Graham Harman interviews Markus Gabriel,

author of

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Graham Harman: Let's start with a topic that is often dismissed as a cliché: the rift between 'analytic' and 'continental' styles of philosophy. It seems to me that this split remains very real, at least in institutional terms. Yet you are one of the authors most difficult to classify in terms of this schema: your educational background is a traditionally German one in a 'continental' way, but you seem very much at home in the analytic style of arguing, to the point that *Fields of Sense* in some ways reads more like a book of analytic than continental philosophy. What is your view of the analytic/continental split: how did it originate, is it still with us, and where is it headed?

Markus Gabriel: Until recently, one might have characterized the state of the split in the way John Searle once roughly put it: if you ask an analytic philosopher a question, he replies with an argument; if you ask a continental philosopher, he replies with a name or a book title. If this were generally the case, analytic philosophy would basically just be philosophy as it ought to be practiced whereas continental philosophy would look like a hybrid of philosophy and history of philosophy mixed with some kind of admiration for authorities (the notorious dead white male metaphysics and their bearded contemporary counterparts in their fifties). What I like about the realist turn in continental circles is that in the work of figures associated with Speculative Realism we get arguments embedded in large-scale philosophical visions rather than the kind of fluffy exegesis and endless litanies that critics of continental philosophy identify with the practice as such.

If you read both contemporary so-called 'analytical' metaphysics and the debates in Speculative Realism, it soon turns out that both debates converge in manifold ways. Yet, Speculative Realism in my view is more advanced due to its historical context which involves a much more original understanding of the history of metaphysics and its various shortcomings. Both debates are haunted by various kinds of criticisms of metaphysics (Carnap and Quine on the one hand, Kant in between and Heidegger and Derrida on the other hand, say, and Wittgenstein making a comeback to) and all participants offer various grounds to resist the critique of metaphysics.

The debates in metaphysics and metametaphysics, however, are only one important point of overlap which in my view point towards an actual overcoming of the perceived profound distinction between the two overall traditions.

Be that is it may, as I point out in the preface of *Fields of Sense*, from my point of view as a philosopher actually brought up on the continent (with a German Dr. phil. and Habilitation from Heidelberg), what Anglophone philosophers call 'continental' philosophy is ultimately really like a continental breakfast. It is a cultural construct borrowing home-grown elements from continental Europe (in particular Germany, France, and Italy) in order to mix them in a different way so as to make sense to a different kind of audience.

My own education in Germany (at the Universities of Bonn and Heidelberg) was one in which the virtues of hermeneutics (close, careful and respectful readings of the major books) were always combined with the virtues of so-called 'analytic' philosophy: that is, rational reconstruction of the arguments behind them. In my very first semester as an undergraduate student, Wolfram Hogrebe taught me to read Schelling's Freedom Essay in light of its contributions to the Fregean identity riddle (how can some identity statements be both informative and non-contradictory?). He argued that Schelling's contribution to this debate differed from Frege's not in clarity or conceptual insight, but

simply by offering a better and more comprehensive theory. Generally, I do not believe that there has ever really been a substantial rift between analytic and continental philosophy, but rather different moments of a complicated debate among philosophers, traditions and so on.

The kind of philosophical (not merely sociological) aspect of the analytic/continental split in my view originate in the nineteenth century. The substantial Great Divide back then was between the positivists and those who still wanted to do philosophy in the high-flown style associated with post-Kantian idealism. Remarkably, Marx is undecided about where exactly to stand (while Engels is clearly a positivist which has influenced our reading of Marx). The substantial Great Divide is therefore not so much between phenomenology/hermeneutics and analytical philosophy (or even between nations such as the French and the British), but really between those who believe that we philosophers should bend down before the great successes of piecemeal experimentation ('science') and those who believe that philosophy is an autonomous scientific endeavor with a notoriously precarious methodology. Note, however, that in reality no other science is better off on the level of methodology. Philosophy is just more careful in looking into the specificities of the relation between the form and content of reflection. It is more radically honest about what it can achieve, as it cannot compensate its conceptual shortcomings by producing powerful and often terrifying instruments of world-domination (such as chemical weapons, airplanes, and so on). There are positivists on the continental side of the Great Divide (in continental Europe) and positivists in the Anglophone world, just as there are metaphysicians, idealists, historicists or critics of ideology on both sides of the geographic and linguistic divides, potentially making dialogues harder across linguistic borders.

No one has ever managed to give a clear-cut criterion really separating those who self-describe as analytical philosophers from those who want to understand themselves as continental philosophers. I will, therefore, not try to add another attempt. However, there are sociological differences characterizing styles, fashions, membership in certain groups (including citation cartels), idiolects you need to master in order to get published in a journal perceived as prestigious, and so on. In my view, it is crucial for actual philosophy always to try to move beyond the limitations imposed in reflection by these sociological boundaries. Philosophy, like any intellectual or artistic endeavor for that matter, strives for originality and insight. Yet this involves an awareness of the existence of the sociological dimension of philosophical knowledge production. Originality is relative to acceptable border infringements. In my view, a lot of original work in contemporary philosophy happens where people are self-consciously going beyond the various artificial borders that make dialogue hard. Unfortunately, dogmatism is as widespread among philosophers as their respect for free thought, speech, and originality. But dogmatism and ignorance (however widespread) are still not virtues to be cultivated by philosophers.

I am aware that you think that there is probably a substantial difference among analytic and continental philosophy, which you seem to locate in a different sense of what counts as an argument (or even in the value attached to an argument as opposed to a view or a stance). And I also agree that philosophy cannot be reduced to a bunch of unrelated arguments. Any philosophy – whether identified as analytic or continental – that has made an impact indeed is built around a view, or an overall vision. This holds of Deleuze and Butler as much as of Brandom or Chalmers.

GH: Let me describe how I see the difference and why I think it's deep and real, and I'll be interested to hear your response. Franz Brentano gave a very interesting lecture in Vienna in the 1890s about the recurring patterns he saw at work in the history of philosophy. Almost in passing, he made a separate remark that philosophy has two different faces. In one sense it is like the positive sciences, making cumulative progress on precisely defined technical problems. We see this face of philosophy today in the culture of analytic philosophy, with its refereed journal articles mimicking the style of progress favored by the natural sciences. Furthermore, analytic philosophers have a tendency to influence mostly other analytic philosophers, and aren't as frequently picked up in interdisciplinary work, at least not in the humanities. Brentano says that the other face of philosophy makes it resemble the fine arts, which tends to progress in recurring cycles of ripeness and decadence rather than cumulatively. This seems to me more like the continental view of things, with its canon of great thinkers and its reverence for the classics, whereas an analytic philosopher is more likely to pounce upon 'bad arguments' in Plato

or Aristotle. It is also interesting that Barry Smith and Balázs Mezei, who translated Brentano's lecture into English, are very interested in Brentano's conception of philosophy as 'scientific', but ignore his 'fine arts' point as if it were of no relevance. This may also have something to do with the different conceptions of writing in the two styles of philosophy. I was shocked to read Jerry Fodor's claim that he and most of his colleagues in analytic philosophy are 'better writers' than the likes of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, a claim that almost no one outside analytic philosophy would accept. What Fodor seems to think is that 'good writing' means writing that makes clear, precise propositional statements without fuzziness, whereas I would say that vagueness can be an important element of good style just as shadow is often important in great painting. Sometimes reality itself is vague rather than precise, and it takes some artistry to convey this fact, and I am quite confident that no analytic philosopher writes as well as Nietzsche. This comment is already becoming too long, but here's what I'm driving at. Thanks to the analytic philosophy boom we now have tens of thousands of people worldwide making clearer and more rational arguments than have ever been made at any time in the history of thought. Yet it is not clear that we live in a more golden age of philosophy than those of the periods of phenomenology, German Idealism, 17th Century rationalism, High Medieval Scholasticism, and so forth. Is there really no significant difference between a tradition that views philosophical breakthroughs as occurring primarily through ever more rigorous argumentation, and those that think the breakthroughs come more through sudden 'paradigm shifts' that show us completely new options in philosophy? I think it was Emerson who asked: 'Who cares about Spinoza's 'arguments'?'

MG: You are certainly right in pointing out that analytic philosophy is typically pursued in the way in which you characterize it. It is indeed unimaginable that Aristotle, Kant or Spinoza would have appreciated the culture of publishing in peer reviewed journals in order to add to your reputation. As we all know, the absolute majority of papers published in so-called leading journals are never read by more than a handful of people who usually only read them in order to find flaws. I also generally agree with you that so-called Continental philosophy has great respect for the idea of an overall philosophical vision which is lacking in the dominant contemporary business model of academic philosophy. Having said that, it is also true that there is a lot of good detailed philosophical work done in analytic philosophy which helps us to understand the conceptual space within which philosophy moves much better.

Here is another way of looking at what you point out with reference to Brentano's distinction between a scientific and an artistic way of practicing philosophy. I believe that philosophy is primarily the attempt to work out an overall vision of how our human thought fits into this strange place we call 'the world'. Philosophy, for me, means to be responsive to the fact that we ultimately have no clue what this show into which we are thrown is or means. For this reason, we first work out a vision of how things hang together, which is the central part of our work. This part is creative and imaginative and in great philosophy it goes significantly beyond what has been established. Great natural science or mathematics also has this aspect, though. Just think about Gödel on intuition (and his interpretation of Husserl) or Einstein on thought experiments. Creative, imaginative thinking is governed by patterns that are also articulated in art works of all types, which is why I frequently make reference to art as a means of illustrating the flavor of a thought. A philosophical thought without creative exposition is empty, but a creative exposition without a philosophy thought is empty. That is why there is also the argumentative, scientifically-minded dimension to philosophy, which is overemphasized in the analytic mainstream which often is written not with a vision but with a business model in mind. Plato, Aristotle or Kant also gave arguments and Spinoza, of course, thought of himself as arguing *more geometrico*. As you can imagine, I here side with the German Idealists who all pointed out that we can never replace a vision by a more geometrico style argument for the simple reason that we can never overcome the vagueness constitutive of philosophical expression (and language as such). Notoriously, early analytic philosophy (like many other movements before) failed in providing us with a clear criterion of what can count as a clear analysis of a concept or a clear presentation of an argument. 'Clarity', 'analysis' and 'argument' are themselves vague terms bound to contextual parameters.

If Fodor literally believes that he is a better writer than Kierkegaard or Hegel, he is simply deluded. Personally, I like to read Fodor too, but mostly because I think that he is wrong about almost everything so that I want to find out how exactly to avoid his innativism and his evolutionary account of

representation (I do not buy any of this). But even if I agreed with him, I would still never agree that he is a better writer than Kierkegaard or Hegel. I have noticed that many Anglophone philosophers believe that Hegel is a bad writer without even having the prerequisites of reading him (that is: a very high-level knowledge of 19th century German). Of course, uneducated people might believe that Shakespeare is a bad writer, because they do not understand his English, which says more about that particular audience than about Shakespeare.

When I was fifteen I read the *Critique of Pure Reason* for the first time followed by *Being and Time*. As a teenager, I did not think that these texts were poorly written at all. They seemed clear to me, but just hard to understand for various reasons. We should never confuse our misunderstanding of a text with the text's alleged unclarity.

Many analytic philosophers working on vagueness have, of course, realized that reality itself might be vague and some of them have therefore turned into duominers in your sense. Yet you are right that they do not typically draw the conclusion that we should adapt our style of writing to that circumstance. One of the significant shortcomings of our philosophical age might be the repression of style in philosophy. But I believe that there is no strictly speaking philosophical reason for this, but that this is again largely sociological: in order to publish a peer reviewed journal article or a book you have to efface your style unless you are already a big name who gets published anyway.

You are right that Anglophone analytic philosophy as it is typically practiced is currently academically very isolated, because it is neither read by natural scientists nor by other humanities. There are various reasons for this. Be that as it may, this is a significant weakness often due to unjustified arrogance on the side of the philosophers. For instance, debates about fiction and fictional objects etc. usually do not even quote the relevant literary theory, and they are obviously not built on any in-depth knowledge of actual fiction and actual theories of fictionality. The same holds of a lot of philosophy of science, at least, those parts of it which are not in sync with actual scientific practice. I have heard many natural scientists and literature professors complain about that. Philosophy in many areas just has to be much more open-minded than its contemporary academic culture allows it to be. But this is largely a kind of 'self-inflicted immaturity', as Kant famously put it. Many philosophers break free of these limitations and are thereby able to create better work.

Let me conclude my answer to this question on a very optimistic note: we live in a very exciting philosophical era despite the problematic sociological side-effects driving people to write worse philosophy than they are able to. In retrospect, future philosophers will probably heroicize our age, just as we put our respected ancestors on a pedestal. Debates surrounding Speculative Realism, New Realism, New Materialisms or detailed accounts of vagueness, existence, advanced meta-ethics etc. have already produced a lot of wonderful philosophical work.

GH: That was a very complete answer, and a fascinating one. But moving now to a different topic, 'ontology' and 'metaphysics' are among the most slippery of basic philosophical terms. Philosophers all seem to define them in their own way. Could you explain your new way of distinguishing them, and tell us what work this distinction does in rearranging the traditional questions of first philosophy?

MG: I define the terms in the following way in order to disentangle them. By 'ontology' I mean the systematic investigation into the meaning of 'existence', or rather (because I am an ontological realist) into existence itself. Ontology deals with existence as a response to various existence questions (are there bosons? Numbers? Facts? Meaning? Nonphysical objects? Irreducible intentionality? Etc.).

In contradistinction, metaphysics deals with absolutely everything that exists. It is the most general discipline qua investigation into the nature of reality as such. It wants to answer the question how absolutely everything hangs together. Otherwise put, metaphysics is what you get if you believe in the unity of reality or the world, as I call it. Metaphysics is the 'wisdom of the world', as St. Paul puts it (in his critique of philosophy qua metaphysics). In the contemporary landscape, metaphysics has taken the shape of a meta-commentary on the most recent physical world-view, a literal meta-physics (a development notoriously criticized by Heidegger).

In the book, I propose that we see ontotheology as precisely a combination of ontology and metaphysics in my sense. Ontotheology is the view that we can only engage in ontology if we have a metaphysics. The most widespread ontotheological background assumption (arguably underlying mainstream contemporary metaphysics) is that to exist is to be part of the world or of reality, to be real. This is a paradigmatic instance of ontotheology: existence is accounted for in terms of a metaphysical view of the world. If it is possible to disentangle ontology from metaphysics, we can work out a non-metaphysical theory which allows us to understand existence. This is exactly what I am doing in the book.

Notice, however, that there are various other senses of 'metaphysics', in which the ontology of fields of sense is metaphysical, and these other senses ever since Plato and Aristotle have been bound up with metaphysics qua the most general investigation into the foundations of absolutely everything. To the extent to which it is possible to draw a clear distinction between ontotheological metaphysics and the senses of 'metaphysics' in which I am a practicing metaphysician, my work is a contribution to metaphysics in at least the following senses:

1. I argue that not all objects are physical. There really are some non-physical objects (such as truth, intentionality, Faust, the concept of an 'object', the Federal Republic of Germany, and moral values).

2. There is a (somewhat trivial) distinction between being and appearance flowing from the distinction between being true (*Wahrheit*) and taking to be true (*Fürwahrhalten*). But this distinction is not very substantial. For instance, if I hallucinate a plane in the blue sky after taking a hallucinogenic drug, I might believe that there is a plane in the sky. But the point about a hallucination here is that there is no such plane. Yet there was something, namely the appearance of a plane, which was of course not located where I thought the plane was. Also, the fictionally reported event of Faust getting drunk in a bar called 'Auerbachs Keller' should not mislead me into believing that it is a fact that Faust got drunk in Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig, such that someone could travel back in time and observe this. We can distinguish between fact and fiction, but this distinction is not between things which are part of reality and things made up. Faust and Macbeth are part of reality too, and many things are true about them. But if we know enough about them, we do not expect them to have been to Leipzig in the same way in which we could have been in Leipzig if we travelled back in time.

3. There would have been fields of sense had no one ever showed up to notice. They are, to borrow Meillassoux's language, as ancestral as it gets. It is therefore not the case that the real was really an overall worldly unity before speakers and thinkers started playing differentiating language games. Also, the ontology of fields of sense does not generally attribute the pluralizing of fields to language, thought or conceptualization (even though this is not ruled out as a subset of how new fields come into existence).

I am sure there are other senses in which fields of sense is metaphysical. However, ever since Ancient Greece in the West and India in the East, metaphysics as a theory supported by arguments (and not as a religious oceanic feeling of belonging to a whole) has been built on the basis of the assumption that there is a big world-whole of which we are a part. I am denying this. The remnants of metaphysics you can easily identity in fields of sense are not a cause for concern (as Carnap, Quine, Heidegger or Derrida might believe), but deflated cousins of the big novel of the past.

GH: On page 24 of the Introduction, you refer to Schelling's notoriously speculative *Freedom* essay as 'among the most important works in the history of ontology'. This is the kind of thing I would expect either Heidegger or Žižek to say, not the analytic philosophers you also admire. What makes Schelling's treatise so important, and what are analytic philosophers missing by refusing to take this rather arcane and romantic work seriously?

MG: Schelling is one of the first who tried to turn Kant's antinomies problem with the world-whole into an ontology. This is exactly the move celebrated by Žižek and attributed to Hegelian dialectics, but it happens earlier in Schelling and comes to a first peak in the *Freedom* essay. Kant famously argues that we cannot know anything about the world-whole. His critique of metaphysics is epistemological, a side-effect of his account of cognition as necessarily finite (as bound by intuition). Schelling accepts that there is something wrong with the idea of the world-whole, but he locates it on the ontological

side. For him, it is a feature of the 'essence of human freedom', which is the official topic of the treatise whose complete title is *Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and the Objects Associated With It*. If you read the text carefully, it turns out that the essence of human freedom is neither human nor free, but what he calls the 'non-ground' (*Ungrund*). According to my reconstruction of what he is after, he discovered that objects do not belong to a structured overall domain, but are individuated in different contexts. It is important to bear in mind that the German word *Grund* like its English counterpart 'ground' can also mean a region (as in 'hunting ground'). Schelling maintains that to exist consists in standing out (*ek-sistere*) from a ground. Existence for him is a relation between a ground (a field, as I call it) and the objects located there. The relation between various grounds (various fields) is not governed by overall rules. It is itself groundless, the non-ground. This groundlessness gives him access to a middle ground (my apologies for the pun!) between the idea of an overall deterministic system and the phenomena of freedom. He thereby, among other things, dissolves the dualism of freedom vs necessity and overcomes the usual conceptual distinctions which inform contemporary debates about free will.

In this context, he begins his investigation with an analysis of identity statements and comes to the conclusion that both informative and tautological non-contradictory identity statements are really claims to the effect that A = B in virtue of the fact that there is some x such that it is both the case that x is A and the case that x is B. The identity fact is neither A nor B, but the fact that there is something that is both of them in different respects. He thereby generalizes Spinoza's neutral monism by showing that identity is not substantial but functional: it serves a certain function in making sense of the plurality of phenomena. It is not a basis for reduction or elimination.

Schelling, of course, not only anticipates the influential Fregean distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*). Rather, he makes a different use of that distinction. For he reverses the Kantian order of explanation of the theory levels of philosophical reflection. According to the Kantian model, we need to make sense of how the level of judgment (of thinking) can ever latch onto objects. His transcendental idealistic 'solution' to this problem is that objects constitutively serve the function of grounding thought in reality. But on closer inspection this 'solution' is a cheat, for it merely introduces the idea of a judgment-independent object (of intuition) as an *ad hoc* repair mechanism of his notion of an empty thought without content. For Kant, empty thoughts without content are not logically impossible, rather they are widespread, as Kant invokes them in order to explain why metaphysics can be such an empty exercise when severed from possible experience.

Against this entire semantic framework (which still drives much of contemporary formal semantics), Schelling argues that the information conveyed by identity statements really consists in an insight into how things really are regardless of how we judge them to be. He argues that existence (and not merely the semantics governing the use of the word 'existence' in suitable contexts) has the form that things can only exist if there is a ground from which they stand out. But this means that we can construct the notion of a thing that remains the same even if we move it across different grounds. For instance, Napoleon is the same if we read about him in a history text book and in a fictional work such as *War and Peace*, but his mode of existence differs in the two cases.

This is just a sketch of some of the important ideas in Schelling's *Freedom* essay. By the way, Heidegger entirely misreads the text because he neglects the role of the non-ground. He thinks that Schelling defends a kind of anthropomorphic metaphysics of the will (*à la* Schopenhauer). But this is a ridiculous myth which even ignores the very title of the book: which promises us a theory not of human freedom, but of its essence.

GH: Scientistic philosophy often accuses its opponents of 'folk psychology'. But on page 35 of *Fields of Sense* you turn the tables briefly, referring to scientism as a form of 'folk metaphysics'. Could you please explain this claim?

MG: Unfortunately, a lot of contemporary metaphysics (which even in Anglophone contexts is sometimes attacked under the heading of 'analytic' metaphysics by philosophers of science such as Bas van Fraasen or James Ladyman) is based on an understanding of physics in terms of popular physics books written in a positivistic mode, such as the frequently cited books by Stephen Hawking or Brian Greene. Take the misguided debates about composition or colocation (which reads to me like a parody of

Aristotle): if there is a statue made of clay somewhere, are there two things (the clay and the statue) or is there really just one thing (a statue made of clay)? Are there really any tables or only elementary particles arranged tablewise? and so on. For one thing, it is simply not the case that tables consist of or are built out of elementary particles. I asked various physicists the metaphysical composition question about tables and not a single one ever told me that it even made sense to base such a claim on actual physics. They gave me various quite divergent reasons from physics to disbelieve naïve philosophical atomism. Folk metaphysics is metaphysics based on an insufficient grasp of actual science. It is a fantasy cultivated by philosophers who somehow want to believe that there is a 'subject supposed to know', to quote Lacan's famous phrase: that is, someone who must somehow have an empirical answer to a conceptual problem. But this is not the right way to think about the relation between conceptual problems and empirical work.

A very popular kind of folk metaphysics is what I call 'Legocentricism'. This model tells us that mesoscopic ordinary objects are composed of elementary particles in metaphysically the same way as a Lego house is composed of smaller bricks. But particles are neither bricks nor building blocks. This is why it is so hard for contemporary metaphysicians to take physics at face value when they are told that particles are more like smeared probabilities than like tiny indivisible chunks of stuff. It is mere superstition to believe that structures which are bigger relative to a certain scale must be composed of smaller objects relative to the same scale.

Another element of folk metaphysics is the popular idea that laws of nature somehow govern what happens or the equally wrongheaded (Humean) idea that laws of nature are abstract structures into which we somehow plug the worldly events whose intrinsic nature we can never grasp. All of this in my view is a metaphysical generalization of the experience of human beings, an extrapolation of categories that are supposed to apply to tables and chairs to the cosmos or nature or some other world-whole.

GH: You make another provocative claim on page 39: 'space-time is just not that central in ontology'. Why do you think space-time deserves a less prominent role than usual, and what trap do we fall into if we are among those who retain space-time at the center of philosophy?

MG: I believe that most objects are not spatio-temporal. Just take the numbers. There are many of them! Add republics, fictional objects, relations, and abstract structures such as information spaces or inferential relations, and you will soon notice that space-time looks much less impressive from the point of view of a more realist picture of what there is. Plus, there is a confusion out there. Space-time, insofar as it is the object under investigation by physics, is not a big container comprising all sorts of seemingly familiar things like stars, hands, and fingernails. It is not a big place (like China or the US, but much bigger) where things happen, but ultimately a model developed in order to explain certain phenomena with which we can become acquainted by different means. It therefore does not conflict with the manifest image. It does nothing to undermine it, but really aims at uncovering law-like regularities that play a role in the physics of some everyday phenomena such as light and electricity. It is not the case that once you know about electromagnetism, you will stop believing in thunderstorms or in magnetic iPads. There is no conflict between the laws of thermodynamics and the laws that regulate the temperature in apartments in New York City during the winter. The idea that modern science undermines 'common sense' presupposes a superstitious understanding of science and a wildly unsympathetic understanding of ordinary speech and thought which makes everybody who is not informed about a particular scientific fact look like a Medieval idiot (in the sense of the Middle Ages as a historically accurate *Game of Thrones*).

If we put space-time (or rather our metaphysical phantasmagoric version of it) at center stage in philosophy, the first effect is that many things which are as real as it gets begin to look less real. Suddenly republics, money, toothaches, and even our own thoughts about these things seem to emerge from a more fundamental level. This drives the popular distinction between concrete objects and abstract objects too, where the concrete ones are supposed to be spatio-temporal-causal (whatever exactly that means). Many philosophers even claim that to exist means to be part of space-time so that they feel like they need to reduce the ontological valence of the things that really matter to people's lives (such as pain, money, debt, justice, (the) God(s), the past, the future etc.). But again: space-time is an object under investigation from the standpoint of certain limited physical models that were never designed to

be metaphysical accounts of a big container comprising everything there is. And if they were, then the physicists who understood them in this way were wrong.

I remember when I heard the terms space and time for the first time in a philosophical context (I was fifteen years old and attended a philosophy lecture). Given that I knew already some physics from high school, I was really surprised to hear that there I should be in a space limited by three dimensions. How could that be, if what it is for something to be a dimension in that sense of the term is for it to be modelled along the lines of Cartesian coordinate systems, which certainly cannot exist out there? Nietzsche famously entertains the idea of the eternal return according to a similar intuition when he suggests that nothing in nature is really linear in the geometrical sense of the term. So why would time be metaphysically linear or why would space be Euclidean? I never got the hang of the idea of nature as Euclidean, or physical time as linear. When I then read the *Critique of Pure Reason* for the first time, I could not disagree more with Kant's arguments about space and time, as they seemed to be describing a mere model of something real, but nothing real. Of course, Google Maps is transcendentally ideal! And it is empirically real if this means that it helps us find our way around in cities because it is a map. In the same sense I believe Einsteinian space-time is transcendentally ideal and empirically real. It is more like a map than like a photograph. This does not mean that there is nothing which is sufficiently like the model predicts it to be. I am not a wild scientific anti-realist. But I do believe that space-time is only a limited region of the real, a field of sense among many others, one which is modelled by physics. There are other senses of 'space' and 'time' – such as those described and analyzed in the phenomenological tradition. There is no *metaphysical* conflict between Einstein and Bergson or Newton and Proust.

GH: On page 44, you proclaim that existence is 'the ontological property par excellence'. On the face of it, this seems to be the polar opposite of Kant's famous dictum that 'being is not a real predicate', found in his refutation of the so-called ontological proof for the existence of God. Are you taking an explicitly non-Kantian direction here, or is there still a kind of secret compatibility between Kant's principle and your own?

Kant actually does not deny that existence (being in the sense of *Dasein* / existence) is a property. He only argues that it is not a real predicate. For him, a real predicate is one that distinguishes an object in the field of possible experience (the world) from another object. Yet existence is a precondition for something to have properties by which it can be distinguished from other objects with the same field. This is the origin of the famous Fregean train of thought according to which existence is a second-level property, a feature of concepts. I agree with certain versions of this thought, but I give it a very different, realist interpretation. Fields of sense are not constrained by the limits of possible experience or by the existence of concepts. There are more fields of sense and objects than there are concepts and many objects outreach the ken of human inquisitiveness for different reasons. This is an ur-realist credo: even our best theories of what there is do not cover everything there is. Being and concept come apart at some level of analysis.

GH: What is probably the central idea of your book appears on page 65: 'to exist is to appear in a field of sense'. Obviously, you explain this claim with more than 300 pages of arguments that would be difficult to truncate here. But perhaps you could give a brief explanation of what you mean by this.

MG: Roughly, the resulting picture looks like this: numbers appear in the series of natural numbers (for instance); republics appear in history; bosons in the universe; the earth's moon in the Milky Way; your questions and my answers right now in the understanding (and most likely disagreeing) minds of our readers. The series of natural numbers, history, the universe, the Milky Way, and the minds of our readers are field where certain kinds of objects can be found. The term 'appearance' is a technical notion designed in order to establish a phenomenological lineage, as I would argue that Husserl or Heidegger were trying to give voice to this ontological idea, but failed to fully do so because of certain subjectivist or anthropological prejudices, which is why they both are obsessed with the question how the human life-world (or *Dasein*'s workshop, for that matter) fit into an otherwise inanimate dark, merely *vorhanden* universe described by Cartesian physics. (Here you see again what happens if you overrate space-time!)

The point of this construal of existence is that it allows us to overcome the idea that all sorts of

different things must be part of the same overall domain. There is just no sense of 'existence' on which republics and bosons exist in the same domain. The idea that we have to place everything in the same realm is only a side-effect of a false metaphysical ontology, as Quine noticed in 'On What There Is', where he also points out that it is misguided to identify existence with being spatio-temporal.

GH: Chapter Three is entitled 'What is Wrong with Kant and Frege?' Here too we find a detailed argument, but perhaps you could summarize for our readers what is wrong with these two major philosophers?

MG: Kant and Frege set out from a very reasonable thought which I call the 'ontological motive'. They wonder what kind of predicate 'existence' is. And they come to the conclusion that it is not a predicate picking out a property that everything has. However, they conclude from their insight that existence is not a run-of-the-mill predicate picking out properties spread out there in the world that it is tied to specifically human conditions of access to what there is. For instance, Kant maintains that to exist is to belong to the field of possible experience. But this means that we cannot meaningfully apply the predicate of existence to the field itself nor to objects had such a field of possible experience never existed, which creates all sorts of paradoxes: some of which Meillassoux attacks under his famous heading of 'correlationism'. Frege runs into similar problems, as he argues that to exist is to fall under a concept. But this creates a dilemma for him. Either nothing would have existed, had concept users never evolved (which is an odd consequence and smells like a misuse of the concept-word 'existence') or concepts would have existed, had no concept users ever evolved (which smells like a misuse of our concept-word 'concept). I therefore try to steer clear of these central anti-realist undercurrents which are built into their ontologies while accepting that existence is some kind of higher-level property, namely the relational property (or the function) mapping objects onto a field of sense.

GH: In Chapter Four you give a detailed critique of Badiou's use of set theory. Could you give our readers a brief explanation of what is wrong with the Badiouian approach?

MG: Badiou makes use of an extensionalist ontology. Sets are extensional creatures; they are individuated by their members. Two sets are identical if they have the same members. All his arguments for his version of a non-all are premised on the assumption that objects and existence can be modelled in terms of an extensionalist approach to what there is. But this entirely misses the fact that objects can only be thought of as existing under descriptions. His metaphysics is haunted by what Jocelyn Benoist has nicely labeled the 'myth of the colorless objects' [*le mythe des objects blancs*]. He does not recognize that his view of mathematics as ontology is a result of an abstraction (which Cantor points out and which is why Cantor himself explicitly rejects a Badiouian version of a non-all in his metaphysical letters!). It is wrong to believe that reality consists of ur-elements which can be grouped into sets. This would make reality as such unthinkable to any other discipline than mathematics, which amounts to an epistemological reduction of the view.

GH: Despite being rather critical of Badiou, you also make the tantalizing claim on page 130 that your own philosophy provides a middle ground between what you see as the incompatible positions of his two major works, *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*. What leads Badiou to miss this third, intermediate domain?

MG: In a word: his rejection of senses! He briefly considers an intensionalist ontology (like the one I spell out), but rejects it because he believes (for no good explicit reason) that senses are associated with religion. But what is religious about the idea of an intelligibility of the real? Deleuze, on the other hand, is a constructivist about senses. Form him 'sense is made' [*le sens est produit*] whereas I claim (in a similar vein as Mark Johnston) that sense is not generally produced, but typically 'sampled', as he puts it.

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou comes closer to a fields of sense kind of view because he introduces the notion of existence as intensity of appearance in a world. But I would not say that senses are intensities; they are more like rules which lend themselves to concept-formation. There is nothing inherently opaque in fields of sense, they do not 'love to hide', but this does not entail the quasi-religious view, to speak in Badiou's tone of voice, that the real (objects in fields of sense) cries out to be designated or thought about by humans or other intellects.

GH: Contemporary rationalisms, which have now proliferated even in the continental context, take the form either of mathematicism or scientism. You reject both of these approaches, and do so with especial wit in Chapter Four. In general terms, what is wrong with mathematicism and scientism?

MG: Both are world-views by attempting to give an account of absolutely everything there is in terms of the rules governing a specific, intellectually respectable discipline. One way of looking at what is going wrong here, relies on a subtle, but important distinction. Mathematics and physics have different domains of objects. You do not study numbers, sets, or graphs in physics and you do not study bosons or quantum entanglement in mathematics (despite the fact that the two disciplines are related in various ways). Or take another more obvious example: political science tells you something about the relation between citizenship and government, but neither object is in the domain of objects of physics. There are two ways of understanding what this means. The first (harmless) one realizes that physics cannot make justified claims about objects that lie outside its domain (that do not exist in the physical fields of sense). The second (harmful) one, which leads to mathematicism and scientism, realizes that there are no republics in the domain of physics, and conflates this with the claim that such objects therefore do not (really) exist. Mathematicism and scientism are overgeneralizations or overextensions of the ontologically grounded conceptual structure of some discipline or other. Sociologism ('knowledge is power', etc.) and politicism ('everything is political') make similar mistakes.

In a debate I once had with Meillassoux, he worried that my account undermined the unity of reason. But this is not the case! The unity of reason across different domains (different fields of sense) consists in largely formal inferential patters designed to give an account of how certain propositions hang together. But from the unity of reason alone you cannot conclude that some discipline or other is metaphysically privileged. There is a huge gap in any such rationalistic argument, a gap Fichte nicely labels a *hiatus irrationalis*.

GH: In Chapter Seven you develop your claim that the world does not exist. This is surely the most famous of your philosophical views, since it is the subject of your runaway bestseller in Germany, *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* [*Why the World Does Not Exist*], which recently appeared in English as well. Could you explain briefly why the world does not exist? Also, how is this claim different from the related claims of Badiou and Žižek that 'the whole is not'?

MG: Here is an abbreviated version of the argument:

(1) To exist is to appear in a field of sense.

(2) For fields of sense to exist is for them to appear in fields of sense.

(3) The world is neither the totality of objects nor of facts (because these two concepts do not cover the concept of existence).

(4) The world is the field of sense of all fields of sense (or else it is not a totality at all and, therefore, also not a kind of open totality or indefinitely extensible whole!).

(5) If the world exists, the field of sense of all fields of sense has to exist.

(6) But it cannot exist. If it existed, it would either have to appear in another field (not yet included in the world) or within itself.

(7) What appears in the world, is a field of sense alongside other fields.

(8) The world cannot be a field of sense alongside other fields.

(C) Therefore, the world does not exist, as it can neither appear in a field not included in the world nor alongside other fields.

Even though the argument has some more or less superficial similarities to Badiou and Žižek, it differs in almost all details. It does not identify domains with sets, for one thing. This is why it is not a version

of the (highly questionable!) application of set-theoretical paradoxes to ontology/metaphysics, as in Badiou's case. Žižek's version of a non-all draws on his notion of the subject as a void separating the One from itself, as he puts it in *The Parallax View*. He argues against totality on the basis of his notion of subjectivity and negativity, which plays no role in my account of existence.

GH: On page 231, but elsewhere in Part II as well, you speak in favor of objects as 'bundles' of facts held together by an 'organizing sense'. As you know, object-oriented philosophy has used Husserl's *Logical Investigations* to criticize severely the empiricist notion of objects as bundles, which I for one see as the biggest difference between Husserl and Brentano. What is the virtue of the bundle model of things? And furthermore, to what extent were you thinking here of Wittgenstein opening the *Tractatus* by saying that the world (a concept you disdain) is the totality of facts rather than things?

MG: The notion of a bundle of senses is not empiricist in nature, at least not in the sense attached to Husserl's criticism. The Husserlian arguments target a specific version of a bundle theory which dissolves objects in representations. You are right that there is some Wittgensteinian line in the background. Here is roughly how it goes: it does not make sense to claim that an object could be different from everything which is true about it. It is true of the moon that it has a certain mass, but also that it looks a certain way to observers like us and so on. If the moon were a substance such that it would be such-and-so without it being true that it is such-and-so we would wind up with an unintelligible notion of a core essence of objects in principle inaccessible to any truth-apt thought.

Notice that the bundle theory I propose is not a form of overmining, let alone duomining in the sense of your convincing criticism of traditional and contemporary reductive/eliminativist metaphysics. Rather, it has the theoretical virtue of making sense of evidently true statements; such as, that there are tables and that we can know all sorts of things about them because there is nothing inherent in a table that makes it unknowable. In the book, I argue that Husserl is not capable of giving a convincing account of the perspective features of human knowledge-acquisition precisely because he is heir to the empiricist idea that we do not directly perceive tables, but table adumbrations (just think here of his discussion of the empiricists in his 1923/24 *First Philosophy*). In my view, if I see a table from where I sit right now, I directly perceive a sense of the table, a way the table looks. I reject the assumption that tables have to be aperspectival entities so that we can construe perspectives as vehicles of access. This is what I mean in the book when I argue at the end that senses are ways things are in themselves.

GH: Let's linger with this question for a moment, since we may have some differences here. It sounds as if you re-describe Husserl's 'adumbrations' of a table as 'senses' of a table. This has the advantage that you don't need to draw any strict distinction between the intentional object and its adumbrations, and therefore you can avoid the problem of the relation between these two. But then what allows you to say that all the 'senses' of the table as we slowly circle it and see it from different angles are nonetheless all senses of the same table? Or would you reject that notion? If so, then your ontology would become radically relational in the manner of Alfred North Whitehead or Bruno Latour.

I have one other question. One of the interesting things about Husserl is that he actually drives a wedge between intentional objects and two kinds of qualities. On the one hand, the table cannot be identified with its various adumbrations, since these are what we are supposed to get rid of in order to reach the essence of the table. But on the other, Husserl thinks that the table does have essential qualities that we can ultimately intuit as long as we do our phenomenology properly. The difference for him, of course, is that the essential qualities of the table cannot be grasped with the senses, but only with the intellect. I don't actually see why the intellect would grasp an essence any better than the senses, or any better than praxis for that matter (perhaps it's the Heideggerian in me). But do you think that there are two different kinds of qualities for a table or anything else? And if not, then you are abandoning any idea of essence, which is fine, though it does run the risk of saying that any sense of a table is as good as any other sense.

The senses of the table (its objective looks) are properties of the table. The table has the property of looking a certain way if seen from here. If I see the same table from another angle, I can come to know

that the two properties (the two looks or properties) are of the same object. We have many successful ordinary practices that allow us to identify tables and similar things across a plurality of senses. At this point it is tempting to say (with Descartes and Husserl) that the table itself is grasped by the intellect and not by the senses. But I block this move by reconsidering the role of the senses here. In the last chapter of *Fields of Sense*, I argue that senses are 'ways things are in themselves' and that what we call our 'senses' deserve that name, not because they filter information coming from some kind of beyond inhabited by aperspectival essences, but because they are 'out there'. To misuse a famous phrase from Hilary Putnam: 'senses just ain't in the head.'

In the book, I endorse a weak essentialism, by which I mean to refer to the idea that there is functional organization of a plurality of senses such that we can identity a center around which they gravitate, as it were. Take the table: we can say that a bunch of senses are of a table. If this is true, the table will be a governing sense for this way of seeing things. Yet, we can also choose to see the senses as emerging from an expensive art work or a subatomic arrangement. Otherwise put, there are many essences we pick out by organizing the senses given to us. However, this does not mean that we construct objects out of given sensory material. We are not screened off from objects, but rather have access to an indefinitely large variety of objects in any situation we cognitively inhabit. There are, as it were, too many essences in any situation which we then confuse with there being no essence. The problem is thus the implicit monism about essences: there is an age-old Platonic / Aristotelian notion according to which there is always only one essence at a time, so to speak. The vulgar example for this view is the problem of the statue: how can there be a statue and a lump of clay in the same spot given that they have different identity conditions? My answer to this question is that relative to one field of sense there is a statue (and accordingly the governing sense 'statue') and relative to another one that is a lump of clay (and accordingly the governing sense 'lump of clay') and so *ad indefinitum*. I merely deny that there is a further underlying more metaphysical unity or essence.

Now, is this ontology relational? It depends on how exactly you flesh out the idea of a relational ontology. I certainly do not want to say that there are only relations without relata. If we have relations, we need relata and one thing one wants to say about relata is that many relations are such that their relata can enter into other relations. Yet, the capacity of a relatum to enter into other relata does not mean that objects are absolutes. Any absolute is absolute relative to some kind of relation which it could enter or not.

GH: Chapter Ten develops what seems to me like one of the most interesting ideas in *Fields of Sense*: the claim that object is to actuality what field is to potentiality. Could you please explain this briefly? Also, how would you respond to a Deleuzean who says that you miss 'virtuality', different from both the actual and the potential? (Deleuzians just love to accuse people of 'confusing the potential with the virtual'.It's almost a tribal ritual with them by now, like offering tea to a guest or handing a peace pipe around.)

MG: Given that I operate with a notion of existence as appearance in a field of sense which combined with the no-world-view yields a denial of the existence of the actual world (not even to mention other possible worlds), I have to remodel our modal concepts. My proposal is to identify existence and actuality. What exists is an object, and objects exist qua appearances in fields of sense. They are actual relative to given fields. If we abstract from the fact that certain objects o_1, o_2, …, o_n appear in a given field of sense in order to grasp the sense which individuates the field as this-rather-than-that-field, we grasp the concept of possibility. For instance, it is possible that I become a Spanish citizen. I could appear in the field of sense of Spanish citizenship, because the senses required in identifying something (that is someone) as a Spanish citizen are compatible with my becoming a Spanish citizen. This does not mean that there is a possible world in which I (if I exist there) am a Spanish citizen. It means the governing sense that you take into account when you wonder whether M.G. could become a Spanish citizen and the senses in play in the constitution of Spanish citizenship are compatible. You are, therefore, not talking about the actual course of events, what happens to Spanish citizens, what happened to them and will happen, as I might never become a Spanish citizen.

If I understand the notion correctly, Deleuzian 'virtuality' refers to the modal status of events/objects

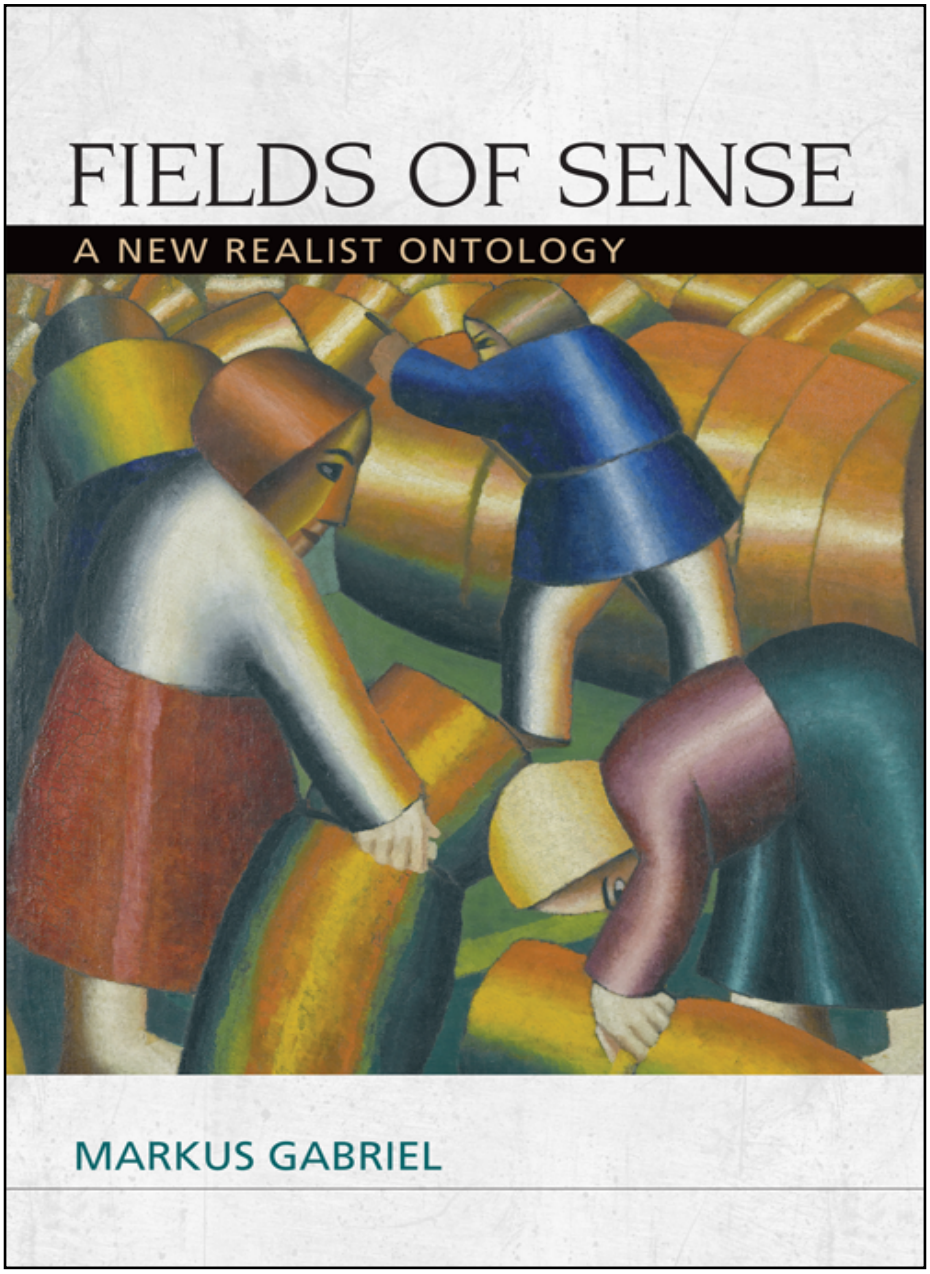
which are neither actual (not part of the causal order in the ordinary sense of the term) nor merely abstract. It refers to a category between the usual dichotomy splitting objects into abstract and concrete ones. Here, I entirely concur with Deleuze: of course many things are virtual in his sense (the contents of my thoughts, the look of that table over there seen from here etc.) One point of the new realism that I am defending is precisely that the real is not exhausted by the causal. It is also not exhausted by a conjunction of concrete and abstract objects.

GH: Where do you go next from the theory outlined in *Fields of Sense*? Are there some parts of the book that you would like to develop further, or will your coming projects point in a different direction entirely?

MG: *Fields of Sense* puts up a scaffolding for reframing many central questions in philosophy. It denies the major assumption which has haunted metaphysics since its inception: namely, the question how everything there is can be part of a single, overall, unified whole. If I am right that it is possible to forgo that assumption, we have very good reasons to take a fresh look at old paradoxes and apparent riddles. Right now, I am working on defending some ideas that are associated with the ontology of *Fields of Sense*. In particular, I am working out which metametaphysical/metaontological views are compatible with my view and which one might be the view about what exactly we are doing when engaged in ontological theory construction. In this context, I am spelling out the consequences of the ontology for recent debates about deflationary ontologies and their respective metaontology.

Another project on which I will be working for a while turns on the notion of a fiction. Some philosophers have objected to my ontology on the ground that they take it to conflict with the notion that there is a metaphysical contrast between fiction and reality, or rather between fiction and existence. Against this background, I intend to work out how to be a realist in regions of thought and discourse that have invited fictionalist treatments (including, of course, fiction in the sense of a mode of artistic presentation, but also fiction in the realm of the social and in the philosophy of mind). Given that I reject the Nietzschean motivations for the kinds of fictionalism that are prominent today in various biotopes of philosophical thinking, I am interested in revisiting the conceptual links between fiction and imagination and their connection to the human mind insofar as it is embedded in social contexts.

In a word, after laying the groundwork for ontology/metaontology, the next logical step is to take a fresh look at subjectivity, one that does not rely on the notion that the subject is an exception or something that overthrows an otherwise subject-less overall order etc., as these metaphysical motivations are premised on world-views which I have rejected in Fields of Sense. This involves rethinking our concepts of various kinds of failed subjectivities tied to notions such as ideology, hallucination, fiction, madness, illusion and so on. Contemporary epistemology overemphasizes the role of success concepts (knowledge, justification, intuition…) for our understanding of our subjective standing with respect to what there is. Against this, there is the age-old suspicion (clearly articulated in Plato, the founder of epistemology) that it is much harder to grasp the even more elusive failures of epistemic subjectivity than to give an account of the conceptual structure of its successes.



Fields of Sense

A New Realist Ontology

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