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Ray Brassier: Nihil unbound: enlightenment and extinction

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Knox Peden

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Punctuated by paeans to “the coruscating potency of reason” and the “dissociative virulence of…non-dialectical negativity,” Ray Brassier’s *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* is a work of philosophy committed to the “labor of disenchantment initiated by Galileo in the physical realm, continued by Darwin in the biological sphere, and currently being extended by cognitive science to the domain of mind” (xi, 45, 40). The defacement of the “book of the world” accomplished during the Enlightenment beckons “an invigorating vector of intellectual discovery, rather than a calamitous diminishment” (xi). This is because “[t]hinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living; indeed, they can and have been pitted against the latter” (xi). Pursuing these interests, Brassier develops a concept of the “will to know” congruent with a “will to nothingness” impervious to the countervailing force of the “will to live.” It is not the least of the ironies of *Nihil Unbound* that a work committed to marshalling the rigorous stringency of reason against the affective finesse of interpretation often produces claims that connect with the gut as much as the mind. Committed though he is to the notion that words are categorically weak objects for philosophical thought, Brassier nonetheless gets a lot of mileage out of them. “Philosophy,” he writes, “should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem” (xi).

The alternative on offer is a signal challenge to contemporary philosophy, as difficult to paraphrase as it is to ignore. The polemical core of Brassier’s project is a philosophical rehabilitation of science against the reductive and derisive attitudes toward scientific rationality that he sees prevalent in the “dominant” quarters of continental philosophy: phenomenology and critical theory. Anticipating hostility from these schools, the former of which is the chief culprit, Brassier has produced a work that alternates between constructive argument and preemptive, sometimes premature, refutation. His philosophical case is more focused than its combative

K. Peden (✉)
Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University, London, UK
e-mail: knoxpeden@gmail.com

expression suggests, however, and it turns on two related agendas: (1) the specific recuperation of nihilism as a philosophical program that is antithetical to subjectivism, rather than complicit with it, and (2) the contention that the nihilism Brassier seeks to develop is the philosophy best suited to an intellectual conjuncture in which Albert Einstein's conception of space–time has rendered any ontology that privileges the latter half of the equation at the expense of the former an exercise in bad faith.

Brassier's acuity as a reader of philosophy is unimpeachable, but it is only by working through some very exigent readings that the apparent idiosyncrasy of his book's argumentative structure coheres into the vector of intellectual discovery promised in the Preface. The book is divided into three sections. The first part, devoted to "Destroying the Manifest Image" of man, is the critical prolegomenon wherein the resources of cognitive science and the contemporary rationalism of Quentin Meillassoux are mobilized against phenomenology and the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno. The middle section, "The Anatomy of Negation," is where Brassier develops a non-dialectical concept of negation indebted to Badiou's demystification of ontology and the methodological and ultimately ontological principle of "unilateralization" drawn from the "non-philosophy" of François Laruelle. The final part, "The End of Time," concludes with Brassier's philosophical consideration of the "truth of extinction" as a spatial *factum* that negates, indeed has already logically negated, human time. This conclusion comes after a cursory dismissal of Heidegger and a more extensive critique of Deleuze. For all their brilliance, both Heidegger and Deleuze come up short in Brassier's estimation in that they ontologically synthesize life and death, the former through finite transcendence and the latter through psychic individuation. For Brassier, the only viable ontological relation is not one of synthesis, but of negation. The extinction of space–time "indexes the thought of the absence of thought" (229–230). Insofar as thought binds itself to this truth, the "will to know" cannot but supervene on the "will to live."

It is important to remark that the book's two main programmatic claims are of different species. The first, that far from being "a pathological exacerbation of subjectivism" nihilism is "the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which…is indifferent to our existence" (xi), is a contention epistemological and ontological in its essentials. Though the arguments in support of this claim sometimes buckle under the imbrication of these two registers, their successful execution is ultimately independent of the position's normative implications. It is to Brassier's credit that, aside from an allusive rhetoric, the philosopher remains solely committed to the "will to know" he celebrates. He resists the temptation to draw out a ready-made ethics or politics.

Nonetheless, Brassier's prescriptions for contemporary philosophy are reliant upon the normative components of his second main argument. The claim that rehabilitated nihilism is the most suitable philosophy for the moment is drawn from Brassier's larger conviction that the disenchantment of the world is an effect of "intellectual maturity" rather than a "debilitating impoverishment" (xi). To celebrate the Enlightenment as a "project" of disenchantment against the "anti-Enlightenment revisionism" of much contemporary thought is to embark on a set of

arguments for which the epistemological and ontological argumentation that is Brassier's forte is not only insufficient but largely irrelevant. Brassier is right to call his celebration of the Enlightenment a "conviction," and for this he offers no apologies, nor should we expect any. But one senses throughout the book a tension between the philosophical imperative that drives Brassier's dazzling critical destruction of subjectivism, on the one hand, and a desire to disqualify other philosophical pursuits which would ultimately be indifferent to his lessons on the other.

An example of this equivocation can be found in Brassier's disavowal of the notion that there is a singular, transhistorical essence of philosophy that can be addressed and criticized as such, an obsession that is regnant in Heidegger's project and which threatens to compromise Laruelle's as well. Brassier argues that there is no more an essence of philosophy than there is an essence of sport. The names "philosophy" and "sport" simply refer to practices, each with a "complex material history" (133). This critique of "essence" serves Brassier's argument well, but its effects are jarring because one wonders then about the status of moral philosophy, or indeed his primary target, phenomenology. Could one say that the difference between Brassier's nihilism and Heidegger's phenomenology is not unlike that between surfing and skeet shooting? If such were the case, the implication is that Brassier's nihilism and Heidegger's phenomenology also have as much in *common* as surfing and skeet shooting.

It is clear, however, that Brassier intends for his project to serve not only as an alternative to phenomenology, but also as a critique of its philosophical aspirations. When he suggests that "it might be better to concede that the aims of phenomenological description *stricto sensu* are best served through the artifices of literature, instead of hijacking the conceptual resources of philosophy for no other reason than to preserve some inviolable terrain of phenomenal experience" (28), this "concession" evinces his desire to determine what philosophy *should* be. And yet, Brassier himself does not escape the charge of essentialism so easily. The essence in question is not that of philosophy, however, but of *science*. The critique of philosophical essentialism is a critique of reductionism. It is a refusal to read philosophy as a singular manifestation of a sole identifiable essence. But if "the advantages of abstraction" (231) that inhere in philosophy as a practice provide it with a certain pliability and mobility, science, for Brassier, seems to possess a singular, basic, and blunt force, one expressed in a concept central to his account: disenchantment.

To describe science *per se* as a labor of disenchantment is to ascribe it a univocal quality that is unwarranted unless one wants to produce a very narrow concept of scientificity as precisely that which "disenchants." To do so, however, would be to invest scientific practice with a normative aim, dubiously and figuratively expressed, in tension with a commitment to a more fundamental rationality and integrity indifferent to the mystical or non-mystical implications of scientific results. Who is to say whether or not "dark matter" is enchanting or disenchanting? Perhaps a more important question to ask is, what is the relationship between the subjective effect of a scientific concept and its status as a scientific concept? Is it not a

condition of science's rational integrity that it does not care for its extra-scientific effects?

Much as science's integrity is independent of the number of those who assent to its claims, Brassier's philosophical argument is not contingent upon the success of his polemical case. His distaste for what he views as counter-Enlightenment revisionism threatens to overshadow the two opening chapters of the work, each of which makes a specific, and necessary, point for the argument to come. His option for the neurophilosophy of Paul Churchland over the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl seems quizzical once Brassier establishes that Churchland's model of consciousness runs into many of the same tautological loops that mar Husserl's endeavor. Still, the utility of Churchland's project is to cast a sharp distinction between an approach to consciousness that seeks to reconcile it with a more originary pre-predicative experience and one that insists on the ultimate incommensurability between the experience of consciousness and the material that generates it.

This distinction gains a wider berth in the second chapter where, through an exquisite reconstruction of Horkheimer and Adorno's option for mimesis over mimicry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Brassier finds dialectical thought attempting "to expunge space from history" (47). Mimesis is "superior" to mimicry because it possesses a subjective and pathic component preferable to the putatively automatic, un-reflective aspects of mimicry. Mimesis is dialectical and historical; mimicry is a lifeless rejection of change. But Brassier's point is that the negativity which inheres in the mimicry prevalent in the animal, insect, and inorganic worlds, is evidence of a negativity without a subject that supervenes on the mimetically motivated proliferation of non-identity that constitutes history "against" nature. Recognizing that Adorno and Horkheimer's aim is to provide an account of humanity, Brassier nonetheless avers the following: "Even if it remains irreducible to it, cultural history is mediated by natural history, which includes both time and space, biology and geology" (48).

The parallelism established here—time with the organic, space with the inorganic—drives the rest of the book. After an extensive discussion of Meillassoux's effort to think in terms of an absolute time indifferent to human experience—a project whose proximity to Brassier's own we will explore below—Brassier turns to Badiou and Laruelle to develop a concept of negation that can serve as a viable alternative to dialectics. The signal virtue of Badiou's ontological project is a demystification of being which succeeds precisely by showing that being *qua* being "is insignificant; it means, quite literally, nothing" (116). Badiou's thesis that "mathematics is ontology" is a riposte to phenomenology in that it subtracts being's phenomenal qualities in order to develop a notion of what is *thinkable* about being *qua* being as inconsistent infinite multiplicity. In a provocative gesture, Brassier suggests that Badiou compromises his own ontological project with the concept of the "Event," the latter of which introduces "an idealism of inscription" into otherwise insignificant being. Brassier recoils from fully elaborating the implications of his rejoinder, to wit, that Badiou compromises his ontology to save his politics, for the event is, along with the subject of fidelity to that event, one of the central political categories of Badiou's philosophy.

Laruelle is reprimanded as well both for thinking he has developed a non-philosophy able to assess philosophy *tout court* and for his indulgence toward the "radical immanence" of one of his primary influences, Michel Henry. But these deviations tarnish nothing of the luster of Laruelle's method of unilateralization, "a non-dialectical logic of philosophical negation" (120), wherein, in Laruelle's own words, "the real's being-foreclosed to knowledge, or…every object's being foreclosed to its own cognition…does not render knowledge possible but rather determines it" (139). What Laruelle attempts is nothing less than the unbinding of the transcendental synthesis at work in any philosophy that designates the synthetic relation between thought and its correlate as the fundamental object of philosophical inquiry. Whether the transcendental operator is read as life, consciousness, or *Dasein*, in all cases the synthetic moment is the essential one. By contrast, Laruelle enables us to define "conditions under which thinking does not intend, reflect, or represent its object but rather mimes its unobjectifiable opacity insofar as the latter is identical-in-the-last-instance with a real which is foreclosed to objectification" (138). Readers will assess the persuasiveness of Brassier's endorsement of Laruelle's case for inorganic mimicry over dialectical mimesis. What is undeniable is that *Nihil Unbound* has brought into Anglophone philosophy a thinker, bracing in his originality, whose project demands our attention.

The binding of thought to the inorganic is subjected to further theoretical elaboration by way of readings of Lyotard's parable of solar catastrophe, Levinas's concept of trauma, and Freud's theory of the death drive. The speculative audacity of these vignettes permits Brassier to argue for a concept of thought as the determined *result* or *effect* of inorganic materiality rather than as the privileged site of matter's reflective consideration. Given his hostility to representational thought, Deleuze would presumably be a valuable comrade in Brassier's project. But notwithstanding its virtues, Deleuze's endeavor is found to be fatally compromised by a vitalism that reads thinking as the essentially organic determinant of inorganic matter. Future readers of *Difference and Repetition* will have to reckon with Brassier's exacting assessment and his compelling conclusion that the central philosophical work of Deleuze's oeuvre remains paralyzed in its vacillation between a mystical panpsychism and an incoherent idealism.

In addition to Laruelle, Brassier's crucial interlocutor is Quentin Meillassoux, whose work has recently been introduced to Anglophone readers in Brassier's translation.[1] Meillassoux's critical target is the philosophical pathology he names "correlationism." Correlationism, which Brassier deems to be functionally synonymous with the transcendental synthesis operationally "unbound" in Laruelle's efforts, is defined as any philosophy that "affirms the indissoluble primacy of the relation between thought and its correlate over the metaphysical hypostatization or representationalist reification of either term of the relation" (51). Brassier follows Meillassoux in affirming the "literal intelligibility" (63) of ancestral phenomena—that is, cosmic occurrences anterior to the manifestation of consciousness—against the unintelligibility of "reality-in-itself" for post-Kantian philosophy. This problematic notion of "literal intelligibility" raises the question of the relationship

[1] Meillassoux (2008).

between cognition and measure. "Correlationism insists that there can be no cognizable reality independent of our relation to reality; no phenomena without some transcendental operator—such as life or consciousness or *Dasein*—generating the conditions of manifestation through which phenomena manifest themselves" (51). Clearly Brassier wants the correlationist—be he vitalist, Kantian, or Heideggerian—to be the solipsist. But it is unclear how the scientist is not a solipsist by the same measure. For what are the tools of scientific experimentation if not transcendental operators, with as much variation among them as life, consciousness, and *Dasein*, and which "generate the conditions of manifestation" of phenomena? Infrared technology "generates the conditions" that allow the Crab Nebula not to *exist* as the material remnant of a supernova, but to be *manifest* via the irradiated dust illuminated in the lens of the infrared telescope.

Yet what matters ultimately are not the colors of the nebula, its mere phenomenal qualities, but the brute fact of its existence. On this score, we can draw a sharp distinction between Brassier's case for non-correlationist philosophy and Meillassoux's. The strength of Meillassoux's argument rests on a rehabilitated concept of primary qualities that are expressible through mathematical formalism. The non-correlationist philosopher reads a "glacial world" evacuated of all phenomena except one: facticity itself. What matters is not the Crab Nebula as a phenomenon, but *that* it appears. The virtue of mathematics for Meillassoux is not that it is scientific, as Brassier's gloss might suggest, but that it is purely formal and thus devoid of phenomenality. Science as such is not devoid of phenomenality, and indeed many of the scientific images Brassier invokes to strengthen his case, from insects to solar catastrophes, remain intelligible only insofar as they are—precisely—phenomena.

Brassier insists that the anteriority of Meillassoux's ancestral realm needs to be supplemented by the posteriority of cosmic extinction in order to consolidate the critique of correlationist philosophy in absolute terms. In this, Brassier purports to have a perspective more universal than Meillassoux's still linear concept of chronology. Brassier's critique of Meillassoux's reliance on human time—ancestral phenomena still took place "back then"—is to the point. But there is a way in which Brassier's putatively "more absolute" case is itself compromised by a fundamental presentism. In Meillassoux's vision, God remains a possibility in the future. This is so not because of any covert messianism, but because Meillassoux is philosophically committed to the notion of absolute contingency. Not so for Brassier for whom the facts *currently* indexed by science are irrevocable. It seems unthinkable for Brassier that dark matter could suffer a fate similar to phlogiston. Moreover, a key point for Brassier is that once the universe culminates in its heat death there will be no evidence, no *index* that consciousness ever existed. But by this very same measure, the fact that there is no *index* of a consciousness anterior to the emergence of consciousness, or indeed anterior to the Big Bang, cannot be read as evidence that it was not there.

If formalism abjures phenomenality, this also accounts for its complicity with, and ultimately its utility for, nihilism. Brassier is at his best when pursuing this philosophical argument. Yet Brassier's commitment to nihilism is a philosophical decision that inaugurates his inquiry; it is not the result of philosophical exploration.

What this means is that the polemical force motivating the work runs roughshod over sites of engagement with other efforts that could prove beneficial to Brassier's own pursuits. For example, there is nothing in Brassier's critique of Adorno to disqualify the latter's arguments concerning a frustrated will-to-know's sublimation as aggression. In other words, nothing prevents the "real qua being-nothing" from being determinant of knowledge and a source of frustration at the same time. Perhaps Brassier will explore the hindrances to the "invigorating vector of intellectual discovery" his nihilism beckons in subsequent work. In the meantime, *Nihil Unbound* makes good on many of its promises, chief among them providing the reader a rare experience: actual philosophical discovery. Whatever Brassier's misgivings, his work provides stunning evidence of at least one of Adorno's contentions: "Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism."[2]

References

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[2] Adorno (1973).