

# Materialism, Realism, Naturalism: Althusser's Philosophy Reconsidered

David Maruzzella

## Abstract:

Though Althusser often spoke of his commitment to philosophical materialism—a position organically linked to his ongoing elaboration of the specific *philosophical* effects of Marxism—this paper argues that Althusser's materialism must also include a commitment to realism and naturalism. Though Althusser does not use these terms himself, he nonetheless remains a realist to the extent that he argues for the capacity of conceptual thought to know a mind-independent reality and a naturalist to the extent that he is a consequent Darwinian (like Engels and Lenin before him) who conceives of cognition as a contingent and evolved phenomenon. It is only on the basis of these considerations that Althusser's polemic against empiricism can be properly understood and the stakes of his philosophical project properly evaluated.

**Keywords:** Althusser, Realism, Materialism, Naturalism, Epistemology

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In this paper, I propose to lay out some of the basic positions of Althusser's philosophical project. These positions, I hope to show, should be considered to be at once materialist (a term Althusser frequently used and with which he openly identified), realist, and naturalist (these latter two being terms Althusser does not use).<sup>1</sup> This specific terminology, I maintain, is particularly useful for grasping Althusser's epistemological and ontological commitments. In my estimation, such terminology is not

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin explicitly denounces the language of realism in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* where he writes "Following Engels, I use *only* the term materialism in this sense, and consider it the sole correct terminology, especially since the term 'realism' has been bedraggled by the positivists and the other muddleheads who vacillate between materialism and idealism" (54). For Althusser's avoidance of the language of naturalism see "Lénine et la philosophie" in *Lénine et la philosophie suivi de Marx et Lénine devant Hegel* (Paris: Maspero, 1972), 30.

only the most accurate for describing Althusser's position, but it serves to differentiate it from the many—quite contradictory—labels it has received over the past 50 years. For Timpanaro, Althusser's epistemological position is “essentially Platonizing,”<sup>2</sup> a theme emphasized by Rancière beginning with his *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1974) and which has arguably served as the main philosophical opponent against which Rancière has fought for nearly five decades. A similar line of interpretation and criticism originated with Perry Anderson who declared that Althusser's appeal to Spinoza was “a theoretical regression behind Marx,”<sup>3</sup> a claim made more recently, though with an admittedly different emphasis, by Knox Peden for whom “the core of Althusser's philosophical effort was the development of a Spinozist rationalism able to act as a powerful critical weapon against phenomenology”<sup>4</sup> but which ultimately leads to a “disarming of politics.”<sup>5</sup> Such interpretations belie two erroneous presuppositions. In the case of Rancière, a kind of sociological error is made whereby it is assumed—paradoxically following the likes of Bourdieu with whom Rancière polemicized incessantly<sup>6</sup>—that scientific knowledge, being a tool of the ruling class and its bourgeois educational institutions, is of no use to the project of political emancipation.<sup>7</sup> Althusser's position, for Rancière, amounts to nothing more than elitist, scientific Platonism disguised in Marxist jargon of science vs. ideology.<sup>8</sup> Rancière, adopting a position much closer to that of Foucault, instead seeks to defend the power of so-called “subjugated knowledges” produced by those assumed to have no business engaging in intellectual activities against the tyranny of science.<sup>9</sup> Human emancipation and the production of scientific knowledge are thus two mutually exclusive and fundamentally opposed domains. In the case of Anderson and Peden, a

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2 *On Materialism* (London: NLB, 1975), 65.

3 *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976), 60.

4 *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014), 187.

5 *Ibid.*, 189.

6 Cf. *Le philosophe et ses pauvres* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).

7 Cf. “Back to Althusser” in *Dissenting Words: Interviews with Jacques Rancière* ed. Emiliano Battista (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 305–321.

8 Althusser, in his self-critical writings, seems to attribute this position to himself. Cf. *Éléments d'autocritique*, (Paris: Hachette, 1974), 41–42.

9 Cf. « Il faut défendre la société » *Cours au Collège de France (1975–1975)* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 1997).

kind of semantic error is made whereby politics is construed in the narrow sense<sup>10</sup> to mean concrete, emancipatory political practice and class struggle. If one defines politics in this way, Althusser's concern for scientific knowledge and its history seems to be of little to no interest and will no doubt appear incomprehensible and arcane.<sup>11</sup> This criticism of Althusser's philosophy amounts to it being condemned as overly philosophical! After all, why theorize—and theorize about theorizing as Althusser did—when the 11<sup>th</sup> of the *Theses on Feuerbach* insisted upon, according to a popular interpretation, the death of philosophy at the hands of revolutionary *praxis*? Why, in other words, interpret the world when it ought simply to be changed?<sup>12</sup>

So, why then read Althusser if, in the worst case, he is both an apologist for a tool of the ruling class, namely, scientific knowledge, *and* incapable of telling us how to transform the world since he is too busy contemplating it? After all, this paper was first presented at a conference entitled “Reading Althusser Politically,” a conference which itself emerged from a bi-weekly reading group dedicated to reading Althusser with an eye towards the political. It is therefore my task here, given that I would like to re-construct the materialist, realist, and naturalist dimensions of Althusser's thinking, to address why an interest in such seemingly obscure debates concerning epistemology and the philosophy of science were in fact central to Althusser's political commitment *as* a philosopher. Indeed, it is my contention that Althusser is ultimately a philosopher—not a political theorist, sociologist, or historian—and that he was in fact quite

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10 Ironically, a recent book on aesthetics and politics accuses Rancière of eschewing politics in the narrow sense in favor of his seeming preference for artworks that stage contradiction and antagonism, but which are not themselves directly political in this narrow sense (they are not literal protests, street manifestations, or instances of “relational aesthetics”). Even more ironically, the author borrows the expression “spontaneous ideology” from Althusser to diagnose this now commonplace position according to which art is “more political” the further it is from reality. See Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2019).

11 E.P. Thompson, for his part, openly admits to not understanding the stakes of Althusser's epistemological concerns: “I don't understand Althusser's propositions as to the relation between the ‘real world’ and ‘knowledge’, and therefore I can't expose myself in a discussion of them.” Cf. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 5 and *passim*.

12 Althusser, in many places, explicitly rejects this interpretation of the 11th Thesis. See, for example, his extended discussion of the role of philosophy in Marx in the little known 1966 essay “Matérialisme historique & matérialisme dialectique” (in particular pages 98–103) and reappearing as late as the posthumous text from 1982 “Note sur les *Thèses sur Feuerbach*” (*Magazine littéraire*, no. 324, septembre 1994: 38–42).

sensitive to the specific role of philosophy as a theoretical discourse, which is itself neither a science nor simply an organ for disseminating political propaganda. In other words, I would like to argue that it is Althusser's commitment to a robust philosophical materialism, realism, and naturalism that allowed him to present a convincing account of the nature of scientific knowledge which, as he saw it, was in fact a crucial *political* task for philosophers working in the wake of Marx. And, in our current conjuncture dominated by science skepticism and conspiracy theories, climate change denial, and the rise of religious fundamentalism<sup>13</sup> philosophers with any political acumen ought to understand the importance of such a project. To put my point more polemically, I'll rephrase a famous quip from Quine who said that "philosophy of science is philosophy enough."<sup>14</sup> For Althusser, elaborating the distinctive *philosophical* consequences of Marxism in the domain of epistemology and philosophy of science is political enough.

To be a Marxist *in philosophy*, for Althusser, thus means precisely to take the measure of Marx's theoretical achievements by producing an epistemology and ontology adequate to it, a philosophy *for* Marxism. As I see it, expecting to find in Althusser—and being disappointed upon not finding—advice for bringing about political revolutions or commentary on the current state of global anti-capitalist and communist struggles would be the equivalent of expecting to find in a mathematical proof some modicum of self-help or a motivational slogan. One must be careful not to confuse different registers of theoretical argumentation and conceptualization. Althusser's Marxist "credentials" are not therefore lost because his works lack the typical complaints against the alienation of capitalism or the horrors of exploitation that one typically finds in Marxist works that seek to "critique capitalism." Althusser, to be quite clear, has no such "critique of capitalism."<sup>15</sup> Instead, writing as a *philosopher*,

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13 Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *Après la finitude* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

14 W.V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and other essays* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976), 151.

15 One often hears laments about particular philosophers lacking a "critique of capitalism," but such a complaint fails to understand precisely what Marx aimed to do, which was not to critique capitalism, but rather to present a *critique of political economy*, that is to say, to reveal the insufficiencies of the *theoretical* discourse that claimed to be able to explain the inner machinations of the capitalist economy in general. The revolutionary project of *Capital* thus lies precisely at the juncture of science and politics: an adequate *conceptual* grasp of the inner logic of capitalism coincides with the very possibility for its eventual transformation. This latter is quite simply what is called "communism." Such an

Althusser's goal is to give an account of what exists and how we know it. He is a Marxist intellectual to the extent that he both was committed to interrogating and defending the conceptual and analytic insights of Marx's mature "scientific" texts as well as finding in the texts of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and others, distinctive ways of properly posing and, in certain cases, solving classical philosophical problems about epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics. Given that, for Althusser, philosophy is itself a *Kampfplatz* where conflicting idealist and materialist tendencies are in a constant theoretical battle—a position he takes to be the proper materialist theory of philosophical practice—he finds resources in many non-Marxist thinkers such as Spinoza<sup>16</sup> and those philosophers who belong to the tradition of French Historical Epistemology (Cavaillès, Bachelard, Koyré, Canguilhem) whom he took to be objective allies in the fight against idealism. It should then not be surprising that Althusser looks to the history of philosophy for help in constructing the kind of philosophy he thinks follows from and is compatible with Marxism as a revolutionary science of history.<sup>17</sup> The most unexpected philosophers might have theoretical resources that can help to better articulate and elaborate certain conceptual lacunae in Marx.

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Althusser, as I stated above, ought to be read as a philosopher.<sup>18</sup> This might perhaps sound like a banal claim, but arguably, and especially

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interpretation is made clear by Engels in his "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific" where he writes, "From that time forward socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes—the proletariat and the bourgeoisie" (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 700).

16 Althusser made many declarations about Spinoza, but none is clearer than one found in the recently published manuscript *Être marxiste en philosophie*, where Althusser proclaims that Spinoza is "to my mind the greatest philosopher of all time [à mes yeux le plus grand philosophe de tous les temps]" (153).

17 Althusser is clear that no particular philosopher is completely materialist or idealist, but rather their thought is traversed necessarily by materialist and idealist tendencies. See *Être marxiste en philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 2015), 56). For more on this point see Pierre Raymond's book *Le passage au matérialisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1973).

18 It is worth insisting not only that Althusser trained as a philosopher and taught in a philosophy department throughout his entire working career, but also that he explicitly claims to be seeking the implications of Marxism for philosophy. *Lire le Capital* opens with the admission that the texts presented therein were the results of a distinctively *philosophical* reading of the text which, as Althusser explains, means to ask the epistemological question of the relationship between a scientific discourse

amongst Marxists unaccustomed to the peculiar nature of philosophy<sup>19</sup>, the difficulty with reading Althusser is that he more often than not is speaking in the distinctively philosophical register. Althusser himself thus rarely presents historical materialist analyses nor does he present any in-depth analyses of the current state of global capitalism and communist struggles.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Althusser's project is perhaps more modest: he aims to clarify and elaborate the *concepts* used by Marx in his scientific analyses (e.g., *Capital*). Along the way, Althusser is thus also led to reflect upon the nature of scientific knowledge in general, the process of conceptual formation, and the way concepts relate to the objects about which they produce knowledge. For this reason, Althusser opens *Lire le Capital* by explaining that the properly *philosophical* reading of Marx consists in the specificity of the relation between Marx's scientific discourse and the object it studies.<sup>21</sup> Pierre Macherey's contribution also insists on this same point: "Philosophy," he writes, "is nothing other than the knowledge [*connaissance*] of the history of sciences. Today, philosophers are those who produce the history of theories, and *at the same time* the theory of this history."<sup>22</sup> When reading Althusser then, one is reading a philosophical reconstruction of the metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology implicitly at work in Marx's texts—he is not performing a historical materialist

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and the specificity of the object it studies. Shortly thereafter, Althusser will present his lectures later published as *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*, which explicitly meditates on the nature of philosophical discourse and practice, a theme which is dealt with again in the lecture "Lénine et la philosophie" (1968), and which one also finds treated at length in numerous posthumous publications such as *Sur la reproduction*, *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes*, and *Être marxiste en philosophie*. These later publications all open with extended reflections on the question "Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?" "What is philosophy?"

19 Indeed, Althusser too consistently presented the practice of philosophy as being a rather peculiar undertaking. An unpublished text conserved at IMEC is entitled, "De l'étrange 'allure' des propositions philosophiques" ["On the strange 'allure' of philosophical propositions"]. This text was intended to accompany Althusser's Philosophy Course for Scientists where he reflects at length on the nature of philosophical language.

20 Althusser, of course, did write such texts and many of his interventions were directly responding to certain conjunctural problems arising from his involvement with the PCF. But Althusser, as Badiou helpfully explains, maintained that "political deviations are in the last analysis for Althusser philosophical deviations." Cf. "Qu'est-ce que Louis Althusser entend par 'philosophie'?" in *Politique et philosophie dans l'oeuvre de Louis Althusser* ed. Sylvain Lazarus (Paris: PUF, 1993), 30.

21 *Lire le Capital I* (Paris: Maspero, 1967), 10–11.

22 *Lire le Capital IV* (Paris: Maspero, 1973), 8.

analysis of the state of global capitalism in the 1960s<sup>23</sup>, but rather explaining what the world must be like and how knowledge of it is obtained *such that* Marx's analysis could exist. In other words, the production of something like a Marxist science of history forces philosophers to go back to the drawing board to reconsider what there is and how we know it. What is a world like where there are dynamic, non-teleological processes at work in human history and in nature? Where history itself has an intelligible structure and is not the domain of haphazard chance?<sup>24</sup> Or where human existence is simply one moment in an infinitely complex, yet nonetheless intelligible, system that both precedes its emergence and will continue after our extinction?

For Althusser, Marx not only produced scientific analyses—what one finds in *Capital*, for example—but in certain places, he also reflects upon scientific practice and the nature of conceptual thinking. For this reason, Althusser was particularly fond of Marx's 1857 *Introduction* as well as the various prefaces and postfaces to *Capital*. In other words, Marx leaves certain indications of what Althusser will call a "Theory of theoretical practice."<sup>25</sup> Althusser's two books from 1965, *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital*, are dedicated to investigating the basic premises of the philosophical position that follow from these passing indications in Marx. Beginning as early as 1967<sup>26</sup> Althusser will criticize his employment of this kind of formulation, but there is nonetheless a general insight to be gleaned from such a claim: among the multiplicity of practices and processes that are operative in the world<sup>27</sup>, there is a subset that specifically

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23 One does find a quite remarkable and unexpected analysis of the conjuncture in a recently published text from 1978 entitled *Que faire?* (Paris: PUF, 2018). In the opening sections, Althusser gives a seemingly improvised analysis of an Italian documentary on an Alfa Romeo car factory. In this extended discussion, Althusser analyses the way in which the commodification of the automobile—once a luxury item—paradoxically serves as a means for breaking up worker solidarity by isolating the factory workers into suburban housing developments far away from the factory itself (see pages 20–30).

24 Althusser's interest in these kinds of questions even precedes his explicit turn to Marx. For example, his first book on Montesquieu is dedicated to laying out the originality of Montesquieu's project which is unique (and a precursor to Marx) to the precise extent that he "*undertook to think history without attributing an end to it*, that is to say without projecting the consciousness of humans and their hopes into historical time." *Montesquieu: La politique et l'histoire* (Paris: PUF, 1959), 46.

25 *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1965), 169.

26 Cf. *Lire le Capital I*, 5–6.

27 For this reason, Badiou speaks of Althusser's "ontology of practices." And more specifically, we should speak of a "differential ontology of practices...because in a materialist vision we must assume

concern what might simply be called “thought” and which includes both the formation and production of concepts (sciences)<sup>28</sup> on the one hand, and the spontaneous “consciousness” of human beings on the other (ideology).<sup>29</sup> The relationship between these two modalities of theoretical activity—and for Althusser both science and ideology are inseparably bound up with other kinds of practices—is famously said to be one of discontinuity whence the language of “epistemological break” taken from Bachelard.<sup>30</sup> But this does not mean, as nearly all commentators have argued over the years, that there is a “clean break”<sup>31</sup> between science and ideology. On the contrary, in many places Althusser insists that “there is no such thing as a *pure* theoretical practice.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as we’ll see below, this is crucial to Althusser’s position since such a claim is the only way to insist upon the radically contingent nature of scientific knowledge. By this I do not mean that scientific knowledge is arbitrary or thereby relativized. On the contrary, positing that scientific knowledge is contingent is the only way to account both for its potential future transformation (e.g., the progress of science) and to avoid the trappings of empiricism. It is this latter position to which I will now turn and which Althusser explicitly attacks in the introduction to *Lire le Capital*, a text which contains some of Althusser’s most notorious and puzzling claims about epistemology.

### Althusser’s anti-empiricism

The major enemy of Althusser’s philosophical position is what in *Lire le Capital* and elsewhere he calls “empiricism.”<sup>33</sup> For Althusser, this is a sufficiently broad label to encompass classical British empiricism (Berkeley, Hume, Locke), which grants a primacy and foundational value

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that what exists is always so in some form of practice...what is materialist is to affirm that only practices exist.” Cf. “The Althusserian Definition of ‘Theory’” in *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today* ed. Nick Nesbitt (Durham: Duke UP, 2017), 24.

28 Recall that Marx speaks of many different ways in which thought can relate to the world, among which he lists artistic, religious, practical, and mental (*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 238).

29 *Pour Marx*, Op cit., 168.

30 *Ibid*, 24, 31, 75 note 40.

31 Cf. Mladen Dolar, “Beyond Interpellation” *Qui parle*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 75–96. See in particular the section entitled “The Clean Break.”

32 *Pour Marx*, 171. Cf. “La querelle de l’humanisme,” 505–506.

33 Though it is far beyond the scope of this paper, I suspect that Wilfrid Sellars’ famous critique of the “Myth of the Given” in his “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” is the closest known account to Althusser’s critique of empiricism.



to the immediate perception and cognition of elementary sense-data, as well as to any and all forms of phenomenology even despite this latter's incessant critique of empiricism.<sup>34</sup> Althusser even argues that Hegel's absolute idealism is "in principle only a variation of the confusion that characterizes the problematic of empiricism."<sup>35</sup> Empiricism, as Kant would show, despite granting an important place to the supposed causal relation between sensing and higher levels of cognition (e.g. Hume's impressions/ideas distinction and their unidirectional causal relation<sup>36</sup>), quickly devolves into *skeptical* empiricism. Lenin, in his *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, will later repurpose this Kantian insight against Mach, Bogdanov, and others. If one holds that all thought ever has access to is the way being *appears* to it in the form of impressions, then one is forced to either be a skeptic about the existence of a material, external reality (Berkeley's *esse est percipi*), or an agnostic who maintains that it is strictly impossible to make claims about such a reality (Kant's unknowable *Ding an sich*). In either case, empiricism leads to idealism and *vice versa*.

For Althusser then, what all of these positions have in common is that they presuppose a kind of pre-established linkage between thinking and being. In so doing, the way being *appears* to thinking is confused with what *is*. The process of cognition is taken to be all that exists—since one cannot make claims about anything outside of how things appear to thought—and thus the processes at work in nature are reduced to their ways of becoming manifest to thought. Being and thinking become isomorphic when the former is reduced to the latter. This view, however, is particularly troubling when confronted with the history of the sciences. The world has no doubt appeared in all sorts of ways and the systematization of such appearances have even produced successful scientific research programs (e.g., the folk physics of Aristotle). And though nature certainly must have looked quite different to Galileo<sup>37</sup>,

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34 In "Lénine et la philosophie," Althusser explains that Husserl is "Lenin's objective ally against empiricism and historicism" (29).

35 *Lire le Capital I*, 46.

36 Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 14–18.

37 Koyré writes, for example, "This [the obviousness of the basic concepts of modern science], in turn, enables us to understand why the discovery of such simple and easy things as, for instance, the fundamental laws of motion, which today are taught to, and understood by, children, has needed such a tremendous effort—and an effort which often remained unsuccessful—by some of the deepest and mightiest minds ever produced by mankind: they had not to 'discover' or to 'establish' these simple

nobody would say that it suddenly started behaving differently because of Galileo's novel perspective—as if the laws of nature changed some time around 1600—but rather the creation of new *concepts*, new technologies, and a refined experimental apparatus made it intelligible in unprecedented ways. The intelligibility of the real is thus a historical acquisition and not a given. As Macherey writes, “bodies have always fallen and have done so without the law being stated. But it was the vocation of knowledge [*savoir*] to *produce* this law: this means that the law is not *in* falling bodies, but elsewhere, alongside them, appearing in a completely different terrain which is that of scientific knowledge. And this is the error of all empiricism, which attempts to extract [*dégager*] lessons from experience.”<sup>38</sup>

Althusser, in the context of his discussions of empiricism, typically refers to this link between thinking and being as a “guarantee” and associates the search for epistemic guarantees as the hallmark of classical epistemology or theory of knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Thus, by and large, Althusser explicitly criticizes the language of “epistemology” itself precisely because for him it names any and all attempts to ground the possibility and production of knowledge in a kind of elementary framework or foundation that shores up the very possibility of such knowledge. With this in mind, we can see how transcendental philosophy with its “conditions of possibility” talk, be it Kantian or Husserlian, falls into the trap of empiricism. By attempting to establish *a priori* the cognitive structures that must be in place in order to secure thought's contact with its outside, transcendental philosophy assumes that there is a necessary structure that guarantees that sensible content can get properly processed so as to appear coherent in consciousness.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the ontological mistake of which Althusser spoke above is once again made when the transcendental philosopher claims that the processes of cognition *constitute the world*. The way things appear is confused and taken for how things *are*. Consciousness becomes primary and foundational. Husserl, taking this

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and evident laws, but to work out and build up the very framework which made these discoveries possible. They had, to begin with, to reshape and to re-form our intellect itself; to give it a series of new concepts, to evolve a new approach to being, a new concept of nature, a new concept of science, in other words, a new philosophy” (*Metaphysics and Measure*, 3).

38 *Théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris: Maspero, 1966), 173–174.

39 *Lire le Capital I*, 66–67.

40 Cf. *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants* (Paris: Maspero, 1974), 91–97.

view to its logical conclusion, was thus forced to denounce, in his late writings, the ontological scandal that is modern science to the precise extent that it attempts to—mistakenly, in his view—subvert the foundational and constituting powers of consciousness. Phenomenology, for Husserl, thus retains absolute juridical priority insofar as it establishes the most basic conditions for the appearance of objects as such, the foundation without which there could not be any science in the first place, namely transcendental subjectivity. This latter, the phenomenologist insists, can never be made the object of a positive science without entering into a kind of performative contradiction whereby one attempts to objectify the very conditions of possibility of the appearance and givenness of objects.<sup>41</sup> We moderns, Husserl argued in his *Krisis*, have made a grave philosophical *and* political error by forgetting that the origin of scientific abstraction is nothing other than the pre-scientific *Lebenswelt* to which only phenomenology has access.<sup>42</sup>

For Althusser, however, the correct perspective must assert that consciousness is in no way foundational—it is, at best, an evolutionary acquisition that is relatively recent, a point I’ll explore more below—, that the world does not in any way *depend* upon consciousness.<sup>43</sup> Timpanaro provides a helpful description of the naturalistic and materialist implications of this point: “The biological sciences have continued to show themselves much more tenaciously materialist, and particularly the historical sciences of nature, from geology to paleontology to evolutionary

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41 For a rejection of this view from a materialist, realist, and naturalist perspective see Ray Brassier, “The View from Nowhere” *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, vol. 8, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 7–23.

42 It should not be forgotten that these kinds of claims in Husserl—his fears about the rise of naturalistic philosophy and objectivist science—are ultimately *empirical hypotheses* subject to verification and falsification. Do we, *in fact*, live in a world dominated by, to use Feyerabend’s expression, the tyranny of science? On this point see the interesting work coming out of psychology such as Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber’s *The Enigma of Reason* or the work of Andrew Shtulman, which studies the way humans’ spontaneous experience of the world and common sense notions bar them from understanding scientific ideas. Shtulman and his colleagues have shown how, even after exposure to college level biology, 80% of students did not modify their essentialist misconceptions about evolution. Only 15% of Americans believed that humans evolved without help from God while 40% believe that God created humans *ex nihilo*, with such statistics having remained more or less the same for four decades. See, among many other texts, his recent paper “How Intuitive Beliefs Inoculate Us Against Scientific Ones” in *The Cognitive Science of Belief* eds. Musolino, J., Sommer, J., and Hemmer, P. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2021).

43 Cf. *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 69–89.

biology, which pose directly the problem of the late appearance of man on earth and hence of the very long period of time during which there existed—to put it with deliberate and appropriate crudity—object without subject.”<sup>44</sup>

So, if classical epistemology or theory of knowledge is defined by its search for “guarantees,” what exactly do these epistemic guarantees guarantee? As Althusser construes it, such philosophical positions attempt to secure in advance the traction that thought has on the real. In other words, empiricism in its many forms seeks to establish and ensure contact between thought and its object. Empiricism does so in one of two basic ways: either it makes knowledge a causal process whereby knowledge is produced by elementary acts of perception (we know what we perceive, and all knowledge is built upon such basic perceptual acts) as if knowledge of an object is *caused* by perceptually encountering that object (confusion of sapience and sentience). Or, by contrast, it stipulates a necessary framework or foundation that conditions all of possible encounters between thinking and being. Such a position, as explained above, is the hallmark of transcendental phenomenology, which ascribes to *consciousness* the role of constituting the world on the basis of certain supposedly necessary cognitive and perceptual structures without which the appearing of phenomenon would be impossible.<sup>45</sup> But in Althusser’s case, he inherited from Bachelard a rejection of this view (also present in the Neo-Kantian school), which argues that a philosopher such as Kant mistakenly indexes his conception of the necessary transcendental categories of consciousness to a scientific theory (Newtonian physics) whose results are not fixed once and for all.

Marx, in the 1857 *Introduction*, ascribes this confusion of constituting and constituted to Hegel who mistakes the genesis of the real with the conceptual genesis by which thought *knows* the real. But such a position is also evident in a work such as Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* wherein propositions are said to “picture” what is. In this case, the grammar of ordinary language—when properly used—simply mirrors or is isomorphic

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44 *On Materialism*, 37.

45 This is Kant’s solution to “Hume’s problem” in the Transcendental deduction: the world must possess a necessary structure, for if it did not, then conscious representation would be rendered impossible (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A101).

with the world. This latter, in turn, has the very same propositional structure of language. In the most extreme forms, empiricism would result in the claim that thought and being are identical. In his later writings, Althusser describes this as the positing of truth as the identity between subject and object (S=O)=T.<sup>46</sup> In such a case, empiricism thus suggests that knowledge of reality is somehow already contained *in* reality and simply awaits extraction by a subject—Truth (*Vérité*) simply becomes the fusion of subject and object. In a 1968 text delivered in Hyppolite’s seminar, Althusser explains that in this circular view “the *Foundation* as the adequation of subject and object is the teleological *origin* of all truth.”<sup>47</sup> This is how Althusser describes it in *Lire le Capital*:

The entirety of the empiricist process of knowledge resides therefore in the operation of the subject known as *abstraction*. To know is to abstract the essence from the real object, the possession of which by the subject is thus called knowledge...*Knowledge* has as its unique function to separate, in the object, two parts existing in it, the essential from the inessential—by specific procedures that have as their goal the *elimination of the inessential real*.<sup>48</sup>

As Althusser presents it, this process of abstraction proceeds by way of parsing out what is necessary and what is accidental in a particular object. Such a view states then that knowledge is the result of the process by which we become aware of what is an essential feature of an object and what is negligible and inessential. Knowledge is thus already given in advance, for what an object *is* already is within the object in a disguised form, but awaits the activity of the subject to be consciously acquired. The “guarantee” structure of empiricism attempts to establish in advance the juridical rights of the subject—and Althusser in many places even suggests that classical epistemology and theory of knowledge is completely beholden to the juridical ideology of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>49</sup>—establishing that the subject has the *right to know* and that the knowledge

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46 *Être marxiste en philosophie*, 167.

47 “Sur le rapport de Marx à Hegel,” 59.

48 *Lire le Capital I*, 39–40.

49 Cf. *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*, 92–93.

possessed by the subject is its veritable property. This juridical question actually begins in a kind of skepticism: “how do we know our knowledge is certain and authentic?” To which a whole host of responses can be given to secure the validity of this knowledge—be it a Cartesian or Leibnizian God or transcendental consciousness. In each of these cases, a higher, epistemic authority ensures that thought has, by a kind of natural right, access to knowing the world. But the consequent materialist (and naturalist) position must precisely deny this point, as I will show below. Thought does not have an inviolable right to know. Callinicos is thus surely mistaken when, in his important early study of Althusser, he proposes that Althusser’s epistemology posits that knowledge of the real is possible because both the real and knowledge “possess an identical structure, that of practice.”<sup>50</sup> This is precisely the position Althusser rejects, namely, that there is an identical *practical* isomorphism between thought and its object that would guarantee that the former has unrestricted access to the latter. Althusser’s position, as I will show, is diametrically opposed to such a view, and it is precisely his rejection of empiricism (broadly construed) that allows him to properly formulate the consequent materialist position with respect to scientific knowledge. And it is only then that, in the philosophical domain, we can start to get a handle on what exactly scientific knowledge is.

What is therefore important is that Althusser rejects any and all attempts to secure in advance thought’s access to reality. And this means that thinking has no primordial, secure grasp on the external world. The world is fundamentally foreign to thought, but it is for this reason that science is in fact possible. In other words, scientific knowledge actually presupposes a world foreign to thought, but which thought can, in rare and exceptional circumstances, grasp *in thought*. This then means that our spontaneous consciousness of the world is in no way the foundation or basis for scientific knowledge. And it should not be forgotten that in the work of Bachelard, the idea of “epistemological break”—so dear to Althusser—can be used to describe *both* the break between ordinary and scientific knowledge as well as intra-scientific ruptures that punctuate the history of a particular science (e.g., physics). Put in stark terms, it might

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50 Alex Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 76 (emphasis removed).

be said that our ordinary encounters with the external world are fundamentally hallucinatory. Not, however, because we are living in Plato's Cave or under the spell of Descartes' Evil Genius, but because our spontaneous interfaces with the world are what Althusser calls *ideological*. Such a view is ultimately foreign to the Platonic or Cartesian conceptions, and much closer to Spinoza's notion of the imagination or the Sellarsian notion of the "manifest image."<sup>51</sup> Our immediate perception of the world does not grant us access to the world as it is, but rather is a complex process of *representing*, or as Althusser puts it, "ideology represents the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence."<sup>52</sup> It is for this reason that Althusser's student François Regnault wrote, in his unpublished contribution to Althusser's Philosophy Course for Scientists (1967–68), "ideology thus begins with perception."<sup>53</sup> So, what empiricism fundamentally gets wrong is that it attempts to posit and make foundational a kind of "natural" or spontaneous access to reality that in turn makes knowledge possible. It thus fails to take seriously that knowledge is in some sense "emergent" and that an adequate grasp of the external world *in thought* must be produced via the systematic elaboration of concepts, a process which is in no way *given* or guaranteed to necessarily take place. Marx, according to Althusser, "proposes to us a new *conception of knowledge*,"<sup>54</sup> one wherein knowledge is conceived of as *production*.<sup>55</sup> And it is this position of construing knowledge as the result of a productive conceptual process that allows Althusser to reconstruct the classical problems of epistemology within a materialist philosophical position.

### Althusser's "materialist epistemology"

In a previous article<sup>56</sup>, I suggested that Althusser deconstructs and even "destroys" the problematic of epistemology in its classical formulation. I

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51 Cf. "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" in *Science, Perception and Reality*.

52 "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état (notes pour une recherche)" in *Sur la reproduction* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 296.

53 "Qu'est-ce qu'une coupure épistémologique?" unpublished typescript dated February 2, 1968 from Althusser's *Cours de philosophie pour scientifiques (1967–68)*, 10.

54 *Lire le Capital I*, 38

55 *Ibid*, 37

56 See my "The 2 Bachelards of Louis Althusser," *parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, no. 31 (2019): 174–206.

am here less concerned with Althusser's refusal of the language of epistemology, for which there is no shortage of textual evidence<sup>57</sup>, and have no problem employing, for the sake of convenience, the expression "materialist epistemology" to refer to Althusser's conception of scientific knowledge. What matters, however, is understanding how Althusser argues one ought to best understand the nature of scientific knowledge in order to most adequately theorize it. Once his view of scientific knowledge and its production is clarified, it will be clear how it is distinct from the empiricist position outlined in the previous section.

Though Althusser nowhere states it, it is perfectly consequent with his thinking to state that scientific knowledge need not exist. Since he refuses any epistemic guarantees binding thought to reality in order to secure the production of scientific knowledge from out of this primordial identity between thought and being, it follows that thought has to earn its ingress on the real. Its capacity to grasp the real is not inherent or given in advance, but must be produced. It is fundamentally the role of concepts that makes this grasping possible. However, Althusser does in some sense say this. In *Lire le Capital* and *Être marxiste en philosophie*, he is clear that what differentiates the materialist treatment of scientific knowledge from the idealist position is that it treats scientific knowledge as a "fact"<sup>58</sup> as opposed to searching for epistemic guarantees. And like he had already suggested in *Lire le Capital*, he again claims that both Spinoza and Marx are united on this point.<sup>59</sup> Now, what does it mean to treat scientific knowledge as a *fact*? Here, we can draw on a simple, but powerful lesson from an empiricist, namely, Hume. A fact (or matter of fact) is quite simply anything that one can imagine, without contradiction, being otherwise than it currently is.<sup>60</sup> Scientific knowledge thus perfectly fits this bill. One can imagine, without contradiction, a world wherein there is no scientific knowledge, one where concepts such as mass, elements, or categories

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57 See for example *Éléments d'autocritique*, 51–53, *Être marxiste en philosophie*, 165. See also Dominique Lecourt's book *Bachelard: Le jour et la nuit* (Paris: Grasset, 1974) where he speaks of materialist epistemology as a "theoretical monstrosity" (170).

58 Cf. *Lire le Capital*, 75 and *Être marxiste en philosophie*, 172–173.

59 Ibid, 172–173.

60 For fascinating contemporary treatments of this issue see Quentin Meillassoux's *Après la finitude* and Nathan Brown's recent *Rationalist Empiricism: A Theory of Speculative Critique* (New York: Fordham UP, 2021).



were never invented. And one need not even *imagine* such a world precisely because human history testifies precisely to this: there indeed have been vast stretches of human history devoid of scientific knowledge! Scientific knowledge—be it Galilean, Darwinian, or Cantorian—did not exist for the vast majority of human history and, *need not exist*. There is quite simply no reason, no metaphysical necessity, why there had to be a Galileo or a Darwin or a Cantor (or a Marx, for that matter). However, this contingency of scientific knowledge—another way of saying it is a *fact*—does not mean there is not a rational necessity at work in the succession of theories or that science is *merely* a contingent human-made discursive practice. On the contrary, Althusser is some kind of “rationalist” not because he believes, against empiricists, that there are innate ideas, but rather because the historical succession of scientific theories whose content can be rationally reconstructed, is not subject to the same physical-causal laws studied by the natural sciences. Put differently, the validity of our scientific theories cannot be explained naturalistically, but requires rational justification. So, Althusser’s rationalism hangs on making a distinction between the domain of the causal as investigated by the natural sciences and the domain of epistemic normative elaborated by the historically inclined philosopher of science. Theories are not *caused* by sensing and perceiving nor can they be traced back to elementary acts of constituting consciousness (phenomenology), but rather, Althusser tends (like Sellars) to argue that there are no primitive non-inferential perceptual experiences that “ground” knowledge. In other words, there are no elementary perceptions free from concepts or various degrees of rational elaboration. When one discusses and analyzes theories, one subjects them to normative and rational criteria which, to be sure, evolve and mutate across history. This historical process is then nothing other than the very movement of the production of scientific objectivity.<sup>61</sup> Althusser, in his 1967 text “Sur le travail théorique,” insists that the major defect of empiricism is that it fails to account for the role of conceptual elaboration in the process of thinking: knowledge never arises from passive observations—indeed, Althusser even insists that there is no such thing as a *mere* observation—but is the result of a further process of conceptual

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61 Cf. Étienne Balibar, “Science et vérité dans la philosophie de Georges Canguilhem” in *Georges Canguilhem: Philosophe, historien des sciences* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), 60.

elaboration. This same point was one of the major insights of Althusser's essay "Sur la dialectique matérialiste," where he laid out the dialectic of generalities that makes up the process of knowing.<sup>62</sup>

Althusser thus draws a line of demarcation within a classical philosophical position known to all students of the history of philosophy, namely, the *active role* played by the mind in knowing. It is typically held that empiricists claim the mind is passive or reflective in its relationship to that which is outside of it. The mind, for somebody like Hume, quite literally receives "impressions" from without. Against this, it is often said that a philosopher like Kant revolutionized philosophy by drawing attention to the way in which the mind does not passively reflect the world, but rather plays an *active* role in constituting it. Althusser here takes Kant's side against the empiricist, insisting that the mind plays an active role in knowing. The difference, however, is that he does not say that the mind plays an active role in *constituting the world*, but rather plays an active role in *knowing* it. This is the materialist twist: empiricism is wrong to insist on the passivity of the mind, but the Kantian or Husserlian, for her part, mischaracterizes the activity of thought. Thought, for the materialist, must be *posterior to being* and thus can never *constitute* it in any meaningful sense. Yet an active effort is nonetheless needed to know this anterior being. This is where thought must take an active role in producing the concepts needed to adequately grasp the material world that it does not constitute and which is fundamentally independent of the process of knowing. To arrive at knowledge of the world one must take, as Althusser once said, the "detour of theory."<sup>63</sup>

What then is peculiar about Althusser's materialism is that it insists—precisely like Marx, it should not be forgotten—that the spontaneous immediacy of how being appears to us in experience is highly abstract and opaque.<sup>64</sup> The concrete is in fact the *result* of rigorous conceptual processes and operations, not the starting point (the abstract). Scientific practice and the knowledge it produces can thus only be properly understood once we recognize "the decisive role of scientific

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62 Cf. *Pour Marx*, 186–197.

63 "Soutenance d'Amiens" in *Solitude de Machiavel et autres textes* (Paris: PUF, 1998), 201.

64 On this point, Althusser had already associated Spinoza and Marx in *Lire le Capital*. There he speaks of the "opacity of the immediate" in Spinoza, which he, in a rare mention, links to Marx's notion of fetishism (14).

abstraction, even better, the role of conceptual systematicity and, in an even more general sense, the role of theory as such.”<sup>65</sup> Althusser’s materialism is thus not a physicalism since it does not necessarily make a claim about matter nor does it claim that even thought is simply matter in motion or reducible completely to elementary material processes. Rather, as a philosopher, Althusser is interested in properly characterizing the cognitive process when it is said to know a world that preceded it in the most literal, chronological sense. This, as I see it, must mean there is an important *naturalistic* element of Althusser’s materialism. If being precedes thought then cognition must be treated in the first instance as a contingent evolutionary acquisition. To refuse this would be to again repeat the error outlined above for it would mean that consciousness is somehow responsible for being as opposed to it being properly understood as an *effect* of the complex natural processes investigated by the sciences.<sup>66</sup> But to be clear, Althusser is certainly no positivist for he does not believe that philosophy can be replaced by natural scientific inquiry. Althusser is not suggesting that we “naturalize epistemology.” On the contrary, his philosophical project is about clarifying the role of philosophy in a world of extremely compelling and sophisticated sciences.

What this then means is that scientific knowledge is the result, as Althusser puts it, of a *process of production*.<sup>67</sup> Process because knowledge does not arrive all at once, ready-made, and production because knowledge does not pre-exist this productive process, but rather is the result of the process of conceptual production. To know is thus not to observe or sense, but rather to *produce* concepts that allow thought to grasp the real *in thought*. Knowledge is therefore a specific kind of *cognitive process* that produces knowledge as its result or effect. So, when knowledge does

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65 “Lénine et la philosophie,” 31.

66 Materialists should thus be open to “naturalizing” the transcendental, that is to say, to subjecting the apparent unity of conscious experience to natural scientific investigation as opposed to leaving it to *a priori* philosophizing. Important recent work on this topic has been done by Catharine Malabou in her *Avant Demain*, a book which, in many ways, takes its cue from an excellent article by Jacques Bouveresse, “Le problème de l’a priori et la conception évolutionniste des lois de la pensée.” The work of Thomas Metzinger is also relevant on this point, for it is Metzinger’s basic claim that the brain is a kind of complex apparatus for making the external world seem transparent and directly accessible to consciousness. See his *The Ego Tunnel*.

67 On this point see Suchting’s “Marx and ‘the Problem of Knowledge’” in his *Marx and Philosophy* where he discusses in section 9.21 “The General Idea of a Theoretical Mode of Production.” I’m grateful to Dusty Dallman for bringing this work to my attention.

come into existence it is not there before the intervention of this process of conceptual elaboration. In other words, knowledge production does arguably produce something “new.” And yet, Althusser will somewhat enigmatically suggest that this knowledge is “eternal” in the Spinozist sense.<sup>68</sup>

How then ought we to make sense of this eternity? I suspect the best solution would be to, without getting embroiled in an interpretation of Spinoza’s texts, propose that Althusser is a realist. Simply put, Althusser claims that scientific knowledge affords us knowledge of reality as it is in itself, “nature just as it is, without foreign addition.”<sup>69</sup> Now, nature, broadly construed, is, of course, dynamic and far from being a completely totalized and stable “object.” But nonetheless, the scientific tradition affords us the best resources for knowing nature in its very evolution. Simply put, *there is* a way of employing concepts and experimental methods that allow thought to know the world as it is independent of the historically and biologically conditioned modes by which the world *appears* to us. This is why Althusser is openly critical of what he calls “historicism” in *Lire le Capital*. There is a difference between producing knowledge about history and the fact that knowledge is produced in particular historical conditions. The former is patently not historical, while the latter is ultimately a rather banal claim. Mathematics, for example, appeared in history—as if it would appear somewhere else—at a given empirical moment (with say Thales or Pythagoras), but that in no way makes the content of mathematical knowledge an arbitrary historically contingent construct.<sup>70</sup> Althusser is therefore always imploring us to distinguish, as carefully as possible, between the physico-causal order and the order of reasons: “To be sure, real (theoretical) problems produced by the process of knowledge concern *realities* that exist independently of the process of knowledge, and belong to the *real process*, or the process of the real, and this correspondence constitutes precisely the effect of knowledge produced by the process of knowledge.”<sup>71</sup> And so, as strange as it may

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68 *Être marxiste en philosophie*, 188.

69 Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Collected Works, Volume 25* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 478–479. This remark is also cited by the important Spinoza commentator Alexandre Matheron.

70 Cf. Tosel, *Spinoza, ou le crépuscule de la servitude* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1984), 65–66.

71 “La querelle de l’humanisme,” 516

seem, Althusser here is in some sense endorsing what we could call a kind of “correspondence theory of truth.” But such a view is precisely not laughable since, once we reject empiricism in the broad sense, we do owe an account of how thought aligns with the real precisely because we do not presuppose their identity or connection. Is for this reason that Ray Brassier is right to speak of what he calls “the enigma of realism”: it is a good, well-formulated philosophical question to ask “how we are able to adequately represent reality.”<sup>72</sup> This question is renewed in all of its urgency the moment we realize that it cannot be solved *philosophically* in advance.

We must then reject the idea, common amongst so-called “materialists,” that being closer to the empirical world—studying random curiosities and peculiarities of history—somehow pulls us away from the temptation of idealism. The great lesson of Spinoza and Hegel clearly taken up by Marx is that the immediate and seemingly self-evident modes of appearing are in reality the *most abstract*. Immediacy is abstract and opaque, not concrete! This is what Marx means in his famous introduction to the *Grundrisse* of which Althusser was so fond: the concrete is attained not by encountering it in some literal way—as if mere perception is concrete—but rather through a complex process of conceptual production that results in the coming into being of the concrete *in thought*. Concrete is thus the result, and not the point of departure. To put the point sharply: there is nothing more abstract than thinking one has knowledge of say, the capitalist mode of production, because one has been thrown into an exploitative work place, and nothing more *concrete*, paradoxically, than being able to produce in thought the multiplicity of determinations that make the capitalist mode of production *what it is*. To make our way to the singular, “concrete” objects with which we regularly interface and which is all that exists<sup>73</sup> we must take the aforementioned *detour of theory*: “we know that knowledge of these concrete, real, singular objects is not an immediate given, nor a simple abstraction, nor the *application* of general concepts to particular givens.”<sup>74</sup> “An inquiry or an observation,” Althusser writes, “is thus never passive: it is only possible

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72 *Nil Unbound*, 51

73 “Sur le travail théorique,” *La Pensée*, no. 132 (avril 1967), 4.

74 *Ibid*, 5.

under the guidance and the control of theoretical concepts that act them, either directly or indirectly, in rules of observation, choices of classification, in the *technical* montage that constitutes the field of observation and of experimentation.”<sup>75</sup>

### The Problem of “Reflection”

Now that I have established Althusser’s rejection of empiricism and outlined the philosophical position he argued ought to take its place, I can now turn to the philosophical problems that Althusser thinks are incumbent upon the materialist epistemologist. To quickly recap what has been established thus far, Althusser’s texts from the 1960s and 70s can be reconstructed to produce the following argument:

- 1) Materialist thesis: Being precedes thought (itself verifiable via evolutionary biology, archaeology/paleontology, and physics).<sup>76</sup>
- 2) Naturalist sub-claim: Thought is a contingent evolutionary acquisition produced in and by nature (whose processes are intelligible in themselves via natural science—the production of cognition in nature is knowable).
- 3) Realist thesis or thesis of objectivity: Thought can know the real in itself not because it has spontaneous access to the structure of reality and natural processes (rejection of empiricism), but rather because conceptual elaboration and production can *reproduce* the real in thought.<sup>77</sup>

If this argument is sound, and which I believe is corroborated by Althusser’s texts, it is now clear why Althusser also claimed that Marx set off a *philosophical* revolution in addition to the scientific revolution associated with Historical Materialism understood as the science of history. With the exception of Spinoza, Althusser maintains that no other

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>76</sup> On this point, see Althusser’s discussion of what he calls “Recent Discoveries” in his posthumously published text “La querelle de l’humanisme.”

<sup>77</sup> My reconstruction of this argument is heavily indebted to Dominique Lecourt’s book *Une crise et son enjeu (essai sur la position de Lénine en philosophie)* (Paris: Maspéro, 1973).

philosopher had ever so systematically rejected the empiricism-idealism doublet so as to raise the proper philosophical questions implied by the existence of rigorous scientific knowledge. The five final sections of Althusser's introduction to *Lire le Capital* are devoted to properly formulating the materialist epistemological problematic and are among some of the densest and most enigmatic pages Althusser published. Recently published archival texts such as *Être marxiste en philosophie*, show that Althusser continued to grant importance to such epistemological problems during the middle and late periods of his thought.<sup>78</sup>

Once empiricism in all its forms is rejected, the question of how thought makes contact with being is suddenly given the philosophical attention it deserves. Far from being an antiquated metaphysical question, it is in fact an urgent philosophical problematic that takes seriously the literality of scientific statements about objects that precede the emergence of consciousness and will outlast the extinction of humans. Those who scoff at such concerns are more proof of just how dominant post-Kantian idealism remains in the philosophical scene. As Ray Brassier writes, "No wonder, then, that post-Kantian philosophers routinely patronize these and other scientific assertions about the world as impoverished abstractions whose meaning supervenes on this more fundamental sub-representational or pre-theoretical relation to phenomena."<sup>79</sup> In other words, Kant's so-called "Copernican Revolution" has become so engrained as philosophical second nature that to suggest that scientific concepts know the real independently of how being appears to human consciousness slaps of dogmatic metaphysics. This is exactly the argument Lenin dealt with in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: "The materialists, we are told, recognize something unthinkable and unknowable—'things-in-themselves'—matter 'outside of experience' and outside of our knowledge. They lapse into genuine mysticism by admitting the existence of something beyond, something transcending the bounds of 'experience' and knowledge."<sup>80</sup> But the materialist thesis of the primacy of being over thought and its naturalistic sub claim regarding the emergence of thought

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78 For an excellent defense of Althusser's ongoing "scientism" see William S. Lewis, "Althusser's Scientism and Aleatory Materialism" *Décalages*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2016).

79 *Nil in Unbound*, 50

80 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, 14.

as the result of complex evolutionary processes requires a philosophical defense of the capacity of science to know the world independent of its correlation with thought. This, then, is what Althusser seeks to sketch.

As I discussed above, one of the major errors of empiricism is the confusion of thought and its object. The empiricist argues that thought and being are identical, which means that no claim can be made about objects outside of how they *appear*. Appearance and essence thus directly coincide. Marx, however, rejects this view and claims, on the contrary, in *Capital, Vol. 3* that the *décalage* between being and appearing is in fact the very condition of possibility of science: “all science [*Wissenschaft*] would be superfluous [*überflüssig*] if appearance [*Erscheinungsform*] and essence [*Wesen*] directly coincided.” Scientific knowledge thus must be produced, since it will never simply appear inscribed on the surface of reality in the way words appear on a page. This is why Althusser opens *Lire le Capital* both with a discussion of empiricism *and* a theory of reading. Though Althusser’s introduction and its famous mention of “symptomatic reading”—the only place where this language is used—caught the attention of literary theorists early on, his discussion quite simply has nothing to do with literary criticism and interpretation.<sup>81</sup> The two strands are related to the precise extent that empiricism presents a kind of textual ontology and epistemology whereby the world is said to be structured like an open book awaiting the proper vision capable of decoding it,<sup>82</sup> which is why Althusser later claims that we must “abandon the specular myth of vision and of immediate reading.”<sup>83</sup> Nature, however, for the materialist, is indeed intelligible not because it contains a latent meaning awaiting extraction, but because the deployment of concepts can reproduce its structure in thought. Now, the deployment of concepts specific to science does allow for knowledge of material objects that exist independent of thought, but the empiricist mistake again occurs if it is assumed that these concepts arise directly and in an unmediated fashion by mere virtue of human beings’ interfacing with the world. In other words, it is because science concerns the world as it is in itself that one might be tempted to

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81 The “canonical” Althusserian text on literature is Pierre Macherey’s *Pour un théorie de la production littéraire*, which explicitly deals with how the Althusserian epistemological program could be activated in the discussion of literary texts.

82 *Lire le Capital I*, 13.

83 *Ibid*, 23.



confuse effects with causes. Scientific knowledge is the effect of a conceptual process that concerns objects, but it is not, for all that, *caused* by objects. Knowledge is *about* objects without being *in* them.

It is for this reason that Althusser introduces a distinction, which he borrows from Spinoza and Marx, between what he calls the “object of knowledge” and the “real object.”<sup>84</sup> By this latter term, Althusser seems to simply mean any individuated entity broadly construed be it the items currently on my desk or capitalism in 2021. Yet, to produce knowledge of capitalism in its current form, it is not sufficient for me to simply be taking part in this mode of production in its contemporary instantiation. This is analogous to the reason one sees a doctor—being embodied does not mean one is automatically privy to the processes that constitute life. And though it might be tempting to say, perhaps following Aristotle, that a doctor always treats the health of *this particular patient* and not health in the abstract<sup>85</sup>, Althusser’s point is that one can only ever cure the concrete, real individual by deploying a complex set of concepts that cannot be read directly off the body of the patient. In particular, scientific thinking “is the historically constituted system of an *apparatus of thought* that makes of thinking...a determinate *mode of production* of knowledge.”<sup>86</sup> By this Althusser means the historically specific style in which observations, experiments, and hypothesizes all coalesce in the deployment of the concepts that constitute a particular scientific theory. This theoretical mode of production can thus *reflect* in thought the same processes at work in nature, be it in my body or in the global capitalist economy. For Althusser, the mature works of Marx and Lenin shuttle between elaborating theoretical concepts and deploying these same concepts in empirical studies. One must be careful not to confuse the two registers of analysis since Althusser tends to see a particular historical discussion such as one finds in the *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire* as being “a concrete illustration of a theoretical concept.”<sup>87</sup> It is the rigor and validity of the latter that, for Althusser, fundamentally make the former intelligible.

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84 Ibid, 46.

85 Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I, vi 16-20: “In fact it does not appear that the physician studies even health in the abstract; he studies the health of the human being—or rather of some particular human being, for it is individuals that he has to cure.”

86 *Lire le Capital*, 47.

87 “Sur le travail théorique,” 11.

Once this distinction is in place between the object of knowledge and the real object, and once Althusser has laid out all the ways they can be confused or mistaken from one another, a genuine philosophical problem arises. Althusser's text is worth quoting here at length:

Posed *in* these rigorous conditions, the problem that concerns us can thus be formulated in the following way: *by what mechanism does the process of knowledge, which takes place entirely in thought, produce the cognitive appropriation of its real object, which exists outside of thought, in the real world? Or again, by what mechanism does the production of the object of knowledge produce the cognitive appropriation of the real object, which exists outside of thought in the real world?* The simple substitution of the question of the *mechanism* of cognitive appropriation of the real object by means of the object of knowledge for the ideological question of *guarantees* of the possibility of knowledge, contains in itself this mutation of the problematic that delivers us from the closed space of ideology and opens for us the open space of the philosophical theory which we are after.<sup>88</sup>

As Althusser sees it, the genuine *philosophical* problem that arises once the nature of scientific knowledge is properly conceived as being both a *fact* and resulting in knowledge of real objects that exist “outside of thought in the real world” is the question of what he here calls the “mechanism” that brings about the “cognitive appropriation of the real object.” How is it, in other words, that a certain kind of cognition can result in the reproduction of a real object, one which does not *depend* on human cognition to exist, in thought, a process that does depend on human existence? To borrow language from Roy Bhaskar, how is it that scientific theories, which are fallible products of human societies and human cognition, end up being *of* or *about* what he calls “intransitive objects of knowledge,” which are “the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events and possibilities of the world...quite independent of us”?<sup>89</sup> How is it that concepts “touch” the world once concepts and objects are no longer metaphysically guaranteed to coincide?

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<sup>88</sup> *Lire le Capital I*, 67.

<sup>89</sup> *A Realist Theory of Science*, 22.

I do not have the space here to discuss how to answer these questions nor do I think Althusser ever settled on an answer with which he was particularly satisfied. Part of Althusser's redefinition of philosophy as "class struggle in theory" seems to suggest that these epistemological and ontological questions will constantly need to be repeated, clarified, and laid out anew as the sciences continue to progress. This is, in some sense, Althusser's version of Engels' claim that materialism must be rethought with each breakthrough or revolution in the sciences. And, insofar as scientific knowledge always clashes with our spontaneous, ideological conception of the world, materialism will always need to be defended against skeptical and deflationary interpretations of science be they from philosophers or politicians.<sup>90</sup>

But, in some places, Althusser and his students suggest a perhaps unlikely and unexpected proposal for resolving this question of the mechanism of the cognitive appropriation of the real object in thought. Althusser, Lecourt, and Macherey all turn to an arguably quite heterodox interpretation of Lenin's "theory of reflection" as discussed in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Lecourt's study on Lenin's book contains a fascinating chapter devoted to what he calls the "Double Thesis of Reflection." There, Lecourt discusses the possibility of establishing a dialogue with the bio-physiological sciences of perception and cognition. He insists that "the knowledge of the mechanisms of the acquisition of knowledge does not fall under the jurisdiction of philosophy."<sup>91</sup> The question of the "degrees of precision" that scientific concepts attain in their historical development, Lecourt explains, is a scientific problem, but a problem for the science of history, not for biology or neuroscience: "it will be this region of the science of history that has as its object the process of the production of knowledge."<sup>92</sup> It would thus appear that although the natural sciences are crucial for historical materialism, the question of the "mechanism of cognitive appropriation" is nonetheless neither a naturalizable nor a philosophical problematic for Lecourt. This claim, it is

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90 This is how one ought to read Althusser's discussion of the biologist Jacques Monod in his *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*. The unpublished, complete manuscript of the course also contains a discussion of the epistemological positions of the philosopher Jean-Toussaint Desanti, which Althusser thought improperly accounted for the production of scientific knowledge.

91 *Une crise et son enjeu*, 34–35.

92 *Ibid.*, 35.

worth noting, stands in an interesting tension with Althusser's earlier claim that the distinctive object of Marxist philosophy—language he will, to be sure, criticize and abandon—is the “passage from ignorance to knowledge.”<sup>93</sup> Macherey, for his part, will discuss the “problem of reflection” in his early discussions of literature.<sup>94</sup> And, lastly, Althusser does mention this notion of reflection in his *Être marxiste en philosophie* in an explicit discussion of precisely such epistemological concerns. There, he explains that the Leninist theory of reflection is the most famous answer to the questions posed above because it is the most categorical and the most scandalous refutation of the empiricist problematic of the classical “problem of knowledge.”<sup>95</sup> Positively citing Lecourt's aforementioned study, Althusser praises the paradoxical active and productive conception of reflection put forward by Lenin. Reflection is thus the *result* of the complex process of the cognitive appropriation of the real object, not the spontaneous operation of consciousness. The sciences, in this view, are the exceptional and rare theoretical adventures that produce a reflection of the real as the result of an active process of conceptual elaboration that is neither passive nor mechanical. But, Althusser, adds one more twist before concluding this brief and enigmatic discussion. He suggests that Spinoza's so-called parallelism and the famous *ordo et connectio rerum idem est ac ordo et connectio idearum* is another possible solution, one that establishes an “active correspondence, an active reflection.”<sup>96</sup> There are, no doubt, crucial difficulties that prevents any easy synthesis of the Leninist theory of reflection and Spinozist parallelism, the least of which includes the fact that Spinoza, unlike the materialism of Marx or Lenin, leaves no room for bodies to be in a causal relation with thought.<sup>97</sup> The upshot, however, is that Althusser, perhaps

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93 20ALT/4/1, “Théorie, pratique théorique et formation théorique. Idéologie et lutte idéologique” (Paris, le 20 avril 1965), 7–8.

94 Cf. *Pour un théorie de la production littéraire*, in particular the section “Lénine, critique de Tolstoï” as well as the article “The Problem of Reflection” trans. Susan Sniader Lanser, *SubStance*, vol. 5, no. 15 (1976): 6–20.

95 *Être marxiste en philosophie*, 167.

96 *Ibid*, 169.

97 As Althusser sees it, “We are thus here dealing with a consequent form of materialism that annuls the difference between the object and its knowledge, all the while recognizing, in an abstract manner to be sure, the difference between the object and its knowledge, that is to say recognizing the possibility of a play and a dialectic allowing the passage, in three stages, from the one to the other across the three different kinds of knowledge” (*Ibid*, 169).

better than any contemporary philosopher, has adequately proposed the distinctive philosophical challenges that await any consequent materialist, realist, and naturalist.

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