



**EVERYTHING**

**AND**

**NOTHING**

**MARKUS GABRIEL**

**GRAHAM PRIEST**

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# **Everything and Nothing**

Markus Gabriel  
Graham Priest

polity

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# Preface

This book had its origin when Markus Gabriel (MG) invited Graham Priest (GP) to give the Ernst Robert Curtius Lecture at the University of Bonn in November 2017. The recording of the lecture found its way onto the internet.<sup>1</sup> Laureano Ralón saw it and suggested that it might form the beginning of a discussion between us on the matters raised, which could be turned into a book. He kindly offered to be involved in the realization of the project. This book is the result.

The Introduction is by Laureano. [Chapter 1](#) is the written-up version of the original lecture. [Chapters 2, 3, and 4](#), written respectively by MG, GP, and MG, continue the discussion. These form [Part I](#) of the book. Philosophical discussions are often most productive when pursued face to face. So, in August 2021, GP visited MG in Bonn, where we spent a week together in order to explore further the dialectical space of matters. [Part II](#) comprises edited versions of the discussions that took place. Finally, we thought that an essay by Gregory Moss might be an appropriate capping stone for the discussion, since he is familiar with both our works but has his own take on matters. Happily, he agreed to write such an essay, and this forms [Part III](#) of the book.

Laureano and Greg both have distinctive views on the matters of the book, and the fact that we include them here does not necessarily imply that we agree with them. Indeed, it will probably be clear that in places we do not. However, we welcome their perspectives on matters and are grateful to them for the roles they have played in bringing this book into existence. As will be even more clear, we do not always reach agreement with each other,

but such is philosophy; and it has been a pleasure for each of us to engage with the thought of the other.

We thank Philipp Bohlen, Alexander Englander, and Jan Voosholz for their tremendous help during the editing process and for their inputs to our discussions. Moreover, MG thanks his team (in addition to the ones already mentioned: Charlotte Gauvry, Laura Michler, Joline Kretschmer and Jens Rometsch) for their philosophical contributions to the detailed debates we had about MG's chapters during the writing process. Laura Michler and Joline Kretschmer also helped with the editing process of those chapters. We owe thanks to the University of Bonn, in particular to the International Centre for Philosophy for supporting this project with funding for the Curtius lecture as well as for GP's visit in August 2021. This would not have been possible without the help of MG's assistant, Annette Feder, who made sure that our meetings could safely take place under the complicated conditions of an ongoing pandemic.

Last but not least, we would like to thank John Thompson from Polity Press for his enthusiasm for this project and his ongoing support.

Markus Gabriel, Bonn,  
Graham Priest, New York,  
January 2022

[1. www.youtube.com/watch?v=66enDcUQUK0&t=2s.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66enDcUQUK0&t=2s)

# Introduction

## *Laureano Ralón*

This volume gathers together writings by two of the most ingenious living philosophers of our time. Markus Gabriel and Graham Priest need no introduction, but the circumstances that brought them together and, by implication, my own involvement in this project need to be made explicit. I came up with the basic idea and format of this book after watching Priest's Robert Curtius Lecture of Excellence on the subject of "everything and nothing," delivered at the University of Bonn's International Center of Philosophy in the fall of 2017. At the time, I had just completed the required coursework for my PhD and was travelling through Europe as an exchange student, attending as many advanced graduate seminars as I could in ontology and metaphysics. These were being taught by a new generation of realist and materialist philosophers (Quentin Meillassoux, Maurizio Ferraris and Graham Harman, among others), all of whom were widely regarded as challenging the anti-realist, phenomenological and postmodern heritage of twentieth-century continental philosophy - an orthodoxy that has been referred to as a "well-entrenched mixture of phenomenological subjectivism, post-Foucaultian systematic genealogical skepticism and late-Derridean exasperated textualism."<sup>1</sup> It was during that trip that I met Gabriel in person at a talk he gave at the University of Paris (Panthéon-Sorbonne), where he discussed what is arguably his most systematic book, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology*.<sup>2</sup> As for Priest, I discovered his ground-breaking work in logic and metaphysics shortly afterwards, when I was trying to figure out the meaning of Meillassoux's "contradictory entity," an



enigmatic concept he introduces in *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Meillassoux writes:

As contradictory, this entity is always-already whatever it is not. Thus, the introduction of a contradictory entity into being would result in the implosion of the very idea of determination – of being such and such, of being this rather than that. Such an entity would be tantamount to a “black hole of differences”, into which all alterity would be irremediably swallowed up, since the being-other of this entity would be obliged, simply by virtue of being other than it, *not* to be other than it.<sup>3</sup>

What was this entity which was said to be every single thing *and* nothing in particular, an illogical *something* that seemed to defy ontological classification? And how was it different from Priest’s own account of nothing(ness), which he likewise defined as a paradoxical yet not completely illogical entity – both an object and the absence of all objects?

In 2018, I had a chance to interview Priest for the website [www.figureground.org](http://www.figureground.org), motivated by these and other questions concerning his novel take on such fundamental issues as everything, nothing, the nature of objects, and their mereological sum or fusion via “gluons” – a metaphysical entity I had never heard of before, but which seemed to play an indispensable role in his ontological system. In addition to discussing different aspects of his work and thought, we addressed contemporary developments in so-called continental realism,<sup>4</sup> zooming in on Markus Gabriel’s fields-of-sense ontology. Off the record, we also touched on the meaning of Meillassoux’s contradictory entity, with Priest making the important observation that Meillassoux never actually endorses the possibility of a contradictory object in *After Finitude*. Indeed, he does quite the opposite: for the French

philosopher, a truly contradictory entity is inconceivable in the context of his ontological materialism, which embraces radical contingency while affirming the principle of identity in order to differentiate his own take on speculation from earlier approaches that took the form of differential process ontologies. This is why Meillassoux also writes that,

Accordingly, real contradiction can in no way be identified with the thesis of universal becoming, for in becoming, things must be this, *then* other than this; they are, *then* they are not. This does not involve *any* contradiction, since the entity is never simultaneously this and its opposite, existent and non-existent. A really illogical entity consists rather in the systematic destruction of the minimal conditions for all becoming – it suppresses the dimension of alterity required for the deployment of any process whatsoever, liquidating it in the formless being which must always already be what it is not.<sup>5</sup>

Strictly speaking, Meillassoux's contradictory entity is not an object but a limit concept introduced from a negative heuristic to set the limits of his speculative enterprise, which, as I understand it, should be interpreted not as a form of materialism but as a study of modality.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Priest's conception of nothing(ness) as a paradoxical entity which is simultaneously an object *and* the absence of all objects is presented as a *true contradiction* and as the *ground of reality*. In other words, the ground of reality for Priest is neither a super-chaotic and hyper-contingent Great Outdoors (Meillassoux), nor a primordial flux of vital becoming (Bergson), nor an aesthetic realm of intensive processes (Whitehead), virtual multiplicities or larval subjects (Deleuze). Instead, the ground of reality is nothing(ness) understood as a truly contradictory entity – an entity which does not exist

because it is not embedded in the spatio-temporal and causal nexus but nevertheless possesses a reality of its own: *the reality that makes it what it is*. If, with the notion of hyper-chaos, Meillassoux sought to differentiate his philosophy not only from the above-mentioned Heideggerian/Derridean orthodoxy but also from its more affirmative and crypto-vitalistic alternative (the kind of relational/dynamic metaphysics introduced by Bergson and Whitehead and perfected by Deleuze and Latour), in Priest we find a “persistence of the negative”<sup>7</sup> that returns him anew to the Kant–Hegel–Heidegger axis that earlier analytic philosophers – following in the footsteps of Moore and Russell – had rejected at the turn of the twentieth century. More importantly for our purposes, Priest’s emphasis on nothing(ness) brings him in close proximity to the New Realism of Gabriel, which, unlike other forms of continental realism, is heavily influenced by German idealism and Husserlian/ Heideggerian phenomenology.

Although Gabriel and Priest had already exchanged views informally on the subject of everything and nothing, the Figure/Ground interview served as an important catalyst for the present book. One of the most compelling aspects of the Figure/Ground repository is that it is more than a mere aggregate of interviews. In fact, the collection is more like a sum or fusion in the technical sense utilized by Priest, with each entry referring to other entries to form a network that exhibits a certain diachronicity. Interestingly enough, during our conversation Priest expressed the need for further dialogue across the continentalanalytic divide, confessing to be surprised that the continental realism with which Gabriel and Meillassoux are associated rarely alludes to the fact that so-called analytic philosophers reacted against this anti-realism much earlier. This was a provocative remark, to which we should add that the name itself – “New Realism” – was borrowed more or less

consciously from a very specific Anglo-American development. In "A Brief History of New Realism," Maurizio Ferraris – the other founding member of twenty-first-century New Realism – traces the origins of the turn to six American philosophers who, back in the 1910s, called themselves the "New Realists," namely, Walter Taylor Marvin, Ralph Barton Perry, Edward Gleason Spaulding, Edwin Bissel Holt, William Pepperell Montague, and Walter Boughton Pitkin:

These names are unlikely to ring a bell to the reader – which speaks for the little success of the movement. New Realism had no Bertrand Russell nor any Wittgenstein or Moore. In the successive phase of "critical realism", it had Lovejoy, Santayana, and Sellars (Roy Wood, father of the more famous Wilfrid Sellars), but the philosophical mainstream went along with analytic philosophy, which seemed to envisage a stronger break and more interesting new approaches.<sup>8</sup>

A few comments about this passage are in order. First, the New Realists of the early twentieth century were not doing analytic or scientific metaphysics but, rather, philosophy of perception; they were arguing with British Idealists such as T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley, and Bernard Bosanquet about whether the content of perceptual episodes was confined to the mind. Second, Ferraris's conclusion that the New Realists became extinct with the advent of the linguistic turn is a little too hasty. Although it is true that, on some narratives, New Realism was abandoned because it embraced a very demanding version of perceptual realism (one requiring that hallucinations and illusions be just as real as veridical perceptions), we should not forget that the New Realists did strongly influence the ecological psychology of J. J. Gibson, who in turn influenced Hubert Dreyfus's highly influential reading of Heidegger. From there to Harman's object-oriented philosophy there are but

a few steps. As for the “interesting new approaches” alluded to by Ferraris, in the Figure/Ground interview Priest himself identified a strong theme of realism in analytic philosophy throughout the twentieth century. The resurgence of realism in analytic metaphysics that Priest refers to is most likely the realism in the 1970s of Kripke, David Lewis, and David Armstrong, who in a way were rejecting the anti-realism of Carnap, Quine, and Nelson Goodman.

Beyond this trajectory, however, there is an “undercurrent” in analytic philosophy, somewhat occluded from view by the empiricist surface of analytic philosophy, which Robert Brandom associates with a “Neo-Kantian tradition” comprising David Lewis, Rudolf Carnap, Wilfrid Sellars, and John McDowell. As Brandom sees it, the narrative of the history of analytic philosophy initiated by Moore and Russell, according to which the movement was given its characteristic defining shape as a recoil from Hegel (a certain Hegel – one seen through the lenses of the British Idealism), necessitated a concomitant rejection of Kant, since these thinkers “understood enough about the Kantian basis of Hegel’s thought to know that a *holus bolus* rejection of Hegel required a diagnosis of the idealist rot as having set in already with Kant.”<sup>9</sup> Now, for Brandom, this narrative picks out but one current in the analytic river; it does not reflect the whole story, and I tend to agree with him. Although Priest’s background is in logic, he can be said to join Sellars, Brandom, and McDowell in the rediscovery of Kant and Hegel that took place in analytic philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>10</sup> and I cannot emphasize strongly enough that this is one aspect of his philosophical orientation – together with his interest in oriental thought – that renders the conversation with Gabriel and the new German philosophy so fruitful. For, unlike Meillassoux, Harman, and Ferraris,

Gabriel does not think that we need to combat Kantian correlationism in order to combat anthropocentrism and embrace a realist conception of sense. The complementarity of sentience and sapience, sensibility and understanding, is ineliminable for both Gabriel and Priest, even though they both try to overcome traditional (Aristotelian) and modern (Kantian) metaphysics and salvage the role of philosophical speculation by exploring what lies beyond the limits of human cognition. It is this basic tacit agreement that the Kantian revolution constitutes a point of no return for philosophy that makes it possible for them to converse and disagree in meaningful and constructive ways.

Later in the Figure/Ground interview, Priest had a chance to address Gabriel directly:

*What's your take on Markus Gabriel's fields-of-sense ontology?*

I'm very sympathetic to the idea that everything is what it is by being in a network (field, if you like) in which it relates to other things. That's very similar to Markus' view, I think - though I am coming at it from Mahayana Buddhist views concerning emptiness. There is one important difference between us here, though. Markus takes these fields to be local: there are many relatively autonomous fields. I think that in the last instance there is one single field. This is essentially the Chinese Huayan Buddhist version of the Indian view. (All these things are explained in Part 3 of my book *One* (OUP, 2014).) Another difference between us is that Markus holds that there is no world, i.e., no sum of everything. I think there is: it is simply the mereological whole comprising all objects (as I explained in the Bonn lecture). Essentially, Markus infers his view (though not explicitly) from the claim that the proper parthood relation cannot be antisymmetric. I think it can be.<sup>11</sup>

At stake is the difference between a radical ontological pluralism (Gabriel's position) that is completely disconnected from the dualistic Parmenidean heritage systematized by Plato and Aristotle - a universe where there is technically neither everything nor nothing(ness) but an ever expanding in-between consisting of objects appearing in fields nested in other fields in an infinite regress of sense - *and* a pluralistic monism (Priest's position) in which objects fuse together with other objects to create ever larger mereological sums that top out at the mega-object "everything," which paradoxically can be part of itself due to a *principle of symmetry*. I will do my best to unpack these two positions in just a moment, but first I should say a little more about how this project came into being.

Given the passage I have just quoted, the next logical step after the Priest interview (which to date remains one of the most widely read Figure/Ground entries) was to approach Gabriel and invite him to respond in the spirit of good conversation. Gabriel accepted right away. However, I immediately realized that an in-depth discussion about such fundamental metaphysical categories as everything and nothing(ness) deserved a more comprehensive back-and-forth than the Figure/Ground environment could afford. Against my better judgment, the sensible alternative was to revert to the gold standard and propose a collaborative volume taking the form of a polemic in which the two philosophers would have a chance to exchange their views and address/criticize their respective ontological commitments at some length. To my surprise, our protagonists welcomed the idea enthusiastically, and in no time we had signed a contract with Polity Press, which now delivers a fine edition aptly titled *Everything and Nothing*.

Having an original idea in philosophy is the closest we get to a miracle. Over the past few decades, Gabriel and Priest have made ground-breaking contributions to a field that is in urgent need of rejuvenation. I believe they managed to do so by strategically situating themselves within a zone of indiscernibility where the borders separating the problematic analytic-continental divide in philosophy tend to soften. "It is agreeable to imagine a future in which the tiresome 'analytic-continental split' is looked back upon as an unfortunate, temporary breakdown of communication," writes Richard Rorty<sup>12</sup> in his introduction to Wilfrid Sellars's *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Like Sellars, Rorty, Brandom, and McDowell, Priest is part of a new generation of analytic philosophers that is well read in the work of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and the Pragmatist tradition. Similarly, Gabriel is part of a new generation of



continental philosophers that is not afraid to engage with their analytic counterparts, aware that both sides of the split share common German roots in the work of Husserl and Frege. If the labels “post-analytic” and “post-continental” mean anything, they serve to emphasize the disposition of philosophers who, like Gabriel and Priest, are willing to meet each other halfway to realize Rorty’s vision. However, unlike Rorty and like Sellars, Gabriel and Priest recognize that metaphysics always returns; that any attempt to eliminate its meta-conceptual resources is destined to fail. Although metaphysics had a tough time in the twentieth century, with virtually everybody on both sides of the Atlantic – from phenomenology through pragmatism and logical empiricism to postmodernism – agreeing that it was a lost cause, metaphysics (a certain metaphysics, at least) is now back in fashion. For the consummation of metaphysics, both traditional and modern, does not imply the absolute end of metaphysics. *Something* must take its place as we leave it behind, and, in Gabriel and Priest, we find creative attempts to explore what lies beyond the limits of human thought but always conscious that the main Kantian conquests cannot be relinquished. Above all, metaphysics is ontology and epistemology, for, otherwise, how do we *know* that what we say exists *truly* exists? Ray Brassier expresses this problematic best when he writes:

Ontology is an attempt to answer the question “What is there?” But this cannot be answered by listing names of entities, for example, “table,” “chair,” “tree,” “Cyprus,” “Dante,” and “Aeroflot.” “Table,” “chair,” and “tree” are common nouns – that is, names for types of objects. “Cyprus,” “Dante,” and “Aeroflot” are proper nouns – that is, names for particular objects. Listing nouns, whether names of types or names of particulars, is uninformative because it offers us names without explaining what a name is or how it is related to its nominatum. If ontology is to take the measure of Kant’s critique of dogmatic metaphysics, it cannot remain content with conjuring yet another more or less arbitrary account of what there is; it must explain how we *know* what there is.<sup>13</sup>

Although I said at the outset that Gabriel and Priest needed no introduction, I believe the main challenge for readers of a book like this is to determine where exactly each thinker stands on the various issues being discussed, especially as philosophical lines are constantly being redrawn in the new century and historical metaphysics is slowly being replaced by *something* else. In what follows, I provide some basic pointers to orientate the reader, and I will do so by situating the exchange between Gabriel and Priest against the background of recent developments in continental philosophy.

The first hypothesis that I would like to suggest is that, when our protagonists refer to everything and nothing(ness), they do so with an eye on what lies between these two poles: mainly objects but also facts, fields of sense, gluons, and so on. It is important not to lose sight of this “in-between” because all along there is a sense in which everything (the most general metaphysical category) and nothing (the most empty metaphysical category) connect on some level. And, if they do connect, it is partly

because both thinkers follow Heidegger in conceiving of *nothing* as *something* that is more interesting than just *nothingness* understood as the ineffable, the absolute absence of objects, or what we get when we remove all things and are left with nothing. In modern Western philosophy the concept of nothingness is typically associated with Hegel, although I should point out that, in the *Transcendental Analytic*, Kant offers an interesting and little discussed “table of nothing,” in which he makes a valiant effort to think through the intricacies of nothingness. Kant begins by observing that his discussion of the concept “nothing,” though “not in itself especially indispensable, nevertheless may seem requisite for the completeness of the system.”<sup>14</sup> He then constructs a fourfold table of nothing where the notion takes the form of 1) an empty concept without an object (*ens rationis*), 2) an empty object of a concept (*nihil privativium*), 3) an empty object without a concept (*nihil negativium*), and 4) an empty intuition without an object (*ens imaginarium*). Kant writes:

One sees that the thought-entity (No. 1) is distinguished from the non-entity (No. 4) by the fact that the former may not be counted among the possibilities because it is a mere invention (although not selfcontradictory), whereas the latter is opposed to possibility because even its concept cancels itself out. Both, however, are empty concepts. The nihil privativium (No. 2) and the ens imaginarium (No. 3), on the contrary, are empty *data* for concepts. If light were not given to the senses, then one would also not be able to represent darkness, and if extended beings were not perceived, one would not be able to represent space. Negation as well as the mere form of intuition are, without something real, not objects.<sup>15</sup>

An in-depth discussion of Kant's table of nothing is well beyond the scope of this introduction. What is important to note, for our purposes, is that both Gabriel and Priest are much more liberal and democratic than Kant was in terms of the kinds of entities that can be *bona fide* objects (unicorns, Peter Pan, Sherlock Holmes, etc.). Whereas Kant applies the category of nothing to a series of intangible, impossible, and imaginary entities such as shadows, squared circles, and so on, for Gabriel and Priest these are perfectly good objects insofar as they can appear in specific fields of sense or else be the correlates of an intentional state. In a way, Kant not only degrades certain objects (such as shadows) by turning them into nothingness; he also degrades "nothing" by inadvertently turning it into *something*.

Fundamentally, the problem with Kant's table of nothing is that it approaches the issue by way of marginal objects, things that in his view are not part of possible experience, since only objects of sensibility - phenomenal appearances that are encountered in space and time and can be subsumed under empirical concepts and general categories - technically exist for him. Of course, Gabriel would oppose this on the grounds that it suffices for an object to appear in a field of sense in order for it to exist, and Priest would oppose it by stating that there *are* non-existing objects which are perfectly good objects, even though they do not exist insofar as they lack causal efficacy.

Unlike Kant and Hegel, Priest follows in the footsteps of Heidegger and asks whether the nothing can be conceived in a way that is neither nothingness nor an impossible object. Is there a nothing *qua* object in addition to the ineffable nothingness? This is a question that Priest - and to some extent also Gabriel - is willing to entertain, although both come at it from slightly different angles as a result of their respective ontological commitments. For

Gabriel, the nothing is a limit concept much in the same way as Meillassoux's contradictory entity is a limit concept. We catch a glimpse of the "nothing" as distinct from nothingness when we try to think about the "world" *qua* mega-object or all-encompassing totality, which does not and cannot exist. For the world to exist it would have to constitute itself as the field of sense of all fields of senses, which is impossible in a truly pluralistic universe disconnected from the Parmenidean axis. For Priest, on the other hand, the mega-object everything is an object like any other, albeit one as paradoxical as the object "nothing" insofar as everything can be a proper part of itself.

The second hypothesis that I would like to suggest is a little more controversial, namely, that Gabriel and Priest not only try to rethink metaphysics in a post-metaphysical context; they also provide important resources for to rethink *flat ontology* in the aftermath of the realist/speculative turn in post-continental philosophy. I acknowledge that the idea is not entirely original since, in a chapter provocatively titled "How Flat Can Ontology Be?," Gabriel had already addressed the principle of flat ontology at some length, claiming that "what DeLanda describes is rather a flat metaphysics than a flat ontology."<sup>16</sup> Briefly, the term "flat ontology" was popularized in the new century by Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman as a basic tenet of their respective ontological systems. In assemblage theory and object-oriented philosophy, the term became synonymous with a non-hierarchical, horizontal and unilateral ontology without epistemology, part of a more general move to combat the asymmetry of anthropocentrism by rejecting the epistemic correlation associated with Kantian transcendentalism. In DeLanda's pioneering attempt to devise a naturalized assemblage theory, the parts of a whole (what he sometimes calls the "material" and "symbolic components" of the assemblage) are said to

interact with each other through *relations of exteriority* which, unlike relations of interiority, are said to be *obligatorily contingent* rather than *logically necessary*. As such, these relations articulate or express a more fundamental solidarity among things that in a way serves to invert the tired postmodern “motto” that the whole is larger than the sum of its parts – or what DeLanda calls the “organismic metaphor.”<sup>17</sup> One consequence of this is that the parts are regarded as greater than the whole, since every individual component is not exhausted by the place it occupies in that whole but withdraws or withholds a surplus in reserve like the potentialities of an untapped oil field.

The important thing to note is that, in the context of this antianthropocentric move, objects are conceived no longer as intentional objects or objects-for-consciousness, the correlations of intentional states, but as *objects-for-themselves*, autonomous units that are irreducible upward to their relations with other objects (overmining) and downward to their most fundamental components and micro-processes (undermining). If phenomenology attempts to explain the mind in terms of the mind itself – that is, without any scientific attempts to reduce consciousness to its material neurological base or microphysical brain processes – then Harman’s own version of flat ontology – his object-oriented radicalization of Heideggerian phenomenology – constitutes an attempt to explain objects as being just themselves in a world without human spectators. Suddenly, there were “objects everywhere,”<sup>18</sup> and every single thing in the universe, both human and inhuman, was considered to be an object at the most fundamental (ontological) level. Unlike idealist and constructivist subject-oriented philosophies, object-oriented ontology was said to be not only *flat* but also *democratic* since, again, every single thing in the universe was

reconceived as an object and all objects were meant to be equally objects. Objects *qua* objects were capable of interacting and communicating among themselves at the ontological level through basic (neither cognitive nor causal) mechanisms that did not necessitate the conceptual resources of the human understanding; nor were they determined by the physical micro-processes we associate with nature. Objects-for-themselves – by virtue of being objects and nothing more – created networks and assemblages that replicated themselves while simultaneously and paradoxically withdrawing into themselves to become generative mechanisms, a kind of executant or infra-reality responsible for what took place in the realm of experience, namely, the emanation of caricatures or sensual façades (which has more to do with the objectivation of phenomena than with the subjectivation of appearances by a human subject).

These early expressions of continental realism were extremely controversial and caught on only in specialized fields and sub-fields such as architecture, media studies, and literary criticism. Within philosophy proper, however, they were subject to harsh criticism. Although Gabriel's field of sense ontology emerged against the background of the speculative turn associated with Meillassoux, Harman, DeLanda, and Ferraris – and to this day Gabriel defends a realist conception of sense, claiming among other things that existence *qua* “appearing is fairly inhuman”<sup>19</sup> – his own version of “New Realism” does not constitute a dogmatic regress to a substantialist or unilateral ontology; nor does his philosophy propose a thoroughly revisionist process metaphysics such as that of Whitehead or Deleuze. To be sure, Gabriel's ontology is flat not because it rejects epistemology in favor of a more originary domain that is neither the logical space of reasons, nor the natural space of causes, nor the phenomenological space of motivations.

After all, he is well aware that metaphysics is both ontology and epistemology even as he tries to defend a realist conception of sense. Instead, a close look at his *metametaphysics* reveals that, in addition to objects appearing in fields of sense, there are facts and a global sense of the situation. Hence, a basic epistemic dimension is contemplated by Gabriel, albeit one that has been unmoored from the human subject. To exist is to appear in a field of sense under a certain mode of presentation or arrangement, which is not strictly or exclusively phenomenological, for numbers and other abstract entities can appear without this implying a phenomenal appearance tied to human sensibility, just as subatomic “particles” can appear in (be detected by) particle accelerators without strictly speaking displaying a phenomenal component consisting of secondary qualities akin to human sensory consciousness. In essence, Gabriel’s *metametaphysics* is flat not because it rejects epistemology to propose a world without spectators but because it refuses to partition the universe into a manifest image and a scientific image of humanity in the world – each with their respective ontologies corresponding roughly to perceptual and theoretical knowledge. For Gabriel, fields of sense are found all across the universe and permeate all levels of reality, with human consciousness offering but a more complex type. Thus, for Gabriel,

An ontology is *flat* as opposed to *hierarchical* if it unifies all objects insofar as they exist. A flat ontology claims that all objects are equal insofar as they are objects or that all fields of sense are equal insofar as they are fields of sense. In other words, flat ontology resists the idea of a governing principle that unifies all objects.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of object-object relations articulated by permanently unobservable and undetectable metaphysical



mechanisms such as *emanation*, *allure*, and *sincerity*, Gabriel's neutral realism claims that the universal glue that makes things hang together is *sense*. And sense is for Gabriel roughly what "gluons" are for Priest. These are the in-between, the universal cement that holds objects and fields and facts together. Yet, unlike facts, sense and gluons are part of the structure of the real, as opposed to the formal structures of our thought about the real.

At first sight, to claim that to exist is to appear in a field of sense structured by facts and a global sense of the situation, or to say that to exist is to be an object or a mereological sum of objects fused together by gluons, does not appear to say much. However, that is the price we pay when we do metaphysics. After all, we are concerned with objects in general, not with the specific objects of the specialized sciences. As such, a metaphysical system must be a theory of absolutely everything, and the challenge for the philosopher is to remain consistent throughout such formidable endeavor. For all his originality and inventiveness, Harman's object-oriented philosophy fails to be consistent.<sup>21</sup> His quadruple object scheme - a kind of roadmap to the universe that is supposed to tell us how *all* objects without exception must behave - fails to contemplate how absolutely everything in the universe truly functions. For instance, there are "things" at the subatomic level of reality which are not technically objects and do not behave as such even if we call them "objects" for efficiency's sake. *Pace* Whitehead, the universe is neither atomistic nor anthropomorphic, and the middle-sized dry goods that Harman takes as the starting point of his ontology (tables, chairs, armies, etc.) are but a perspective on the universe - a very anthropocentric perspective.

Gabriel and Priest, on the other hand, can speak consistently about objects because, in their view, objects

are not metaphysical entities that withdraw or subsist beyond all access and relational contact (cognitive and causal). As we saw earlier, they both recognize that Kant's Copernican revolution sets a point of no return for philosophy, a basic standard for rationality. The transcendental dimension and the epistemic correlation are ineliminable because to perceive something is to perceive something *as* something: a free and reflexive move from the object of representation to the representation of the object. Moreover, as Kant taught us, we can speak meaningfully only about what we encounter in space and time, whereas talk about things in themselves, withdrawn real objects, or subsisting entities presupposes an *aperspectival perspective* - an impossible position. Even Priest, who is quite fond of paradoxes and brought about a revolution in logic by claiming that there are true contradictions and non-existing objects, would not go so far as to toy with dogmatic metaphysics in this way. The kind of paradoxes that he entertains are circumscribed by his logical and ontological commitments, in particular, by the fact that an object is above all an epistemic category: everything we can think of, talk about, refer to, quantify over, and is the correlate of an intentional state. Notice that his definition remains well within the bounds of the Copernican revolution, since, for Kant, let us remember, an object was neither a substance nor a noumenon but an empty form - the sum of the meta-conceptual categories of the understanding.

For Gabriel, on the other hand, neither Harman's nor Priest's definition of the object will do, since to be an object is something which fundamentally precedes the subjectivation of appearances by the human mind. To be an object is above all to appear in a field of sense governed by facts and a global sense of the situation, and none of this is in principle a strictly human activity. Objects can appear in

consciousness as correlates of intentional states, but they can also appear in other fields of sense which are not particularly human. This position seems to enlarge the category of object, which is understood no longer as being something that tends to correlate with human subjects but, rather, as a more originary stepping forth governed by sense. The difference, however, is subtle, since Priest technically does not object to the idea that objects are always already part of a background, with nothing(ness) being the ultimate ground of reality. More generally, the two philosophers endorse a realist conception of objects, since objects are not mental representations. Nevertheless, unlike Harman, both Gabriel and Priest offer *relational* definitions of objects to affirm their realism. An object is not in the mind but becomes something meaningful when we think/talk about it, quantify over it, and so on. Similarly, an object can function as a field of sense, but it becomes a proper object when it appears in one.

One final difference between our protagonists that is worth pointing out as I bring this introduction to a close is that Gabriel's ontology can be said to be more *affirmative* than Priest's. Although Gabriel never refers to the ontogenetic processes whereby objects become objects (e.g., Whitehead/Deleuze), sticking to a more strictly phenomenological definition of existence *qua* appearing, his radically pluralistic universe is one in which there is always something new, with fields proliferating without end in an infinite regress of sense. We are always confronted with *something*, which is why nothing(ness) does not carry the same weight for him as it does for Priest. Whereas nothing, for Gabriel, is a limit concept, *something* we catch a glimpse of when we try to think about the world, for Priest, nothing can be *something*, and in this sense at least his philosophy can be said to be more Heideggerian than Gabriel's. This brings us back to the idea of a zone of

indiscernibility: there is a becoming analytic in Gabriel and a becoming continental in Priest that renders the divide more obsolete than ever before, opening up the door for new and unprecedented ways of doing philosophy in a century where historical metaphysics is being replaced by *something* yet to be determined.

- [1.](#) Gironi (2018), p. 12.
- [2.](#) Gabriel (2015a).
- [3.](#) Meillassoux (2008), p. 70.
- [4.](#) Ennis (2011).
- [5.](#) Meillassoux (2008), p. 70.
- [6.](#) Sachs (2018).
- [7.](#) Noys (2010).
- [8.](#) Ferraris (2016), p. 593.
- [9.](#) Brandom (2015), p. 34.
- [10.](#) Redding (2007).
- [11.](#) For my interview with Priest, see [www.figureground.org](http://www.figureground.org).
- [12.](#) Rorty (1997), p. 12.
- [13.](#) Brassier (2013), p. 102.
- [14.](#) Kant (1998), A290.
- [15.](#) Kant (1998), B349.
- [16.](#) Gabriel (2015a), p. 9.
- [17.](#) DeLanda (2006), p. 8.

[18.](#) Žižek (2016).

[19.](#) Gabriel (2015a), p. 166.

[20.](#) Gabriel (2015a), p. 9.

[21.](#) Wolfendale (2014).

# **Part I**

## **Essays**