So, in order to halt a vicious regress where everything represented would need a higher-order representation to have knowledge of it, Descartes postulates a certain class of representations that are given immediately to the mind, and so which yield a kind of luminosity or introspective knowledge by acquaintance into the contents of our psychological states. Thus while physical things were said to be represented by thought’s mathematical mediation, mental contents were rather thought to be *intrinsically* intelligible, providing the fundamental strata upon which all further knowledge is mediated. Similarly, Kant’s ontological distinction between noumena and phenomena follows from his epistemological distinction between things that are knowable by being apperceived under judgment through concepts, and the represented things-in-themselves that lie beyond all cognition. Hegel’s basic point, according to Brandom, is that as long as one distinguishes ontologically between what is immanently given or internal to the mind on the one hand, and reality as beyond the mental on the other, the skeptic can refute any ambition to know of the in-itself through the aid of appearances. Thought would remain entrapped in a correlational house of mirrors, at best motivating the “bracketing” of any realist commitments, as Husserl originally deemed necessary to retain methodological rigor. But the relinquishing of the absolute from the reach of reason reveals the *cognophobia* behind the incipient epistemological accounts.¹⁷ In my estimation, this is as clear an anticipation of Meillassoux’s diagnosis against correlationism as there can be.

[The instrument-or-medium conception of reason], above all...presupposes that the absolute *stands on one side* and that *knowledge*, though it is *on the other side*, for itself and separated from the absolute, is nevertheless something real. Hence it assumes that knowledge may be true despite its presupposition that knowledge is outside the absolute and there-

¹⁶ G.W.F Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1977), 1-3.

¹⁷ Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007).

with outside the truth as well. By taking this position, what calls itself the fear of error reveals itself as a fear of the truth.¹⁸

Hegel’s solution will be, of course, to fold the transcendence of the in-itself onto the dialectical envelopment of the Concept, where even the alleged immediacy of sense-certainty reveals the mediation of the negative as its ultimate truth. Rather than explaining how thought gains traction on the in-itself, Hegel’s identification of logic and metaphysics renders the transcendence of the in-itself immanent to thought. And yet, the domain of reasons and that of causes coalescing, the attempt to escape the skeptical entrapment to appearances recovers the absolute at the price of identifying it with thought itself. In order to prevent being from slipping over into the skeptical courts of the ineffable, Hegel’s rationalism sees it to reify metaphysically the norms of thought. Absolute idealism is thereby proposed as the only alternative to the correlationist dispossession of the Real.¹⁹

As we saw in the first section, similar doubts inform both Badiou and Meillassoux’s attempts to disarm the strong correlationist reification of being’s transcendence *vis a vis* thinking, as the evacuation of the Real leads to the triumph of the sophist and the surrender to the mystic. In avowing the ontologization of mathematics so as to flatten the phenomenological divide between subject-object (or Dasein and World), both Meillassoux and Badiou, like Hegel, are led to anchor their materialism iterating the Parmenidean thesis according to which being and thinking are the same. Or more precisely, in their terms, mathematics grasps being *directly*, without subjective mediation; the primary properties of the in-itself are captured by the formal vacuity of mathematical discourse, recalcitrant to translation or to “meaning.” The kenotype’s opacity dispels the semantic illusion.

Yet what Brandom highlights, crucially, is that the early Hegelian objection against modern representation is directed specifically at the ontologization of a difference in intelligibility between that which is disclosed to the mind, and that which is in-itself. For as Kant realized—contra Descartes and in agreement with the empiricist—drawing such a sharp line

¹⁸ G.W.F Hegel, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1-3.

¹⁹ In attempting a non-dialectical alternative to the Hegelian answer, as we saw above, the Bergsonian-Deleuzian short-circuiting of hylomorphism involves absolutizing the psychic syntheses of sensible intuition directly onto the material. In spite of its anti-dialectical pretences, however, the proprieties of thought and sensation are once again transposed and ubiquitously disseminated onto being.

between the mental and the physical, the in-itself had to remain foreclosed from all conceptual grasp. The idealist identification of logic and metaphysics, the order of reasons and the order of causes, is set precisely to dissolve such a metaphysical gap, by dissolving the epistemic question of access to the reality beyond appearance. It is important to note that it does *not*, however, take issue with the claim that one can trace structural isomorphy between distinct elements or structures; it only claims that any such connection will be beyond epistemic reach for a metaphysical dualism motivated on epistemological speculation. Similarly, for Badiou and Meillassoux, the indiscernibility of mathematical inscription and real being is set to dissolve the phenomenological gap between the ontic and the ontological, and the ineffability of the latter with respect to the former. From this end, I would define a first decisive imperative against representation as follows:

(Anti-Skepticism): Overcoming the foreclosure of the in-itself for thought demands that we identify the conditions of the in-itself with the conditions of thought.

Such an imperative is broad enough to capture the basic strategy of those who pursue the overcoming of epistemology by way of a return to metaphysics, whether such a return is of rationalist bent (Badiou, Meillassoux) or empiricist bent (Bergson, Deleuze). And I would suggest it covers even the disposition of Harman's Object-Oriented-Ontology, insofar as the latter absolutizes human *finitude*, understood in terms of features associated with phenomenological-intentional mediation, inscribing the latter directly in the in-itself.²⁰ With this in mind, we note that although the attack on representation is first addressed to the narrow conception and the problematic inaugurated by Cartesian dualism, it slowly moves towards a more general notion and morphs into the problems associated with it, concerning something like the ontological conditions for the epistemic impasses confronted in principle by epistemology.

So what about the broader notion of representation? As we indicated, once the ontological conditioning

²⁰ It is of course not by itself a fault to identify features that non-human objects might share with humans. What is peculiar to Harman's account is that he models the "pantranslationism" between all objects on the intentional mediation of psychic structures; namely, the Husserlian and Heideggerian accounts of the partial givenness of a being in relation to the agent of thought (whether it be the transcendental Ego, or Dasein).

of representation becomes the focal question, the very enterprise of a theory of knowledge becomes dislodged from philosophical primacy. Whether it be understood in terms of the occlusion of *Zuhandenheit* by *Vorhandenheit*, the fourfold axis that organizes the hylomorphism of conceptual identity, or whether it be part of the irrational surrender to a mystical Otherness, representation and epistemology cannot be proper to first philosophy, since the latter cannot but run unsaid ontological commitments. A second imperative can be stated thus as setting the stage for the ontological turn:

(Ontological Priority): The enquiry into the possibility of a knowledge of being can only be made tacitly on ontological grounds; representation assumes *too much*.

This condition includes, though is not limited to, those who pursue the continuation of the metaphysical task. It is thus relatively more general in relation to the anti-skeptical imperative. With these two conditions in place, the two orientations towards "ontology" appear urgent, simultaneously as the diagnosis that representation leads to a correlationist enclosure, with its skeptical (and mystical) aftermath, and the belief that representation must carry with it unquestioned metaphysical prejudices. With this in mind, speculative realism, if it exists, becomes continuous with this dual disposition against epistemology.

§3 - THE CUNNING OF REPRESENTATION TOWARDS A RATIONALIST MATERIALISM

If speculative realism does indeed present a challenge to epistemological anti-realisms, more is needed than the disposition towards ontology according to the conditions outlined above. For just like the return to metaphysics supported by (anti-skepticism) was aligned to idealism, the priority of ontology that detects the metaphysical underpinnings of epistemology has also been predominantly configured within a strong correlationist vision, as in Heidegger's case. And although, as we saw, the contemporary return of metaphysics is sought within a materialist vision, both its rationalist and empiricist iterations proceed like its idealist predecessors by transposing features of thought or sensibility into the material, or marking the material as mediated by thought.

Either in the name of the all enveloping Concept within dialectics, or of a non-dialectical panpsychist vitalism, these "materialisms" remain far too close to the Hegelian idealist solution, in terms of which

ontological univocity requires the identification or indistinction between the structure of thought and that of being as such. With this in mind, although I believe that Meillassoux is correct in classifying the Bergsonian and Deleuzian visions as part of what he labels “subjectalism” for their absolutizing of psychic life, it is just as certain that, like Hegel before them, both Meillassoux and Badiou remain within idealist bounds, insofar as they absolutize the formal intelligibility of mathematical discourse.²¹ For any realism worthy of the name must be capable of disambiguating between *our thoughts about things* and the *things that are thought*, lest it fall prey to the anti-skeptical imperative which motivates an idealist metaphysics. Yet according to the latter, it is precisely such a distinction which leads to the perils of ontological dualism, and with it either to the skeptical aftermath (weak correlationism), or the eventual mystical reification of the Great Outdoors (strong correlationism). Again, we seem suspended between the Scylla of idealism and the Charybdis of correlationism. Is there no third way?

To conclude, I would like to suggest that indeed there is a third way, and that undertaking it requires that we reassess the assault on representation that has led to the “ontological turn.” Following the work of Wilfrid Sellars, this third way or solution evinces a possibility to resolve both the skeptical quandaries concerning dualism on epistemological grounds, as well as opening for the possibility of a naturalist metaphysics. In pursuing this task, it becomes necessary to reactivate the methodological primacy of epistemology with respect to ontology. For unless we assume a pre-established harmony between thinking and being, and if our thoughts of things can be about things that are *not* thoughts, we must explain under what conditions this is possible. To disambiguate between thinking and being it must be possible to explain this very difference, lest we fall back to naive realism at a loss for reasons. But if the explanation concerning *how* we know the Real must be propaedeutic to the account of *what* is Real, then it trivially follows that metaphysics cannot be first philosophy. We must first return thus to the connection problem, so as to see whether we can reject the choice between idealism and skepticism, i.e. how we can reject that (**anti-skepticism**) demands the ontological identification of thought and being.

Let us return then to the narrow sense of representation, first conceived by Descartes. As we saw above, the latter’s fatal flaw was to ontologically distinguish

²¹ Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign,” *Spekulative Poetik* (Freie Universität, Berlin, 20 April 2012)

between the immediacy of mental contents, and the mediated representations of physical entities in the world. Against this predicament, Sellars’s view already presents two crucial advances. First, in his critique of what he calls “The Myth of the Given,” Sellars rejects the idea that there are *epistemically independent* beliefs: foundational bits of knowledge whose having requires no other beliefs and so which are, in a sense, self-legitimizing.²² Knowledge is to be understood *holistically*, as the relaying of beliefs caught in the complicated practice of giving and asking for reasons, and every belief is liable to normative assessment. This is *not* to say that there cannot be non-inferential knowledge understood as beliefs *acquired directly* as responses to stimuli, rather than as the result of an inferential procedure. Yet Sellars makes no concession to the foundationalist, for to say that some knowledge is *non-inferential* is not to say it is *independent*; the former entails that there are beliefs that are not causally derived from other beliefs, the latter requires the stronger claim that some beliefs are possible without having any other beliefs. Schematically, we separate between:

- 1) *Non-Inferential Knowledge* - For any fact p , p is non-inferentially known if p is not acquired as the result of an inference from another fact(s) q .
- 2) *Independent Knowledge* - For any fact p , p is independently known if p can be known without knowing any other fact q .

To deny independent knowledge amounts to saying that for any belief to acquire a non-inferential reporting role it must be nevertheless liable to justification by inferential reasoning. Sellars rejects thus all variations on the foundationalist claims to knowledge by acquaintance, and denies that we have privileged access to the contents of our minds. This leads us to our second point. Through his speculative anthropological fable on the “Myth of Jones,” Sellars describes how, short of being the bedrock of our beliefs and the furnished ground of our pre-theoretical awareness, our concepts of *thoughts* and *sensations* are acquired, late theoretical constructs. We first *learn* to postulate thoughts by modeling them analogically on episodes of overt speech (as “inner-goings-on”). Similarly, we learn to postulate sensations by modeling them by analogy with the properties we first learn to attribute to extended objects. This is not to say that sensations *are* concepts, but that in what concerns our *knowledge* of

²² Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (Austin: Ridgeview, 1991).

them as sensations, conceptual mediation must be implicitly in place. The revisionary Kantian strategy at work here therefore consists of showing how the intentionality of psychological-phenomenological states is accounted for as part of an acquired development of *linguistic* competence, and specifically the capacity to use certain kinds of sophisticated vocabulary to make self-attributions. As Ray Brassier says: “The ‘aboutness’ of thoughts is derived from the ‘aboutness’ of words, as instituted in linguistic practice, not from some pre-established harmony between mind and world.”²³ And since the “aboutness” of words is fundamentally not innate, but acquired, it follows that not even our mentalistic-intentional vocabulary about thoughts and sensations as private is directly apprehended by introspection or phenomenological reduction, enjoying transparency into our mental states. With these two insights in place, I conclude that Sellars’s account is not sensitive to the (Cartesian and phenomenological) reification of mental contents as foundational instances of *immediate* knowledge.

However, as we have seen, the original Hegelian objection, which quickly paved the way for the criticism against the broader conception of representation, goes beyond the incipient Cartesian account. Even Kant, it was argued, was victim of the skeptical trap, since although he rejected the possibility of immediate knowledge, he continued to separate metaphysically between the phenomenal and noumenal domains, thought and being. Such a dualism is said to present an insurmountable difficulty for the epistemological account.

In response, Sellars’s strategy can be best summed as the attempt to reconcile *methodological dualism* with *ontological univocity*. This startling dialectical short-circuit attempts to simultaneously insist on the separation between thought and the world, without construing this difference as a *metaphysical* difference. Following Kant once more, Sellars seeks to preserve the distinction between the order of reasons and the order of causes, logic and metaphysics, whose conflation we have seen characterizes the idealist metaphysical (re)turn. Yet this difference is not, he argues, a *metaphysical* difference, crucially, because *thoughts are not things*—they have strictly speaking no metaphysical status. Thoughts are to be understood as a kind of *doing*: specifically, the kind of doings exhibited by *sapient* animals, and whose peculiarity consists in the integration of non-inferential responses to environmental inputs (*perception*), inferential moves within language

²³ Ray Brassier, *Lived Experience and the Myth of the Given* (forthcoming 2013).

(inference), and transitions from inside language to out of it (action).²⁴ The structural binding of these three levels of processing constitutes the intersubjective space of reasons within which we understand ourselves as knowing creatures.

To draw a helpful analogy: just like characterizing an object as a “pawn” in the context of chess is not describing an intrinsic *qualitative* property of the material object in question, but rather explaining the *role* that it plays in the game as defined by its relations to other pieces and the rules for organizing them purposefully, thought episodes are to be characterized in terms of the *role* that intentional vocabulary plays in the game of giving and asking for reasons. For, as we surmised above, thoughts are modeled on overt linguistic *behavior*. The following two passages help clarify this point: “In characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says;”²⁵ “Thus our concept of ‘what thoughts are’ might, like our concept of what a castling is in chess, be abstract in the sense that it does not concern itself with the *intrinsic* character of thoughts, save as items which can occur in patterns of relationships which are functionally analogous to the way in which sentences are related to one another and to the contexts in which they are used.”²⁶ And just like the rules of chess are not native or reducible to the material medium in which they are instantiated, the rules of reasoning are defined *transcendentally* with respect to the material properties of cognitive systems in which these rules become embodied. They define, in short, what any system must be capable of doing if it is to count as reasoning, quite irrespective of whatever metaphysical constraints or causal conditions obtain for such a system.

Yet even if we accept that thoughts are *logically* irreducible to the order of causes, there is no incoherence in claiming that, ontologically speaking, thoughts are *causally* reducible to the neurophysiological processes that constitute the material conditions for the instantiation of thought. Explanatory plurivocity is compatible with ontological univocity; methodological dualism is compatible with metaphysical monism. The crucial result I wish to extract from this should be evident: it is possible to reject both (anti-skepticism) and (ontological

²⁴ Wilfrid Sellars, “Some Reflections on Language Games,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

²⁵ Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*, 169.

²⁶ Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*, 34.

priority) without relapsing into correlationism, since it neither follows that to distinguish between thoughts and being requires us to embrace metaphysical dualism, nor that a theory of knowledge in an account of representation must tacitly run on metaphysical grounds, like Heidegger feared. The distinction between reasons and causes is *not* metaphysical, and reasons are not in the real order. It is ironically with Kant, and against all attempts to conflate being and thought, that in the name of materialism we can avoid idealism, or just as importantly for us, correlationism. Sellars's crucial advance is that once representations have ceased to be identified with a domain of *entities*, the order of thoughts need not be conceived of as a separate domain from the in-itself or the causal. They must be understood rather in terms of a certain kind of functional, rule-governed behavior, proper to those "clever beasts" that did not so much invent knowing as they came to develop it in the course of evolutionary history, within nature. Thus, while there is a (trivial) *epistemological priority* of concepts with respect to objects (since only sapient creatures know), there is just as importantly an *ontological priority* of objects with respect to concepts. Deflating the ontological status of thoughts, I conclude that Sellars is capable of naturalizing intentionality and epistemology, without metaphysically separating thoughts from nature. In doing so, Sellars' account of representation is not only immune to the objections leveled against the Cartesian version of representation and its avowal of immediate knowledge by acquaintance, but also deflect the general concerns inherent to the later Kantian account.

By the same token, once sensations are no longer identified with a private domain of "subjective" appearances accessible to introspection, nothing in principle forecloses an empirical investigation into the objective, inapparent structure of appearances, and their connection to the rest of the physical world. Against the vitalist-panpsychist account, we can recognize the ontological status of sensations as part of nature, without making them ubiquitously present in all physical reality. Against the mathematical Platonist, we can resist the trivialization of intuition and experience, without thereby relinquishing rationalism, by recognizing how the causal affection of sensible receptivity anchors us on the world causally as well as epistemically, as sensible inputs become integrated into the practice of reasoning, triggering reliable non-inferential perceptual reports through conditioning.²⁷ Even if sensations *by them-*

²⁷ Sellars describes the causal affectivity of sensing as "a dimension of givenness (or takenness) that is not in dispute." See Wilfrid Sellars, "The Lever of Archimedes,"

selves do not yield knowledge, they are essential in recognizing how the dialectic of scientific thought develops as involving perceptual reports, beyond the formal vacuity of pure mathematics. In other words, we can understand how the *practice* of reasoning can become reliable in tracking the structure of being through the mediation of sensation, that guarantees that when we develop and change our concepts "...we do not change that to which we are responding."²⁸ Rather than liquidating sensation in the name of the Concept, or rendering sensation ubiquitous in the name of Life, Sellars's account preserves the rationalist saturation of knowledge to the conceptual, while preserving the non-epistemic autonomy of the causal order to which sensation proper belongs. The adjudication of this difference, and an elucidation of the interconnection between these terms constitutes, I submit, a decisive advance for any realist philosophy.

At this juncture, the correlationist skeptic might insist that as long as sensibility remains recognized as the source of receptivity, and thoughts as the immanent relaying of beliefs we have not yet escaped the correlation since, after all, sensibility and judgment are ours alone. But this is to misidentify sensations and thoughts once again. Once the phenomenological vocabulary of sensings as privately given mental contents has been shown to be in truth theoretically contaminated, modeled as it is on objective discourse, there is no reason to isolate sensings from our explanatory accounts about the rest of the physical world. Similarly, once thoughts are seen to be modeled on overt speech, the privacy of thought presupposes the public space of reasons. Neither in the side of thought, nor of sensing, do we risk a dualism of the sort that Hegel deemed fatal for critique. Rather, Sellars' naturalism compels us to *integrate* our self-understanding with our understanding of nature by attesting to the physical objectivity of sensations, and to the functional determination of thought in behavioral terms.

We should notice that this allows us to preserve the explanatory purchase of modern representation without the metaphysical excesses. For as we noted above, the objections leveled against representation left it open that an isomorphism might obtain between different entities or structures, provided these were in the same ontological domain. But since for Sellars concepts are understood as *signifying*, understanding meaning in terms of the functional-role equivalence between expressions rather than between words and things, he can explain how reasoning involves

in *Foundations for a Metaphysics of Pure Process*: <http://www.ditext.com/sellars/carus.html>, §87.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

tracking an *isomorphism in the logical order*. And once we see that the coordination between thought and the world is not one between two insurmountable metaphysical domains, but integral to the activity of sapient “orientation systems,” nothing prevents us from describing how the rule-governed behavior of language using animals, and specifically the apparatus of *naming* in empirical-descriptive discourse, bears a (second order) *isomorphism in the real order* with the structure of the world and the particulars that populate it.²⁹ In this second, non-semantic sense of “correspondence,” it becomes incumbent to explain how the production of statements containing referring expressions become causally coordinated with objects in the world. Beyond the (logical) semantic proprieties that hold between expressions in the logical order, at the fundamental empirical level, language can be thus said to *picture* the environment.³⁰ This fundamentally realist insight, which integrates representational activity within the causal order, is condensed in Sellars’s so-called *norm-nature meta-principle*, which reads: “Espousal of principles is reflected in uniformities of performance.”³¹ Understanding how discourse gains traction on being requires therefore that we examine those uniformities by virtue of which we become differentially reliable when responding to the world; that is, coordinated with given environmental triggers. Having distinguished between these two braids of correspondence implicit in human behavior, and with them the necessary distinctions between the *representational* and the *causal* levels of explanation, I conclude that Sellars’s account is immune to the accusation that representation must lead to skepticism by motivating a kind of dualism, vitiating the possibility of a realist metaphysics.

To close up, we might wonder whether this vision is, in any legitimate sense, still deserving of the label “speculative realism.” In this regard, my contention is that if Meillassoux and Badiou are to be credited for recuperating the ambition for truth and the ab-

solute within Continental thought, then perhaps it is our task today to reawaken the critical purchase of thought away from its anti-realist envelopment. And if Sellars’ work can indeed serve to motivate the idea that contemporary realism demands “speculation,” it would surely be to the purposes of overcoming the residual narcissistic indulgence associated with the term. For if to “speculate” entails nothing but the exercise of thought to counterfeit a failure of explanation as a testament to man’s creative ingenuity, then we have done nothing but to reinforce the Ptolemaic gesture by reifying voluntarist caprice over the force of reasons. Needless to say, if speculation amounts to performing such a disservice to thought, then the less we have of it the better. But if realism is to be speculative in a benign sense, I submit, it is because, short of pursuing an ideological blackmail in the name of anti-anthropocentrism, the true radicalization of thought’s critical exercise requires us to take the Kantian legacy not as the obsolete, unfashionable business of “correlationism,” reducing it to a pious Ptolemaic counter-revolution. However fastidious its demands, and however necessary the purging of its incipient excesses might still be, it is critique itself that announces reason’s cunning against the anthropocentric prison, and lays the path for a realism that dares to face the blinding stasis of the distant sun.

²⁹ See Johanna Seibt, “Functions Between Reasons and Causes: On Picturing,” in *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. Willem A. deVries (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁰ Needless to say, we cannot at present delve deeper into the intricacies of Sellars’ account of picturing. Let it just be said that it remains one of the most under-discussed and controversial aspects of the Sellarsian stereoscopic vision, and of the attempt to integrate the coherentist leanings of his semantics and epistemology, with his avowal of his naturalist metaphysics. See Sellars, “Being and Being Known,” and “Truth and Correspondence,” in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

³¹ Wilfrid Sellars, “Truth and Correspondence” in *Science, Perception and Reality*, 216.