

Interview with Paul Ennis

In 2011, the then yet non-existent journal **Das Questões** met **Paul Ennis** to ask him few questions about the renaissance of metaphysics in the early years of the 21st century. The renaissance is composed of multiple turns: the ontological turn advertised by C. B. Martin and John Heil in 1999, the speculative turn explored in the 2010 book edited by Levi Bryant and others, the new materialisms of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti, the affect turn of Sara Ahmed, the non-human turn of Richard Grusin... The prevalence of metaphysical preoccupations seem to spread among different trends in philosophy more or less alike. A number of issues then arise concerning the changing shape of metaphysics and, as a consequence, of our relation to whatever we mean by the Great Outdoors.

Paul Ennis is the author of several books including a book on Heidegger in the 21st century, a book on interviews with philosophers and a dictionary of Meillassoux's vocabulary. Here is the interview:

Das Questões: Why is metaphysics back to centre stage? Is metaphysics unavoidable?

Paul Ennis: Metaphysics is back at centre stage because it is unavoidable, and it is unavoidable because it constitutes the core of the discipline. Talk of metaphysics never really disappeared in continental thinking. The entire era of deconstructive antimetaphysics is testament to the allure of metaphysics. It gained a negative reputation, that much is true, but it persisted all the same, and it persisted where it mattered in these debates i.e. in their metatheoretical aspect. Whilst openly there was much talk of postmetaphysics the 'secret' of deconstruction, which I consider the strongest representative of antimetaphysical thinking, is that metaphysics is a slippery target. Heidegger always remarked that philosophers should never look to the East for solutions. We can read this, on the surface, as almost orientalist in tone, but I think that is wrongheaded. Heidegger was warning us that as long as Western thinking failed to confront metaphysics then metaphysics would relentless pursue it. It is a pure virtuality of thinking that gobbles up all the paths that might lead outside it. I am not saying anything new here. Deconstruction is full of great ironists because they knew the game was up once they reached the point of meta-deconstructive readings.

I think we are seeing the emergence of thinkers that never bought into this narrative. Plenty of people never did, but enough continental philosophers did that nobody ever really thought to question whether overcoming metaphysics would constitute a positive development or whether it could be

considered progress at all. Someone might argue that they were albeit in a roundabout way, but we are seeing a different breed of people thinking about this issue namely ones that are pro-metaphysics. The innovator in this regard was Deleuze. The idea that metaphysics needs to be decentred is shown, all over his corpus, to be absurd. Metaphysics is already decentred. It lacks any geographical basis. It is, in Deleuzian parlance, thought made immanent to itself. Deleuze is instructive here for many reasons. After all what else is Deleuze if not a metaphysician in the old style?

For the antimetaphysical tradition there is a fascination with the dark art of metaphysics. There the metaphysician appears as an unscrupulous, and slightly menacing, character sucking in all of reality like some manic black hole. There is some truth in this: after all, what kind of maniac attempts to map the real using nothing more than reasoned speculation? Accepting that metaphysicians are trapped in a mania I think we should just accept that and wallow there. Metaphysics has had a two millennia long gravitational pull. It is not easily circumnavigated so we should surf that wave and see where it takes us.

I don't see Kant as inaugurating the antimetaphysical trend. It is clear that Kant never manages to start his proposed project of grounding metaphysics, but this did not stop those who followed in his wake from engaging in speculative metaphysics. Fichte aside, both Hegel and Schelling engaged in some of the most mind-bending metaphysical analyses of the structure of reality that you can find this side of outright mysticism. Schelling's *Die Weltalter* is not the work of a modest antirealist tiptoeing around the limits of transcendental method (even if it does take into account the German idealist stricture of the limits of finitude).

In my thesis I argued that metaphysics is the immanence of the real spelt out for in thinking, and I stand by this. Metaphysics is the thinking appropriate to absolute immanence. Iain Grant has done much to regain the global perspective needed for us to thinking according to the metaphysical line again and that is a direction I think should be pursued a little further. I am hoping my own contribution to these debates can add something akin to the metatheoretical revision of the tradition that people like Iain Grant, Graham Harman, and Steven Shaviro have undertaken in recent years. From a global or absolute metaphysical (meta-metaphysical) perspective you can look back and see that philosophy proper begins not with the idea that thinking and being are the same, but, rather, with the idea that thinking and being are in a skewed, lop-sided relationship. On this reading I do not think we need to get back to the pre-metaphysical Pre-Socratics since there one finds the naïve

position that thinking and being is the same (Parmenides). Instead we should start on a Platonic footing.

This is the orientation I want to help revive.

Ultimately I think that the original problems of metaphysics shattered in a hundred different lines of flight across the centuries before they were reconfigured in stunningly unpredictable shapes, but they always retained some recognizable core that tells you these are *metaphysical* problems. I think the problem with the entire Heideggerian-deconstruction nexus, and I do think we should aim our critique of antirealism there and not at Kant, is that it became obsessed with the structure of the question and where the question leads. It wanted to round up on and corral metaphysics so that it might tame it. It failed because metaphysics exists in the wild.

Das Questões: Is metaphysics tied to the transcendent? What role do laws of nature play in metaphysics?

Paul Ennis: I suspect that philosophy has partially survived so that the non-religious can discuss the transcendent vicariously. I am not suggesting philosophy is closeted theology, but that the fideistic domination of transcendent feeling demands a response from philosophers. Today this is manifesting as showing how the transcendent is filthy, mucky, and needs blackening. The black metal theorists are (perhaps unsurprisingly) a not so well known group oriented to this kind of experience and I'd like to see more of it.

Personally I quite like the Deleuzian motif of transcendental empiricism. In Hallward's wonderful reading of Deleuze 'out of this world' becomes something like 'out of the mundane.' For philosophers thinking *as* creation is the antidote to the mundane and so constitutes the transcendent for us. Thinking in this way is thinking according to immanence i.e. in absolutist terms. When you hear philosophers discussing immanence it signals the entry-point into the meta-theoretical. The most transcendent moment for the philosopher is when she remembers how the transcendent exists along the dirt. It brings us back down to *earth*, but out of the mundane. That's the consolation of philosophy and I am glad I found it.

Natural laws are an unusual problem for philosophers. The problem is unusual in that it is at once 'outside' philosophy, in that natural laws are the content of the physical sciences, and 'inside'

philosophy as a long-standing theme in the history of the tradition including debates between induction-deduction, rationalism-empiricism, and today necessity and contingency. Thematically speaking the problem also hints at the boundaries between philosophy, religion, and science...all of them offer explanations of this particular problem.

I think this is a non-problem. This is not to say that it is a pseudo-problem. It is a real issue, but I think it has been answered to a relatively satisfactory degree. The same can be said for a number of philosophical problems, but there is a tendency to assume that no answer will ever suffice. I have proposed that there is an answer albeit an awkward one.

In order to accept the answer one has to accept that the world, for us, truly is sutured along two lines. If you believe, as I do, that there is but one world, but that the fabric of this world is internally cut (the Kantian two-aspect thesis) then it makes perfect sense that there are forms of thinking appropriate to each aspect. There is a form of thinking appropriate to natural laws in the appearances (empiricism in the sciences, phenomenology in philosophy) and a form of thinking appropriate to natural laws in-themselves (rationalism and speculation respectively). The 'problem,' such as it is, is an utterly human problem and it is founded in disciplinary greed: we all want to claim all the content. To me that makes it, on the terms of natural laws as such, a *non-problem*.

Das Questões: Are perspectives part of reality? How can perspective-laden metaphysics deal with the question of relativism?

Paul Ennis: I'd like to be a little bit blunt on this question, but again not because I think it is a pseudo-problem, but rather because I think it can be answered succinctly. Perspectives are a part of the real, and we know this because one of these perspectives tells us so. This does not mean that all perspectives are equal. Even the most strident antirealist will accept that a perspective-free reality *must* exist, and although this is often accompanied with the thesis that we cannot know it as such I for one do not find this troubling. I see no real reason why we should so desire a perspective-free picture when we are capable of registering when human faculties are operative and distorting. We should just accept the fact that we tint the world a little, and then remove as much of the blur as possible. Perspective is the embedded journalist of knowing. It gets good insights, but you have to cut away at their embellishments to get to the truth of the matter the reporting.

Das Questões: If there are no necessary connections, is metaphysics doomed?

Can one depart from actualism without being essentialist?

Paul Ennis: I must admit that when I hear that there are no necessary connections I do not first go to the idea that metaphysics is doomed, but rather that metaphysics has been unleashed again. On this question it is helpful to look at the significant scholarship undertaken by Iain Grant in reminding us that there is a long ‘virtualist’ (Schelling up to Deleuze and including Spinoza) tradition that has a neat contingency-oriented flavor.

I tend to consider an over-reliance on actualism somewhat problematic in philosophy because we have accounts of the actual all over the place. If philosophers, at least those in the speculative circles, are supposed to outline leftfield theories on the nature of reality then embedded actualist theories are more likely to muddy the waters than clear them. Rather the more important work (and I stress that this is by no means an uncontentious point) is in the account of the virtual.

Leaving aside Iain Grant and Graham Harman on this point (see their debate in *The Speculative Return*) I think that outside metaphysics essentialism is, in fact, found everywhere in actualist accounts of reality. I do not mean in philosophy *per se* since there are many anti-essentialist metaphysical systems out there (relationism, networkology, and so on), but just that more and more people now consider ‘essence,’ broadly construed, as something that will be found, if it is ever found, in the ‘actual’ world and that essence does not point beyond, under, or over it. Potential saturates the phenomenal world in these theories and we all know that good scientific explanations can pinpoint potentialities at work ‘under the hood’ in general experience.

I am not opposed to the virtual being utterly weird like the Latourian plasma. I also agree Meillassoux that metaphysicians should just learn to trust reason again. We are not *empirical* scientists and we have to make decisions one way or another concerning these broad positions of actual-virtual primacy. For now, and this is just a preliminary stance as I stretch into new research, I tend to favor the virtual as the primary arena that metaphysics ought to concern itself with. The question that this leaves me with is how can I know that my speculative reasoning concerning the virtual touches on anything ‘real’ or is it the case that, metaphysically speaking, the virtual is more real than the actual (and so on...). My intuition at the moment is that reason is a good guide to the virtual because it accepts the weirdness and random contingencies inherent in the structure of the real and so, against

the traditional notion of a pure reason, we should stop trying to make reality reasonable. It clearly isn't. It's mad all the way down.

Das Questões: Are objects defined independently of their properties or relations? What are subjects in a world of objects?

Paul Ennis: There is no way I can discuss objects in the same volume as Graham Harman and say anything more interesting than he will so I'll just make a few small points. I value what object oriented ontology has done in de-centering philosophical thinking. This is where it needs to be. When Bryant discusses a democracy of objects I am fully on board.

The entire flat ontology thesis is something I subscribe to as a point of procedure albeit from a slightly different perspective. I think it quite obvious that if we all come from the same stuff then in the metaphysical sense all that exists is equally something or other – is an object in some sense. Are these objects defined apart from their relations? They can be described according to their relations sure, and their relations may play a big part in what they are, but I am not sure relations are the sole *defining* criteria when it comes to objects.

I'm on the side of anything that helps us think clearer about the unending connections that seem to make their way across our cosmos so I'm happy to consider the object oriented point when it helps us to think about climate change, as Tim Morton does, as a hyperobject or how Harman has helped many working in aesthetics to think about what an artwork actually *is* without resorting to the idea that it is just something made artistic because it sits in an art gallery (an anti-wonder thesis ever there was one).

In a more general sense I think that object oriented approaches are clearly amongst the most promising philosophies out there, and I credit Harman's *Tool-Being* with waking me from my Heideggerian slumber. It was essentially the impetus for me to move from thinking about a pretty insular world (what does Heidegger mean by X or Y!) to a much more open one – the one consisting of an endless array of bafflingly wondrous objects. This includes us, but here's the rub: I can't bring myself to call people one type of object amongst all others. I don't think OOO denigrates or hates humans (this is an actual trope believe it or not!), but I'm still a little too anthropocentric to consider myself oriented toward objects.

As to what are subjects in a world of objects they are amongst the most complicated objects, leaving aside the nuance needed here, amongst other objects – some of these objects are almost as complex in terms of intelligence (animals), some are just wildly complex (spiral galaxies), but a lot of objects are just hanging about (a piece of concrete).

Where I'm perhaps no so anthropocentric is that I think intelligence is something more widely spread than the familiar intelligence humans. Following transcendental materialists such as Rainer Zimmermann I'm happy to consider the algorithmic computational logic that produces spiral galaxies or the self-repeating information transmission that goes on between species as general expressions of a *dematerialized* notion that manifests forms via material. As I intimate at the end of *Continental Realism* this is essentially a kind of *dispirited* Hegelianism.

At the most metatheoretical angle I can gain in self-reflection I consider myself a nomologist. There is *only* a dematerialized set of notions (not a Notion!) that becomes material. In this way of seeing things I can't help but be pessimistic about the subjects that exist on our planet even though causes for hope arise from time to time (the Middle Eastern revolts for instance). I realize this is a strange place to end considering the question, but I'd say that what unites the subject as it exists among the objects is that they are all engaged in entropic cosmic race to the bottom of the sink.

Das Questões: Does science pre-empt all metaphysical efforts? What is the role of scientific experimenting within the boundaries of metaphysics?

Paul Ennis: I think we have to be careful here because when we engage in this debate we end up with either the 'they are all reductionists' argument or the 'philosophy is useless/dead' argument and neither, it seems to me, is defended by the centre ground, but rather by people perhaps too invested in either side – so the worst anti-reductionists have a little too much faith in philosophy and the ones heavily opposed to philosophy place too much faith in science.

Despite this I think most thinkers recognize that the best kinds of thinking thread a middle ground and that different areas require different approaches – sciences has its limits, and philosophy does too. I don't have much time for people who want to gobble up the other side.

Besides being amongst the narrow minded thinkers out there it just strikes me as unlikely that the

extraordinary range of content in our world could be explained by one particular discipline whether it is physics or history.

I could take all kinds of pot shots at scientists for being dismissive of humanists, but I'd like to take the time to address some of the real criticisms that scientism (not scientists), leaving aside its merits or demerits, has laid at the door of metaphysics. There is at least one definite charge made by them in relation to humanists namely that most humanists are woefully scientifically illiterate. I hold my hand up here because beyond the popular science section of the bookstore my exposure to science is pretty much a second hand affair.

When I read Spinoza or Schelling (or Kant or Husserl or take your pick) I don't find that same distance from the other sciences. I'm not sure when it happened, but at some point we mentally 'checked out' of the sciences and fell behind. I mean we live in the age of outrageously exciting science and it is worth asking why it is that we so reluctant to discuss them. I can see why many humanists fear being burned again due to the Sokal affair, but metaphysicians are not dealing with science by chance since natural laws, causation, and so on are the bread and butter of the discipline. It is the content we think by.

As Fabio Gironi has consistently pointed out Meilloux risks his insights not being taken seriously by scientists, and remember *After Finitude* begins as a defense of scientific statements, because he fails to substantiate his reflections with regard to the actual science. The same critique pops up all over *The Speculative Turn* with Adrian Johnston being particularly biting in this regard. Gabriel Catren, as Gironi also notes, is a much more consistent thinker of speculative science than Meilloux, but his scientific literacy has actually worked against him. The reason I raise this is because if it were not for Gironi I may well have continued to overlook Catren because his article in *Collapse* was full of strange diagrams drawing on quantum mechanics.

But I don't agree, as *per* the question, that science pre-empts metaphysical efforts as a rule. Science is a distinctly experiential endeavor and, by its very nature, avoids pre-empting anything. Its method, as far as I can discern as an outsider, is to let the evidence speak for itself. For example logic tells us that 'something cannot come from nothing,' but a scientist might argue that nature does not always follow this rule so neatly. Nature does not bend to our rules.

This is all quite anti-Kantian, but here I would chime in with the Kantian that in so much as one might want to develop metaphysical knowledge it is imperative that we begin *prior* to science because metaphysics cannot rely on the same experiential content to tell us how things are.

The peculiar nature of metaphysical knowledge is that it is not found ‘out there’ in experience. It goes *against* experience. It’s an internal affair and against the Kantian I would add that we must, as Meillassoux reminds us, learn to trust reason again. My mind has been completely decentred from when I began studying philosophy and where once I would have called myself anything but a rationalist I think that is where I am at now. Or, to be precise, I’m a nomologist in the logicist rather than physicalist sense. But these are mere labels – to finesse my stance I believe that the trail of metaphysics is traced out along purely rational lines and that it can be carried out in *pure* reflection. I think we need more taxonomy, some more arrangement, or perhaps some more *τάξις* lest we end up utterly fractured.

Das Questões: What can be said about the claim that humans are the measure of all metaphysics? “Humans are not more different than lakes than lakes are different from mountains.” Is this a good starting point for defending metaphysics?

Paul Ennis: To the first question I think it is clear that humans are the measure of all metaphysics since metaphysics is an activity undertaken by humans, but all the same what metaphysics measures should not always be weighed up according to familiar human coordinates. The metaphysics of objects or nature are two examples where human coordinates ought to be de-emphasized, but I don’t think this discounts other forms of metaphysics that will have a clear human orientation (the politicized metaphysics of Deleuze or Badiou being clear examples).

Kant, despite the criticisms leveled at him, is instructive on how one should go about a dispassionate metaphysics of the inhuman. For Kant the noumenon as correlate to the phenomenon is just a *limited* concept, but he recognizes, via causality, that the thing-in-itself must be a real thing – beyond measurement according to human coordinates.

This means that his proposed Critical metaphysics would not consider metaphysics the measure of all things. Kant never really pursued the metaphysics the Critical philosophy was intended to ground,

and it is actually Hegel who tries to make man the measure of all things.

You could argue that the Notion is taking a measure of the Universe through us, but as privileged participants in the Notion coming to know itself we are at one with it as a measure. Metaphysics is one giant taking stock of how it goes with the Notion. I do not think this entirely mad. If I were prone to systems Hegel's would be the most appealing to me, but in terms of this question he does not come out well. It all comes down to your criteria and this is to say how you intend to *measure* things.

Now as criteria go a defense of metaphysics that begins with the thesis that "humans are not more different than lakes than lakes are different from mountains" is just off the wall. Humans are different from lakes in much the same way any random object I could pick would be different from another random I might pick including mountains.

There is an endless metaphysical tug of war between sameness and difference, the general and the particular, and the so on. So if I say that all objects are substances and then say this holds for humans as much as for lakes I must be saying that humans and objects are not that much different from each other in metaphysical terms...right? Well of course not since in their *particularity* humans are radically different than lakes.

That the political notion of universalism arises from identification across all humans is an expression of a particular thing that humans do – they universalize from particulars. They do metaphysics. So there has to be some nuance there because anti-humanism is a charge that object oriented thinkers are going to face endlessly and I don't envy them, but I do think the critiques are often wildly uncharitable as if all object oriented ontologists are more concerned with batons than the person being hit by the baton (this came up on a blog!). There is a danger, of course, that someone might become so obsessed with objects that they begin to fetishize them, but I think you'd need to be pretty unreflective for that to happen. Considering that the whole point of OOO is to reflect on objects it is uniquely insulated against that trap.

Das Questões: What comes first, metaphysics or politics? How can the current debates in metaphysics shape the future of philosophy?

Paul Ennis: This is a question that I find trips me up quite often. I'm not indifferent to political

issues. I likely spend as much time as the average academically inclined person scouring the news. I do, however, think that social injustice is self-evidently wrong and I do think that there is an *imperative* to oppose it. Rather than spend my time complaining about the internecine warfare that goes on in much radical leftist philosophy I'd just like to mention that the political philosopher I respect the most is Peter Hallward whose politics is always directed at the systematic structural evil he sees in the world, and never ends up too navel-gazing. I'm wary about Marxist politics, and perhaps even more wary about the default Marxian stance found in continental academic philosophy, but I like that Hallward never diverts his attention from the enemy proper. His proposed solution is to kindle, where possible, the will of the people which he claims is extraordinarily difficult to defeat once it is directed at some systematic evil or another. I have no idea whether metaphysics or politics comes first. I'm not sure there is a natural ahistorical totem pole where metaphysics precedes politics or *vice versa*, but I am certain there are times when metaphysics can be done and when its pursuit would be dishonorable (or, at least, selfish and misguided).

Metaphysics is a leisure discipline: no two ways about it. We've known that for so long it has become a truism. Josef Pieper, in his *Muße und Kult*, argued that culture *in toto* arises from leisure. I'm not sure if that still holds, but certainly you need to be detached from a lot of day to day material needs if you want to spend your time musing about causation or natural laws. Although you might have a job that is boring enough to let you do this anyway, in true Einstein style, then the fact is that academic jobs are uniquely suited to the task. As I write this I have no idea whether I will end up in one, but the (non-philosophy) writing that keeps me financially afloat is certainly often enough to throw me off reading metaphysics for days or even weeks. You need to be pursuing metaphysics relentlessly to get at the hard stuff.

I want to signal a careful note on the future of philosophy because it is impossible for us to know what subtle undercurrents are at work in philosophy that will bear fruit in three or four years time. And let us not forget that speculative metaphysics is a minority sport. You can see it coming in from the super-fringes, but it remains fringe. I suspect that speculative metaphysics will come to be the mainstream of the fringe, but in the broader picture we'll see the dominance of a more historically-informed Anglophone philosophy, more postphenomenology that fills in the core neuroscientific insights that will deluge us in coming years, and I think philosophy of science will become an interesting area that will hold a middle ground somewhere.

Continental philosophy is almost completely straddling on the edges of philosophy when you look at things with a wide-lens, but I doubt it will lose its status as an important direction for thinking. I just think it will be more Badiou-Deleuze focused in the coming years in much the same way it was once Heidegger-Derrida focused. I think Derrida will become standard background noise and everyone will be expected to have a solid knowledge of his thinking, but I'm not sure deconstruction will be considered a major force. I know there have been many complaints about the language fetish of SPEP dominated Continental philosophy amongst speculative metaphysicians, but I never lived to see it (and only know a handful of semiotic-oriented thinkers in continental philosophy personally). So Derrida has never appeared 'hegemonic' to me in terms of stifling what can and cannot be thought.

My supervisor Joseph Cohen completed his PhD under Derrida and what I draw from Derrida via his approach to the tradition is 'intensity,' 'unfaithfulness,' and 'intellectual kindness.' Now the first just means that thinking philosophically is intense and my thesis 'Speculative Intensity and the Ruins of Being' was a kind of subterranean attack on Critical thinking – metaphysics as the end point of antimetaphysics, postmetaphysics and so on.

To me the way out of *Gestell*, this being the impetus to speculation in my thesis, is not the overcoming of metaphysics, but the *intensification* of it. I learned that intensity is what sparks metaphysics into life by way of the Derridean intensive focus on the secretive, the hidden, and the silences (that literally speak volumes!).

The more that philosophy says the more its secrets and silences pile up until there is a point of intensity that forces us to broach the meaning of our forefather's secrets/silences. To do so is, of course, to become unfaithful. This again is the Derridean ideal that the most faithful act, in philosophy, is infidelity.

Taking the long view I have practically zero interest in seeing one form of philosophizing supplant another. Rhizomatically speaking the more the merrier.