

## Laruelle and the Reality of Abstraction

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Perhaps the chief *philosophical* virtue of Laruelle's *Philosophies of Difference* is its remarkable analysis of the problematic of 'Finitude'.<sup>1</sup> Laruelle defines the latter 'in quasi-Kantian terms' as grounded in 'the irreducible distinction between the entity-in-itself and the entity as objectified or present; as ob-ject'.<sup>2</sup> It is on the basis of this distinction, Laruelle maintains, that Heidegger is able to radicalise Kant's critique of dogmatic metaphysics. For Kant, a metaphysical thesis, whether realist, idealist, or materialist, is dogmatic in so far as it disregards the distinction between objects and things-in-themselves. We are affected by things-in-themselves, but we cannot know them independently of our being affected by them. We may of course still try to think them, but for Kant thinking is not knowing. Ignoring this constraint, the claims of dogmatic metaphysics ring hollow because they import into things-in-themselves conceptual determinations that apply only to objects of representation.

But why does Kant insist on this distinction? For Kant, it is sensibility, i.e. our material constitution, that connects us to things-in-themselves. Since we are affected by things-in-themselves through our sensibility, our conceptual capacities are conditioned by a non-conceptual element, originating in sensation. Thus, sensibility limits the reach of reason by tethering the conceptual to the non-conceptual, understanding to intuition. In this regard, sensibility ensures our contact with the in-itself even as it constrains our cognitive access to it. However, if, as Kant himself insists, the category of causality can only be properly applied to objects of representation, then surely it is illegitimate to claim that we are affected by things-in-themselves, given that the concept of 'affection' seems to presuppose a causal relationship between affecting and affected? Contrary to a common misinterpretation invited by Kant's occa-

sionally injudicious use of the word 'cause', things-in-themselves should not be understood as the causes of appearances in the sense in which electrostatic discharges are the causes of lightning. This is not because the category of causation cannot be applied to things-in-themselves; for there is a sense in which it can, provided we bear in mind the distinction between pure and schematised categories. The pure, or unschematised category of causation is simply the logical relation of ground and consequence, and as such it can be applied to the relation between appearances and things-in-themselves, so long as we are clear that this is a purely conceptual rather than a cognitive determination. Thus we can think things-in-themselves as the grounds of appearances, provided that this grounding relation is understood in terms of a modified analogy with the way in which appearances cause other appearances.<sup>3</sup> The relevant modification is that whereas the schematised category of causality always involves a consequence relation between temporal events, the grounding relation between things-in-themselves and appearances involves a consequence relation that operates at the level of transcendental reflection.<sup>4</sup>

Still, we may ask what justifies us in postulating this transcendental and hence purely conceptual analogue of the causal relation. Kant's answer is disarmingly straightforward: 'Even if we cannot cognize these same objects [i.e. appearances] as things-in-themselves, we must at least be able to think them as things-in-themselves. For otherwise there would follow the absurd proposition that there is an appearance without anything that appears.'<sup>5</sup> What is the precise nature of the absurdity Kant seeks to avoid here? On one level, it is obviously absurd to deny that we can think appearances as things-in-themselves if this distinction is simply equivalent to the conceptual distinction between appearance and that which appears. For it is indeed absurd to deny that the concept of appearance implies something that appears. If this is what the distinction boils down to, then it is precisely its purely conceptual status that guarantees its validity. It is secured irrespective of whether or not we are able to know if what appears is like or unlike its appearance, or whether things-in-themselves exist at all. But if the distinction is purely conceptual, then the concept of the in-itself is a pure abstraction: it is simply the concept of something considered in abstraction from the way in which appearances are given to us in sensibility and determined by the concepts of the understanding. This is precisely the view Kant seems to endorse:

it also follows naturally from the concept of an appearance in general that something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing for itself and outside of our kind of representation; thus, if there is not to be a constant circle, the word 'appearance' must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself, without this constitution of our sensibility (on which the form of our intuition is grounded), must be something, i.e. an object independent of sensibility. Now from this arises the concept of a *noumenon*, which, however, is not at all positive and does not signify a determinate cognition of any sort of thing, but rather only the thinking of something in general, in which I abstract from all form of sensible intuition.<sup>6</sup>

The noumenon in this specifically negative sense is not to be confused with what Kant calls 'the transcendental object = X', which, somewhat confusingly, he also describes as 'the entirely undetermined thought of something in general'.<sup>7</sup> The transcendental object is 'that which in all our cognitions is really one and the same = X';<sup>8</sup> it is the ultimate referent of all our objective representations, the pure form of the object in general to which every determinate representation ultimately refers. Thus the transcendental object is still thought in accordance with an ultimate categorial determination: that of substance, not in its schematised, empirical sense as what persists throughout a manifold of appearances, but in its unschematised, transcendental sense as the invariant correlate of pure apperception persisting across a manifold of representations. This is presumably why Kant refers to it as 'one and the same' throughout every representation, and why he refuses to identify it with the noumenon, which, since it plays an entirely negative or limiting role, does not even bear the minimal categorial determination of substance, and so cannot be conceptually determined as one rather than as many.<sup>9</sup>

But the cost of maintaining the negativity of the concept of the noumenon, as devoid of any categorial determination, seems to be to render it a wholly indeterminate abstraction, or as Kant himself puts it 'an empty concept without an object' (*ens rationis*).<sup>10</sup> This 'thought entity', or empty concept without an object, is the concept of the intelligible nothing. Kant distinguishes it from the 'non-entity', the empty object without a concept (e.g. the square circle), which is the unintelligible nothing. These are the two types of empty concept. Kant contrasts them with the two types

of empty intuition: the privative nothing as the empty object of a concept (e.g. shade as the absence of light), and the imaginary entity as the pure form of intuition without an object (Kant gives no example of the latter and it is significant that both the objectless empty concept and the objectless empty intuition defy empirical exemplification).<sup>11</sup>

But how can this intelligible nothing be thought of as the ground of appearances? How can we be affected by a wholly indeterminate abstraction? More precisely: How can a wholly indeterminate conceptual abstraction give rise to the kind of determinate empirical experience whose possibility Kant seeks to explain? The difficulty is compounded by Kant's insistence that our intuition, unlike God's, is fundamentally receptive: our minds do not create appearances in Kant's specifically transcendental sense, even though they determine them as objects of representation. Experience is rooted in something affecting us from 'outside'. This is the fundamental meaning of Finitude. Thus it seems there must be 'something' that 'causes' us to have experiences. But in characterising the noumenon as an intelligible nothing, Kant seems to reduce the problematic ground of appearances to a mere thought-entity. Yet it is precisely the reality of this problematic nothing that needs to be accounted for, for without such an account, the claim that things-in-themselves are the source of appearances becomes unintelligible. Thus it seems the absurdity Kant wishes to avoid in acknowledging the necessary link between appearances and things-in-themselves is not merely the contradiction attendant upon the denial of a tautology. The absurdity at issue is more profound, and follows from denying the reality of appearances. The empirical reality of appearances must be rooted in a transcendental reality, albeit one whose determinate characteristics we are barred from knowing. Notwithstanding its role as a purely negative and limiting concept, it seems we are obliged to acknowledge the problematic reality of the noumenon *qua* abstraction. Consequently, on a second reading, Kant's claim about the necessary link between appearances and things-in-themselves can be interpreted as meaning that the *objective* reality proper to appearances in the transcendental (as opposed to empirical or Berkeleyan sense) is grounded in the *formal* reality of things-in-themselves. The distinction at issue is between the empirical reality of appearances *qua* representables whose being depends upon their being thought (or represented – these are equivalent

here), and the transcendental reality of things-in-themselves, which exist independently of being represented. For as Wilfrid Sellars points out, the relation of analytical dependence between represented and representing also renders the objective reality of the represented content conditional upon the formal reality of the representing act.<sup>12</sup> Since every represented implies a representing, the objective reality of a represented entails the formal reality of the representing through which it is represented. Clearly, this argument establishes only that *if* there are representeds, then there must be representings-in-themselves; not that there actually are such representings-in-themselves. While it reveals the degree of conceptual co-dependence between the concept of appearance and that of things-in-themselves, it does not prove that representings exist in-themselves, let alone that non-representings do. This is why the determination of the in-itself in terms of formal reality remains insufficient. If the concept of formal reality as that which exists in-itself remains analytically dependent upon the concept of objective reality as that which exists in representation, the being of the in-itself remains conditional upon the being of appearance. The problem then is that, since an appearance implies a relation to sensibility, this renders the existence of the in-itself conditional upon the existence of appearance, and hence of sensibility, which is precisely the kind of empirical idealism Kant seeks to avoid. Kant's claim is that the existence of appearances presupposes the existence of things-in-themselves, and that the reality of appearances is grounded in the reality of things-in-themselves, not that the existence of the latter is predicated upon that of the former. If this were the case, then the concept of appearance would be intrinsic to that of reality in-itself, with the result that the idea of a reality that does not appear, i.e. that is not representable, would become incoherent. But the claim that to be is to be representable implies precisely the sort of dogmatic idealism Kant wishes to repudiate. Thus, what is required is an account of the reality of the in-itself that grounds the reality of appearances without rendering the former conditional upon the latter. But it is difficult to flesh out the notion of transcendental reality so long as the relation to sensibility in objective representation provides the precondition for cognitive determination. If being is not a real predicate, then the claim that the reality of appearances implies that there is a reality that appears establishes a logical dependency between the concept of appearance and the concept of the in-itself; it does not legiti-

mate any ontological inference, either from the being of appearance to the being of the in-itself, or from being-in-itself to the being of appearance. It is the nature of the difference between the reality proper to appearances and the reality proper to the in-itself that is at issue. Yet the question remains whether it is legitimate to infer an ontological difference from a conceptual distinction, or to postulate a domain of being (or reality) independent of the conditions of sensibility.

Contrary to a prevalent caricature, the postulate of the in-itself does not entail a two-world metaphysics. Indeed, Kant explicitly denies that the noumenon is another kind of entity, existing in an intelligible world that transcends experience: 'The division of objects into phenomena and noumena, and of the world into a world of sense and a world of understanding, *can therefore not be permitted at all*, although concepts certainly permit of division into sensible and intellectual ones.'<sup>13</sup> But then what does it mean to insist, as Laruelle does, that the transcendental distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves is to be understood as a *real*, rather than merely ideal, difference, if this is not the familiar metaphysical difference between two separate kinds of being, such as the sensible and the intelligible? Clearly, appearances are real in a sense that goes beyond the objective reality of their representation, since they are constituted through acts of representing that are not themselves encompassed within the represented content. The same point can be made in a phenomenological register by pointing out that 'objectivating' acts of consciousness must be granted a reality that transcends the conditioned reality of the objects they constitute.<sup>14</sup> Thus the transcendence proper to formal, as opposed to objective, reality is not to be understood in terms of the metaphysical transcendence traditionally ascribed to the intelligible object, but rather in terms of *objectivating transcendence*. What we are working toward is the suggestion that the reality proper to the in-itself is neither that of the transcendent object, nor of objectivating transcendence, but rather that of unobjectivisable transcendence. This is the key to Laruelle's interpretation of Heidegger.

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Once the two-world interpretation of the transcendental difference between phenomena and noumena has been ruled out, it seems we must acknowledge that the reality of the in-itself constitutes a noumenal dimension within appearance as such; or in

other words, a transcendental difference intrinsic to the entity (the phenomenon) itself. This point can be elucidated by considering the scholastic differentiation between real distinction (*distinctio realis*), conceptual distinction (*distinctio rationis*), and formal distinction (*distinctio formalis*).<sup>15</sup> A real distinction corresponds to a difference in being (i.e. in the 'whatness' or essence of a thing) that does not depend on our understanding because the difference is itself an entity or *res*. A conceptual distinction corresponds to a difference in the definition or concept of a thing, without a corresponding difference in being (i.e. the difference *is not*). A formal distinction, however, corresponds to a difference in the entity that is not a difference in being. It is an inexistent difference that makes an existential difference. This distinction first arose in an attempt to make sense of the difference between essence and existence, a topic to which we shall return below. The difference between the essence of Socrates (the list of properties that make him what he is) and his existence or actuality is not merely conceptual or nominal, and so qualifies as 'real', yet the nature of this 'reality', as well as of its contrast with the 'ideality' of Socrates' essence, both remain obscure. Thus the difference between the definitive concept of Socrates, in so far as it circumscribes his essence, and the actually existing Socrates, is neither a difference in Socrates' definition, since the latter identifies all those attributes that make him what he is, nor a difference between Socrates and some other entity, since Socrates' existence cannot be construed as something separate from Socrates. Consequently, what separates essence from existence is not an individuating difference, since the definition of a thing is what individuates it. But nor is it a specific difference, since what is specific to Socrates is entirely subsumed by his essence. Lastly, it is not a generic difference either, since all of Socrates' generic attributes are encapsulated in his definition. Consequently, the difference between Socrates' essence and his existence falls outside every available ontological rubric. Yet the difference is undeniable, since there would seem to be all the difference in the world between a definition that expresses Socrates' essence by enumerating all his essential attributes, and the flesh and blood Socrates who incarnates these essential attributes. Thus, the difference between Socrates' essence and his existence is a formal distinction in so far as it is a real, as opposed to merely nominal difference; but a real difference that seems to evade all the available conceptual determinations (i.e. of generic, specific,

or individuating difference) that render differences in being intelligible. This is why the distinction can be characterised as an ontic difference without any corresponding ontological coordinates.

The distinction between phenomena and noumena is not a metaphysical or (what is equivalent here) an ontological difference, but a formal distinction in the sense we have just outlined: one that is rooted in the entity itself but that does not correspond to a difference in being, understood as *what* something is. This allows us to see how the difference between phenomena and noumena can be construed as a *real* difference, i.e. a difference rooted in the phenomenon as such, and hence one that does not hypostatise a domain of entities transcending the conditions of sensibility, thereby entailing a two-world metaphysics. Moreover, to claim that the difference between phenomena and noumena is real is to insist that the difference between the intelligible form and sensible content of appearances is not just a distinction of reason, since it falls neither on the side of the understanding, nor of intuition.

This is what Laruelle seems to be indicating when he points out that the in-itself is not something other than the appearance:

the thing-in-itself is the same entity as the phenomenon, as Heidegger says, it is therefore reduced [i.e. it is not dogmatically posited as a transcendent entity existing in an intelligible realm – RB], but at the same time it corresponds to a point of view other than that of the phenomenon: that of the entity's uncreatedness or transcendence relative to Being, the milieu within which Being must be disclosed and illuminated.<sup>16</sup>

By 'Being', Laruelle here has in mind transcendental conditions of objectivation in a Kantian sense, since he views Heidegger's investigation into the being of phenomena as that part of his project which is continuous with Kant's transcendental problematic. Thus Heidegger renders explicit an insight that remains implicit in Kant: that the reality of the entity (i.e. of the phenomenon) is rooted in its transcendence relative to its conditions of objectivation. But this is no longer a metaphysical transcendence. In fact, Laruelle's account requires that we distinguish three varieties of transcendence: first, the transcendence of the intelligible object vis-à-vis its sensible instantiation in dogmatic idealism; second, the transcendence of objectivation with regard to the object in critical idealism;<sup>17</sup> finally, the transcendence of the entity-in-itself with regard



to its conditions of objectivation as the key component in the transcendental critique of idealism. It is this latter, unobjectivisable transcendence that is marked by Kant's critical-formal distinction between phenomena and noumena.

This formal distinction is not to be confused with Heidegger's *ontological* difference between Being and beings. For Laruelle, the ontological difference remains metaphysical because it is posited a priori and established in the element of the a priori, i.e., the conceptual: 'Metaphysics establishes itself in the relation between beings and the a priori, a relation which is itself a priori, a prior place of thought.'<sup>18</sup> This relation exposes the correlation between Being and beings as the necessary condition for experiencing the entity as object. In this regard, Being, or more precisely, what Heidegger calls 'pre-ontological understanding', functions as a priori condition of objectivation. However, as an a priori, this ontological distinction between Being and beings remains *ideal*. It is what Laruelle calls an 'a priori factum' for thought, in the sense of that which establishes the correlation between objects and their conditions of objectivation. Such a correlation presupposes an *idealising* reduction of the dogmatic postulate of reality as something existing in-itself (the postulate characteristic of what Husserl called 'the natural attitude'). This idealising reduction preserves the independence of the real, but only as a correlate of the ideal, conditioned by the a priori within the element of ideal immanence (whether that of consciousness, intersubjectivity, or language). It yields what Husserl called 'transcendence in immanence', according to which the real is in-itself for the consciousness (or domain of intersubjectivity) that constitutes it.

But Laruelle credits Heidegger with carrying out a second, more radical reduction; one that suspends not only the transcendence of the object, but also the transcendence that an insufficiently critical idealism continues to attribute to the a priori (i.e. the conditions of objectivation).<sup>19</sup> Thus in Laruelle's reading of Heidegger, Being conditions the entity, but Being itself, i.e. the formal reality of objectivating transcendence, is also conditioned by the entity. It is the relation of objectivation itself, the transcendence of the a priori in so far as it conditions the presence of 'beings as such and as a whole', which is now reduced to the status of immanent *factum*: an a priori fact of reason. The transcendence of Being is affected by the entity, which, since it is not created by Being in the way in which the transcendent Creator produces his creatures, must be

given somehow, but in a way that is independent of its objectivation. Consequently, there are two dimensions of givenness: one through which the phenomenon is objectivated, and one through which the phenomenon at once precipitates and transcends its own objectivation. The difference between these two is the difference between the formal reality proper to objectivating transcendence, and the transcendental reality proper to unobjectivisable transcendence. It is this latter brand of transcendence that constitutes the reality of the phenomenon or entity in-itself. Although Laruelle himself never explicitly formulates this distinction as such, it is essential to his interpretation of Heidegger. Moreover, it also sheds light on the grounding relation between the reality of the in-itself and the reality of appearances. The reality of appearances, understood as the mode in which they are given prior to being objectivated, is constituted by the transcendence intrinsic to the entity (or phenomenon) itself. This transcendence is the unobjectivisable dimension immanent to the entity as such in its formal distinction from the present-at-hand object of representation, whether interpreted in terms of the determinate, particular object, or the ideal category of the object in general (*Objekt überhaupt*). It is obscurely prefigured by the metaphysical distinction between essence and existence, usually glossed in terms of the difference between *what* something is, and *that* it is. As we saw above, while the former is conceptually determinable, the latter is a symptom of something in the difference between possibility and actuality that resists conceptual determination. In the theological worldview organised around the distinction between potentiality construed as essence and actuality construed as existence, all formal reality is tributary to the entity's createdness – the actualisation through which God converts potentiality into actuality. As Heidegger himself explains, this process does not involve the addition of something lacking in the possible (i.e. a missing determination), since actualisation is synonymous with creation understood as the transition from essential potency to actual existence:

When in creation [the] possible goes over into actuality, this transition is to be understood, not in the sense that the possible relinquishes a way of being, but rather in the sense that it first of all receives a being. The *essentia* now is not only . . . in that potency, namely of being thought by God, but it is only now properly actual . . . the being is only now first created by God and as this created being, it at the same time

stands on its own in its own self . . . The difficulty of the problem of making the distinction [between essence and existence] intelligible at all depends on how in general actualization is thought of as the transition of a possible to its actuality. Expressed more exactly, the problem of the distinction between *essentia* and *existentia* . . . depends on whether in general the interpretation of being in the sense of existence is oriented towards actualization, towards creation and production.<sup>20</sup>

Heidegger will of course insist that it is the ancient Greek concept of production (*poiesis*) that holds the key to the proper interpretation of the role played by the concept of existence in actualisation. But while he detects in this venerable distinction the seed of the ontico-ontological difference (although pointing out that it remains entirely on the ontic side), the dimension of unobjectivisable transcendence intimated by 'thatness' continues to be occluded by Heidegger's own subsequent characterisation of the ontological difference as distinguishing the 'how' from the 'what' of being, and his claim that the ontological is to be grasped in terms of *how* beings are, i.e. their way of being, rather than what they are. Yet part of Heidegger's remit in exposing and 'destroying' the metaphysical determination of being as presence involves querying this identification of 'thatness' with existence construed as sheer occurrence, devoid of every determination other than that of its bare presence-at-hand. From Heidegger's point of view, it is precisely this identification of existence with a degree-zero of presence that occludes what is most essential in ontological transcendence, i.e. being's withdrawal from presence, its congenital nothingness as unpresentable condition of presence. This nothingness clearly echoes that of Kant's noumenon, but while the latter remains an intelligible thought-entity marking the porous frontier between the ideal and real, Being marks the juncture of pre-conceptual understanding and supra-conceptual transcendence. Ultimately, the contrast is one between a rationalist and a non-rationalist conception of transcendence. Heidegger's decisive insight comes with the realisation that, just as the metaphysical characterisation of existence as indeterminate occurrence in contrast to the determinacy of essence leaves the unpresentable ground of presence unthought, it also obscures the real difference between what is given according to the mode of objectivation and its unobjectivisable residue. Heidegger then demarcates himself from Kant's residual rationalism with the claim that this difference remains as unthinkable from

the critical standpoint of objectivation as it was from the dogmatic viewpoint of actualisation (i.e. creation). Just as the transcendence of the possible vis-à-vis the actual is a symptom of the entity's createdness, so the transcendence of objectivation vis-à-vis the object is a symptom of the entity's producedness. Both the theological conception of creation and the transcendental conception of objectivation continue to think the absoluteness of being in terms of a notion of formal reality whose transcendence vis-à-vis the created or objectivated shuts out that aspect of the entity which is not conditioned by actualisation or objectivation, because both processes unknowingly presuppose it. The transcendence of the in-itself is the seal of the entity's uncreatedness precisely in so far as it cannot be mapped in terms of the junction of potentiality and actuality. Similarly, it is because the entity is uncreated that its reality cannot be wholly subsumed by its relation to Being, understood as objectivating transcendence. Since objectivating transcendence perpetuates the transcendence of creation (i.e. of actualisation), atheism entails the renovation of transcendental realism; its transformation from a thesis upholding the autonomy of substantial form as existing in the mind of God, to a thesis acknowledging the autonomy of the insubstantial and the formless, understood as that aspect of reality which must be thought in order to secure our knowledge of the reality of appearances. As we saw above, this noumenal ground of appearances is not a substance considered in abstraction from its relation to the subject, but a concept considered in abstraction from its relation to the object. Thus the noumenon as 'thought-entity' or intelligible nothing is not just an abstract concept, but rather the concept of an absolute abstraction, existing independently of its abstraction from experience. In this regard, and contrary to the familiar Hegelian rebuke according to which Kant abandons the in-itself to the domain of the inconceivable, the noumenon as intelligible nothing lays claim to the territory of the in-itself for conceptualisation, without presumptively annexing it to the latter. From Kant, through Heidegger, to Laruelle, the postulate of the in-itself requires that we rethink the metaphysical hypostatisation of being-in-itself, which is an abstraction relative to an empirically given reality, as the absolute reality of abstraction. Laruelle takes his cue in this endeavour from Heidegger's transformation of the concept of essence.

Laruelle identifies unobjectivisable transcendence with the dimension of withdrawal that Heidegger takes to be inseparable from Being's disclosure of the entity. However, in Laruelle's interpretation, it is not Being itself that withdraws – in fact, the very notion of 'Being itself' involves a metaphysical hypostatisation – but rather the entity-in-itself, since Being remains an illuminating projection, and hence an ideal correlate of Dasein's 'thrown projection'; a projection whose function is at once revelatory and objectivating.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, on Laruelle's account, it is in fact the entity's unobjectivisable transcendence that constitutes the noumenal dimension of phenomena, i.e., that which is in-itself within appearances. This is the immanent dimension of transcendence in which appearances are rooted, and which conditions Being's withholding from presence, its inappareance within appearances. Contrary to those who would interpret it phenomenologically as the 'presencing' or Being of the phenomenon, understood as the non-conceptualisable residue that resists assimilation to metaphysical essence or 'whatness',<sup>22</sup> Laruelle identifies it with the entity's withdrawal from presence and views this as the veritable source of what Heidegger will subsequently describe as the 'essence' (*Wesen*) of Being:

Essence is no longer a transcendent ideality, in the metaphysical sense. It is rather a real or absolute transcending – not a particular, i.e. objectified being that is transcendent in the theological style, but rather the transcending of the real *in-itself* that no longer has any object-term and that is an absolute scission. Under the name of Finitude, Heidegger thinks the real, absolute opposite, the 'Other' of every relation of objectivation; the un-objectivizable real that is the essence of Being ...<sup>23</sup>

From essence as eternal identity to essence as 'absolute scission' or Finitude a remarkable shift takes place. It is this scission of the entity – or rather this entity as real scission – that constitutes the essence of Being understood as disclosive opening (or 'clearing') within which beings can be encountered as present. However, while Heidegger's existential phenomenology tells us what is given and how it is given, the two ontological facets of givenness, it stops short of trying to grasp the given independently of its givenness. This is precisely what Laruelle, radicalising Heidegger, will seek to do. And it is important to note that he does so initially,

at that point where he is still providing a philosophical rationale for his dissatisfaction with philosophy's *modus operandi*,<sup>24</sup> by striving to seize this moment of absolute scission, which he identifies as the hidden wellspring of absolute transcending, and by trying to think it independently not only of the form of the object, but also of objectivating transcendence. This is arguably the pivotal point on which the theoretical cogency of the transition from philosophy to non-philosophy depends, at least in so far as this transition is not to be reduced to some gratuitous and ultimately arbitrary abandonment of philosophy. To wrest this moment of absolute scission free from the horizon of ontological transcendence, Laruelle must think it in its immanence, which is to say non-relation, rather than its transcendence, which here means relation, *vis-à-vis* objectivation, since to think it as transcendent is to re-inscribe it in and as a mode of Being. The goal is to think scission absolutely, in and from its absoluteness, rather than thinking it relative to what it divides, which would render it relative, and thereby transcendent, once again. But paradoxically, and in an eminently dialectical twist, thinking division absolutely requires thinking it as absolute indivision, uncontaminated by difference or division, which is always relational. This absolutely immanent indivision – not to be confused with unity, which is synthetic and hence relational – is of course what Laruelle calls 'the One', and the entire impetus of his analysis of the 'philosophies of difference' is to demonstrate that philosophy cannot but subordinate the indivisible scission of the One, which for him is ultimately of the order of (non-thetic) experience rather than of the concept, to a division in and of conceptual transcendence. Thus, for Laruelle, Heidegger's conception of Finitude remains mired in a fatal equivocation, using the absolute indivision of the Real to bind Being to beings even as it petitions its power of scission to split the entity from the object. Although this blocks the absolute idealist suspension of ontic transcendence by grounding Being's determination of beings in the transcendence of the in-itself, it stops short of thinking this absolute division in and for itself, independently of its conjunction with division:

What distinguishes finite Difference from the idealist usage of Difference is that this gap, the scission from whence transcendence is deployed, is no longer *relative* to transcendence, as it is in Idealism; is not in its turn a relation or an Idea. It is a non-relation or an absolute

'relation', one that is perhaps unthinkable in itself since one of its 'terms' – the entity in-itself – is real, and hence by definition non-objectivisable and non-manifest; and so it is thinkable only through its other side, that of Being as relation (of transcendence) *to* beings, a relation which is itself ideal. Difference is indeed an indivision or a unity of Being *and* beings, and a real indivision; it is not an ideal and infinitely divisible continuum. Finitude is what gives its reality and consequently its indivisibility to Difference, its repulsion of every division and every integration into itself of new immanent relations. But on its other side, which is no longer the real or ontic origin of transcendence, but transcendence as deployment, as intentional continuity, Difference is divisible and able to integrate new relations into itself; it is the site for the deployment of the analytic of Being or the objectivation of beings, the divisions and new relations that philosophizing thought operates with a view to raising itself up to the essence of Being.<sup>25</sup>

Heidegger's Finitude evokes the absolute scission of a transcendence that punctures the horizon of objectivation, but does so in order to relate Being's determination of beings to Being's determination by *that which is not* in beings. This non-being within beings is the noumenon as intelligible nothing, a thought-entity that is at once substance-less concept and formless thing. But to think this non-entity as the ground of phenomena is to concretise absolute abstraction and acknowledge the differentiating power of the indifferent: the Real as indivisible divisor of reality and ideality. This is the dialectical inversion through which the thought of absolute difference, i.e. difference in its non-relation to identity, non-subsumable by the categories, turns into the thought of absolute indifference, the One as absolutely indivisible immanence, which is the operator of absolute, a-categorial differentiation precisely in so far as it is without distinction or differentiation. For Heidegger as for Laruelle, such an outcome is at once too dialectical, because of its assertion of the reversibility between the abstract and the concrete, and too idealist, because of the way in which it affirms the convertibility between transcendence and immanence. Abjuring this dialectical, and hence perniciously philosophical conversion, Laruelle seeks to isolate the moment of scission, the irreversibility of the absolute division between transcendent division and immanent indivision, and to separate it from the reversibility proper to the dialecticisation of scission. Yet is this separation itself not precisely the dialectically necessary acknowledgement of the need

to think the absolute abstraction of scission in and for itself, even if this entails insisting on its foreclosure (non-reciprocity) to and for thought? In this regard, Laruelle's attempt to think immanence in and from its absolute separation is the necessary next step in unfolding the logic of absolute abstraction, one that provides an exemplary dialectical absolutisation of abstraction. Laruelle subjects the general dialectic of the One and the Dyad, of Finitude and Difference, to a one-sided splitting (or 'dualysis'), but mistakes his own abstract separation of abstraction for its realisation. He separates the separate and the inseparable – indeed he uncovers the logic of this separation without separation, which he calls 'unilateralisation' – but he misconstrues this startling twist in the dialectic – the dialectic of dialectics and non-dialectics – for a suspension of dialectics, and ergo of philosophy, as such. For what is the One conceived as fulcrum for the articulation of dialectics and non-dialectics but an effect upon philosophy?

Obviously, this is not how Laruelle himself will view the situation. He will insist that, despite Heidegger's 'finitising' reduction of objectivating transcendence, the transcendence of the entity in-itself is not so much given as *posited as given* by both Kant and Heidegger, in a manner that remains a priori, idealising, and hence transcendent (which is to say, objectivating). Countermanding this residual concession to idealism, Laruelle will claim that the One is not a conceptual posit but an experience given independently of all phenomenological objectivation. Unobjectivisable transcendence is the intra-philosophical symptom of an unobjectivisable immanence that is no longer philosophisable because it is of the order of a 'non-thetic experience' that determines conceptual determination, without being conceptually determinable in return. The One is this non-thetic experience, presupposed without being posited, given-without-givenness, etc. Thus Laruelle insists that he has converted the philosophical absolutisation of immanence into a non-philosophical radicalisation that 'unilateralises' and hence marginalises philosophical absolutisation as such, in the name of an experience of immanence – or rather, of a radically immanent experience – whose immediacy is no longer susceptible to dialectical mediation.

But is Laruelle invoking the reality of a concrete experience of immanence, or the concretisation of an absolutely abstract conception of immanence? Here the congenital ambiguity constitutive of the logic of abstraction and concretion persists, and it infects both



the transcendence and the immanence attributed to the entity in-itself: Is it the One *qua* indivisible that withdraws (i.e. divides), or is its withdrawal (i.e. division) One *qua* indivision? If the withdrawal of the One is not a thing but rather an absolute 'un-thinging', then the 'un-thing' (*unbedingt*) exerting this power cannot be identified with any individual entity – least of all the human person. Likewise, ambiguity persists in the meaning of 'absolute' transcendence and 'absolute' immanence. Is it possible to separate them? Or is the separation itself the ultimate abstraction? Has Laruelle realised abstraction or abstracted the Real? Or has he identified the Real itself (=One) with abstraction? At this juncture, the problem of dogmatism, and of Laruelle's relation to the critical-transcendental legacy from which he draws inspiration, re-emerges. Laruelle uses philosophical abstraction to define the non-philosophical Real that suspends philosophical abstraction: 'lived experience', 'knowing-without-knowledge', 'Man-in-person', 'One-in-One', etc. Yet he insists these have a non-constitutive, merely occasional, nominative function: they do not constitute what they name or describe. But what do they name or describe? Immanence 'itself', the immanence of the Real 'in flesh and blood', as he likes to put it? Or the abstract reality of an absolute abstraction that positively realises the transcendental negativity of the Kantian noumenon as objectless 'thought-entity'? Laruelle insists on the former, on the grounds that 'we know' ourselves to be this immanent experience; a claim which he of course immediately qualifies with the proviso that we know it without 'knowing', which is to say, without the conceptual mediations involved in reflection, comprehension, understanding, judgement, etc. This is *gnosis* understood as a 'radically immanent' mode of knowing immunised against the all-too-philosophical demand for justification: 'Man-in-person is defined by this idempotent "gnosis", this indissolubly scientific and philosophical lived experience, which is not a being in the world, or a being in philosophy. The genericity of man consists in being knowledge that he himself does not "know", a lived experience that is not reflexive and cumulative.'<sup>26</sup> The problem is that this distinction between immanent *gnosis* and transcendent knowledge already presupposes the separation it is supposed to secure: the separation between the Real-One as that which is already determinate ('without-determination'), and the realm of philosophical ideality as the domain of that which is determined *as* this or that, as subject or object, as immanent or transcendent,

as abstract or concrete, etc. Laruelle invokes a self-authenticating experience of the Real in the wake of its conceptual separation in order to prevent what he has separated in an abstraction which he of course immediately disavows – the One as radically immanent experience is ‘separate-without-separation’, ‘abstract-without-abstraction’, etc. – from being re-incorporated into the necessarily interminable movement of abstraction. What shores up this preemptive blockage of abstraction? Simply Laruelle’s identification of the Real-One with the ‘human in flesh and blood’ qua ultimate determinant of abstraction. But this continues to beg the question: How do I know I am the One ‘in-person’? What distinguishes this gnosis from any number of merely doxastic empirical identifications I am able to reel off unreflectingly (‘I am François, I am a man, I am French, I am . . . etc.’)? Laruelle presumes to be able to discharge himself of the obligation to justify the gnosis that motivates this nomination, yet the case for exemption continues to depend upon a (highly sophisticated) theoretical rationale saturated with the kind of conceptual understanding that gnosis itself is supposed to render redundant. Shorn of this elaborate theoretical alibi, Laruelle’s identification of the Real with ‘Man’ or ‘the human-in-person’ – a nomination which retains a determinate semantic valence, relying as it does on our understanding of the *meaning* of terms such as ‘Man’, ‘human’, and ‘in-person’ – is as arbitrary, abstract and ultimately as ‘decisional’ as other possible identifications of that which is pre-eminently Real, whether as Self, Spirit, Life, or Nature. It is important to remember that everything that distinguishes the latter’s alleged philosophical transcendence from the former’s supposedly non-philosophical immanence is itself abstract, and hence nothing if not conceptual.

Ultimately, Laruelle faces a dilemma: either he regresses to Michel Henry’s phenomenological idealisation of radical immanence,<sup>27</sup> or he accepts that the radicalisation of the immanence of the Real necessitates the dissolution not only of intentionality, but also of intuition itself, which is to say, of gnosis. Our knowledge of ourselves certainly comprises a dimension of non-inferential immediacy that endows us with a privileged epistemic access to our own internal states, but only within certain limits, since the immediacy of self-knowledge is itself mediated and cannot be evoked to ratify the appeal to an allegedly intuitive, pre-discursive gnosis of ourselves as ‘the Real-in-person’. Only the appearance that immediacy is not the result of a mediating self-relation allows

experience to be absolutised. This is, of course, 'the myth of the Given', originally targeted in Hegel's critique of sense-certainty, and more recently dismantled – arguably in a more profound and definitive fashion than it was by Hegel – by Wilfrid Sellars.<sup>28</sup> But the crucial Kantian insight is that we can abjure this myth without succumbing to the lure of absolute idealism, once we realise that the reality of appearances is grounded in the reality of what does not appear; that acknowledging the concrete reality of the phenomenon requires acknowledging the abstract reality of the noumenon; and ultimately, that sensible being is founded upon the intelligibility of *that which is not*. Thus the identification of the Real with 'Man-in-person' is the height of abstraction, for it brusquely identifies the noumenon with the phenomenon, using the divisive power of the former to secure the absolute indivisibility of the latter. The result is a terminal abstraction masquerading as the termination of abstraction. Laruelle has hypostatized an absolute abstraction and subjected it to a premature identification with an empirical instance – the human individual 'in flesh and blood' – in a misguided attempt to stave off its re-idealisation in a transcendence in and of the concept. He successfully conceptualises the separation of the in-itself, but misidentifies it as an experience, refusing to recognise that no residue of experience can withstand determination by mediation. The rejoinder that the One is 'abstract without abstraction' begs the question, for it simply radicalises abstraction in an attempt to neutralise ('unilateralise') the dialectic of mediation and abstraction. The given-without-giveness is certainly a real abstraction, or the Real as abstract, and its absolute separation, or unilaterality, the reality of abstraction. By the same token, Laruelle's struggle with the very possibility of philosophising is undoubtedly more instructive than any complacent *passage à l'acte*. Yet in the final analysis, his attempted suspension of the pretensions of philosophy – epistemological as well as ontological – is more indicative of a frustrated philosophical agenda than of a genuine alternative to the philosophical problematic bequeathed to us by Kant.

## Notes

1. François Laruelle, *Les philosophies de la différence. Introduction critique* (Paris: PUF, 1986), translated by Rocco Gangle as *Philosophies of Difference: A Critical Introduction to Non-Philosophy* (London

and New York: Continuum, 2010). Page references will refer to the French edition followed by the English translation.

2. Ibid., p. 57/40 (translation modified).
3. This is a point made by Wilfrid Sellars: see his *Kant and Pre-Kantian Themes* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 2002), p. 168.
4. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Alan Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A261/B317.
5. Ibid., Bxxvi.
6. Ibid., A252.
7. Ibid., A253.
8. Ibid., A109.
9. See *ibid.*, A253. This is one of the more confusing passages in the First Critique. In the course of explaining why the transcendental object is not the noumenon, Kant writes: 'I cannot think [the transcendental object] through any categories, for these hold of empirical intuition, in order to bring it under a concept of the object in general. To be sure, a pure use of the category is possible, i.e. without contradiction, but it has no objective validity, since it pertains to no intuition that would thereby acquire unity of the object, for the category is a mere function of thinking, through which no object is given to me, but rather only that through which what may be given in intuition is thought' (A253). But the determination of the concept of the transcendental object via the pure category of substance, understood as the relation of inherence and subsistence, does not surreptitiously endow the category with objective validity, since it does not involve conflating the transcendental object with an empirical object.
10. Ibid., A290-2/B347-9.
11. Ibid.
12. See Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 41. See also Sellars, *Kant and Pre-Kantian Themes*, p. 65.
13. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A255/B311 (my emphasis).
14. We will write 'objectivating' and 'unobjectivisable' rather than the more common 'objectifying' and 'unobjectifiable' in order to emphasise the link with the phenomenological concept of 'objectivation', which Laruelle constantly invokes, and which Rocco Gangle retains in his admirable English translation of *Philosophies of Difference*.
15. These three distinctions are discussed by Heidegger in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 88-99. The

context there is a discussion of the scholastic distinction between essence and existence.

16. Laruelle, *Les philosophies de la différence*, p. 63/46 (translation modified).
17. This is one way of understanding ontological transcendence, as when Heidegger describes Being as 'the *transcendens* pure and simple', in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 62.
18. Laruelle, *Les philosophies de la différence*, p. 56/40 (translation modified).
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–3/45–6. Here one could object to Laruelle that neither neo-Kantianism, nor Husserlian phenomenology, nor Habermas' communicative discourse theory, treats the a priori conditions of objectivation as a transcendent (trans-historical) 'fact of reason' in this uncritical sense. On the contrary, all have sought in their different ways to historicise the a priori. But Laruelle's point seems to be that even a historicised a priori is posited as given relative to a set of empirical data. And because of this co-dependence between a priori factum and empirical datum, the former becomes relatively transcendent with regard to an empirical conjuncture. For Laruelle, it is the very relativity of the a priori that perpetuates the metaphysical hypostasis of transcendence as intelligible form or Idea. He views it as the source of the residual dogmatism infecting even the most historicised forms of idealism.
20. Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, p. 98.
21. In this regard, the distinction between Being and the entity-in-itself in Heidegger can be understood as analogous to that between the transcendental object and the noumenon in Kant.
22. This is Richard F. Grabau's interpretation in his unduly neglected paper, 'Kant's Concept of the Thing-in-Itself', *Review of Metaphysics* 16.4 (1963), pp. 770–9. Although Grabau explicitly distances his interpretation from Heidegger's interpretation of Kant, of which he is critical, there is an undeniable affinity between his interpretation of the in-itself in terms of the presence of the phenomenon and Heidegger's characterisation of Being as that which does not show itself within appearances and yet constitutes their 'meaning and ground'. In Heidegger's own words: 'that which remains *hidden* in an egregious sense, or which relapses and gets *covered up* again, or that which shows itself only "*in disguise*", is not just this entity or that, but rather the *Being* of entities' (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 59).

23. Laruelle, *Les philosophies de la différence*, pp. 79–80/63–4 (translation modified).
24. Thereby revealing the extent to which the impulse for non-philosophy, its conceptual motivations and theoretical rationalisations, still come from philosophy – a point that is too often overlooked in any straightforward affirmation of the discontinuity between philosophy and non-philosophy.
25. Laruelle, *Les philosophies de la différence*, pp. 79–80/63–4 (translation modified).
26. François Laruelle, 'The Generic as Predicate and as Constant: Non-Philosophy and Materialism', translated by Taylor Adkins, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, edited by Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, Nick Srnicek (Melbourne: re-press, 2011), p. 248 (translation modified).
27. An idealisation he has himself vigorously criticised. See François Laruelle, *Prinçipes de la non-philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1996), pp. 133–43.
28. See Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).