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Meaning and (F)act: Ray Brassier's Speculative Nihilism and its Implications for Dialectics

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Abstract

This paper seeks to frame the proper place for the empirical phenomenon of human meaning in the scientifically disenchanting world described by Ray Brassier. I embrace Brassier's statement that "Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity" but disagree with his injunction that human meaning is unimportant. Meaning should be an object of philosophy insofar as we are biologically bound to experiencing the world in a meaningful way. Brassier's work is exciting for its application of rigorous analytic techniques to continental discourse, in a manner that makes contributions to both metaphysics and philosophy of science.

Philosophers would do well to desist from issuing any further injunctions to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life, or mend the shattered concord between man and nature. Philosophy should be more than a sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem. Nihilism is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity. (Ray Brassier, Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction(xi))

The recent work of Ray Brassier presents a fundamental challenge to the accepted ways in which philosophy has been performed in the past century. By using the technical precision of the analytic tradition to confront the giants of continental thought, he is able to begin a conversation many would think impossible. Seeing a complementary tendency between recent French materialism¹ and radical Naturalism (particularly the Churchill's eliminative materialism), Brassier has opened a new trajectory that could lead to a productive reexamination of the aims of philosophy in the twenty first century. *Nihil Unbound* calls for a new scientific nihilism to break the trend of anthropocentric relativism that he sees as the still dominant doxa in almost all philosophy. Brassier insists that we have still not lent the proper attention the challenges that science raises.

Over the course of a few centuries, the longstanding assumption that everything exists for a reason, that things are intrinsically purposeful and have been designed in accordance with a divine plan, is slowly but systematically dismantled, first in physics, then in chemistry, and eventually in biology, where it had held out longest. Curved space-time, the periodic table, natural selection: none of these are comprehensible in narrative terms. Galaxies, molecules, and organisms are not *for* anything. Try as we might, it becomes increasingly difficult to construct a rationally plausible narrative about the world that satisfies our psychological need for stories that unfold from beginning, through crisis, to ultimate resolution (Brassier-Interview).

Brassier asserts that philosophy's response to this challenge has largely been a kneejerk attempt to reassert the meaning of human existence, rather than confronting the much more important and interesting challenge of a world without meaning as described by science. Some philosophers, particularly those of a continental bent, will be put off by this seemingly naïve statement. One could imagine our interlocutor's line of reasoning: 'Why are you giving science such little scrutiny? Any scientific claim can only be made from a human perspective and therefore is subject to the limitations of the given human narrative in which it exists.' This position which, following Quinton Meillassoux,² Brassier calls "correlationism" assumes that it is impossible for humans to think a world without human thought. In Brassier's attempt to strengthen Meillassoux's argument against the correlation he brings to the table a hyper-existentialist argument that he claims can resolve the issue, the absolute certainty of human extinction. Rather than this taking the form of a new being-towards-death which can only lead to a realization of the authentic constitution of the human qua human, Brassier means this as a supremely inhuman gesture. The difference lies in concept of world. Brassier quotes Heidegger "Strictly speaking we cannot say: there was a time when there were no human beings. At every time, there were and are human beings, because time temporalizes itself only as long as there are human beings" (Heidegger, 88-9). At the acknowledged risk of being overly simplistic the argument is the same as that attributed to our hypothetical correlationist. Brassier, again following Meillassoux, posits that Correlationism is a stage that must be passed through in order to move forward. The interesting point is rather I see as the disjunct between Heidegger's brilliant understanding of historicity and this position. A Doxic Heideggarian would argue that due to the fact of historicity, thought that seeks to place itself outside of its historical place falls victim to transcendental fallacy. My retort to this is a simple reversal. The position that defies historicity is that which indexes existence in its totality to human experience. Take any number of scientific studies that demonstrate the fact of eventual human extinction, such as Brassier's absolute example of the death of the sun. While one could say that such a happening is solely dependent on constructs of human thought (systems of mathematics, measurements, theories, etc.) and as such that this scenario simply proves the correlation, this argument would not change the fact that scientists can accurately predict the lifespan of stars, therefore doing nothing to change the status of knowledge of such an event.

Rather than destroying the manifest image of human life and replace it with the scientific image, I will contend that Brassier's brash challenge opens the doors to new possibilities in dialectics. Consider the following quote.

Science does not need to deny the significance of our evident psychological *need* for narrative; it just demotes it from its previously foundational metaphysical status to that of an epistemically derivative 'useful fiction' ... I think that it is possible to *understand* the meaninglessness of existence, and that this capacity to understand meaning as a regional or *bounded* phenomenon marks a fundamental progress in cognition. (Brassier-Interview)

This statement opens a new and interesting problem: How is a nihilist to conceive of meaning in his own experience? How, given that 'existence is worthless' did Brassier become a philosopher? Brassier has carefully separated his definitions of meaning and truth so as to avoid what he sees as Nietzsche's failure of conflating the lack of meaning with the lack of truth. While I agree with this criticism, it seems as if Brassier still misses an important point concerning the relation of the two terms insofar as he holds

that he can perfectly separate and even oppose them to one another. In what follows I hope to hold Brassier accountable to his innovations by examining meaning as an empirical phenomena that must be examined by speculative thought. That is, while meaning is indeed a 'bound phenomena' that is inarguably reducible to biological processes, this fact does not erase the *truth* of its existence. This point makes all the difference because it holds Brassier accountable for his own thought. Brassier's brilliance lies in his reinauguration of wonder (at extinction, science and truth) as the new opening condition of philosophy. This paper will not seek to reinstate human meaning as the centerpiece of philosophical truth but to understand "bound meaning" or meaning that is understood as objectively subjective. While meaning and truth are by no means identical, Brassier's declared love of truth in this pointless world must strike those who take him seriously as particularly significant.

In order to fully appreciate Brassier's development, we must see that empirically verifiable statements have a radical new meaning within this framework. Rather than being ontologically identical to any statement, those that hit upon the material workings of the world in a mathematically predictable way have a retroactively transformative nature, which I will highlight by referring to them as F(acts). F(acts) can happen in a variety of ways, but they must be bits of data that cannot be accounted for in the world in which they emerge. Take the agricultural revolution, where the discovery that plants can be strategically planted en mass causes a defining acceleration of human development. The importance of this moment is foundational. What it entails is a transformational negation of the previous conditions of life that formerly conditioned existence for humans. What is at stake in this moment is nothing less than the foundational break in *reality* entailed here. This is a moment when a thing happens that breaks the rules of the world, as established by its prior state. What is now necessary is to establish precisely how the correlation is broken when a F(act) happens. By treating bound human meaning as being conditioned by F(acts) we can adequately discuss meaning in all of its importance without falling back into the correlation.

Now we must delve into what exactly what the definition of 'meaning' is so that we may engage with it and its preconditions. Brassier, oddly enough, declines to define the term explicitly. However, by taking his juxtapositions of meaning and truth alongside those of the 'manifest image' and 'scientific image' we can reasonably deduce what this signifies: the 'je ne se quoi' of experience that is supposedly irreducible to the facts of existence and grounds the dimension of the human. Above I claimed that the human experience of meaning is an empirically verified phenomenon. By this I mean that it has been sufficiently demonstrated that any theory of human action can only make sense a citing a faculty that produces rational reasons in excess of the facts. Take, for example, the well-known Forer effect. In one elegant experiment, researchers gave 150 subjects what they said was a personalized astrology reading and asked the subjects to rate it for accuracy. 94 percent of the subjects reported the horoscope as accurate, in spite of the fact that they all received the exact same report. Calling these people fools does not help us; they are demonstrating the characteristic of humanity that we are investigating.

Common sense, the great opponent of thought, would tell us that reason governs human action and that this example is but an oddity built into a population that already believes absurdities (stellar influence in human happenings) and is therefore prone to make mistakes in judgment. The true point lies elsewhere, in the fact that the vague nature of the predictions was encountered in such a way as to allow the participants to endow each of them with their individual meaning. It is much more effective to see how meaning arises absolutely out of random bits of data, often against our better judgment. Is it not

humiliating to read a silly fortune and catch oneself interpreting this according to one's life, regardless of the fact that the whole thing is never taken "seriously?" Indeed it's essential to highlight this feature as an example of Žižekian disavowal that has no small consequence for our investigation. The very structure of a statement along the lines of 'I know very well that this fortune is never the sort of thing I would take seriously, but this reference to needing to make a choice between my current loyalties cannot but strike me as pertinent to my present situation' points to a way to use meaning against itself via what we could call a neuro-Kantian exploration of cognition. I say neuro-Kantian as this method would search the brain to discover how what happens at the level of experience is possible physiologically, while retaining a ruthlessly critical attitude to the preconceptions of science and philosophy via study of the irrational basis of thought.

The human brain is the most complicated structure known to have been produced by natural selection, and the ateleological nature of evolution must be underscored here. Nothing happens for a reason. Reasons can only be produced following happenings. Eyes are not for seeing, organisms that sprouted photosensitive sensory structures happened to be selected for in such a manner as to reach their current state of dominance amongst large animals. The human brain must be understood in a strictly analogous fashion, a pileup of genetic flukes amongst a small ape population leading to the most significant ecological event in recent geological time. By the time of *Homo erectus*, hominids began burying their dead, suggesting a fundamentally new way of interaction with existence. *H. erectus* remains also display large craniums, evidence of anatomy capable of proto-language, the use of fire and tools (should we call this species *Homo heideggerius*?). It follows that from this point onward in hominid development we can hypothesize that increased cortex volume and the development of the frontal cortex created the conditions for what Brassier calls meaning.

There can be no question that the advent of "meaning" has guided human development. History hitherto has been dominated by what Brassier would be sure to call pure fictions of the human cognitive apparatus that ought to be abandoned by those seeking truth. Neuroscientific research has identified two brain regions as being the likely basis of the religious experience, the temporal and parietal lobes. This could be taken as a simple (though cheap) victory for vulgar atheism, but a comparison with art (another locus of meaning) should interestingly complicate this. Asking the question 'does music exist?' seems absolutely removed from asking the same thing of God. We can point to mathematical relationships between frequencies as physical proof of the former. However, a condition such as amusia (an inability to hear any kind of sound as musical, due to brain damage or developmental abnormality) displays proof that this is far too simple an answer. Music is not objective in the way that sound is, in the sense that we can empirically verify the existence of the latter while the existence of the amusic proves that 277.18 Hz is not equivalent to western music's C#, and be pure noise. Why then, does some ability to at least hear (what is culturally determined to be) music exist in any human without cortical damage while belief in the divine seems to be supplantable by a naturalist line of thought? The F(act) that humans have different faculties for appreciating meaning should cue us that this differentiation is not trivial, meanings must be comparatively examined.

This juxtaposition of the teleological and the aesthetic is the focus for the *Critique of Judgment*, that brilliant excess of the critical project that I read (following too many thinkers to list) as symptomatic of Kant's inability to recognize the power of his own thought. As he gives an account of Judgment, the point of connection for intuitions and concepts that underlies the first two critiques, Kant becomes mired

in the transcendental fallacy he had sworn to avoid. The figure of the stoic (likely Prussian) subject-to-the-sublime who finds joy in his confrontations with the boundless, knowing that reason will always have the final say is the analogue of the subject-of-nature who can only conclude that the world was God's logically developed laboratory for the creation of his ultimate product, Man.

Understanding what this line of thought can teach us is of the utmost importance as it places the carefully developed system of defense against the irrational in the service of irrationality itself. The transcendental subject is always already overtaken and determined by legions of the ding-an-sich, the material multiplicity of subatomic particles following seemingly irrational quantum laws that somehow formed the conditions for this bald ape to declare itself the reason for existence. Here we can reconcile Brassier's work with Hegel's dialectical system. Reason, the seat of all teleological logic, is always seeking to overcome what is in fact the most powerful of the faculties, the understanding. In fact, there is no reason to oppose the Hegelian understanding's ability to Brassier's (by way of Badiou) subtractive ontology.³ Recall the famed passage from the preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Lacking strength, beauty hates the understanding for asking of her what it cannot do. But the life of spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (p. 19, sec. 32)

Brassier's uncharacteristically simplistic treatment of Žižek's resurrection of the Hegelian project is important to note. It seems odd that such an astute scholar of Badiou would neglect the fact that the Žižekian subject is not at all the individual person but the materially determined subjective process that constitutes 'person' as such. The power and importance of dialectics lies in the fact that it is a constant self-overcoming, an excess of the constituting parts over the posited whole, leading to the whole's failure, fissure and subsequent infinite attempts to discover its truth.

The negation that is essential to the Hegelian dialectic has constantly derided as a false negation, something posed for the sake of propping up Reason's dominance. The truth is the opposite. Negation has to be understood as the power of the understanding to realize what we have decided to call F(acts), a material happening hidden behind appearance whereby a newly realized relation explodes the previously supposed objective relationship.

The necessity at this point is to appreciate Brassier's turn to François Laruelle when it comes to thinking negation, which we shall seek to do via Kant and Heidegger. Laruelle's project is what he refers to as non-philosophy, using the content of philosophical thought to discover its formal operations by conceiving of them as axioms. Rather than perform a Derridian contextualization of the idea, Laruelle seeks to isolate its operations and expose them to the world. By taking the mutually and inversely defined notions of transcendence and imminence within philosophical structures, he is able to respond to the phenomenological transcendentalization of substance by pairing them so that the void of being can

be exposed. In the brain the object is both immanent and transcendental (it is caused by matter interacting with the random complications in a very particular variety of carbon based matter by triggering the activation of structures developed that allow the organism to recognize and manipulate matter). The thing that causes the transcendental response remains in its immanence, unable to think, unable to care. According to Brassier's Characterization of Laruelle, "The object is no longer conceived of as a substance but rather as a discontinuous cut in the fabric of the ontological synthesis. It is no longer thought that determines the object, whether through representation or intuition but rather the object that seizes thought and forces it to think it, or better according to it" (Brassier, 149). It is worth noting that every way in which we interact with the world is based on an outside force causing a disturbance. Sound waves vibrate hair cells, light is sensed by turning OFF the "dark stream" that occurs in the absence of photons.

Now we can perhaps understand how Kant could turn the world toward teleology during this inauguration of truth. While most thinkers argue over the primacy of the first and second critiques, the crucial moment is their disjunction in the most formal way during the third critique. According to the first *Critique* "to every judgment belong, as its essential components, matter and form. The matter of judgment consists in given cognition" – intuitions – "that are joined into unity of consciousness" [i.e., are so joined through the act of judging]; "in the determination of the matter in which various presentations as such belong to one consciousness consists the form of the judgment" [namely, concepts which thus determine exactly how intuitions are synthesized together (concepts as rules for synthesis)]. [A68/B93].

Imagine a scientist going over results in his lab, when he sees something (an intuition) that doesn't appear to make sense within the context of the experiment (concept). While human thought usually seeks to simplify and explain happenings in terms of its narrative, the brilliance of science lies solely in the fact that its method is formally opposed to that of doxic thought. While science in practice is plagued by academics struggling for their outdated theories and maverick thinkers being passed over in grant allocation in favor of conservative research, F(acts) appear. A piece of data that contradicts the null hypothesis leads to a new hypothesis that challenges a theory. Though absolutely contingent, it is a happening, and as said before, when things happen to humans, the happening is given a meaning.

The F(act) discloses meaning by tearing at the *conditions* of experience, insofar as experience is this tearing. By this I mean that all experience must take the form of a disturbance while inversely our cognitive faculty seems predisposed towards normalizing every disturbance. Rather than jettisoning meaning as an enemy of truth I will risk cliché by insisting that we ought to keep our friends close but our enemies closer. Religion, mathematics, art, and ethics can be examined empirically to ascertain the way in which humans think. By combining empirical investigation with critique and speculation we are subject to possibilities that philosophers have never before encountered. At the beginning of this paper I suggested that Brassier was reintroducing the basic philosophical condition of wonder at the totality scientific disenchantment. By investigating every facet of the undoubtedly meaningful way in which humans engage with their world via a confrontation with the contingent and stupid conditions for such meaning, dialectics and science will only be identical insofar as they oppose themselves.

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¹ In this category Brassier includes Badiou, Laruelle, and Meillassoux, not the “speculative realism” he has disavowed.

² Brassier translated Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* and is indubitably one of his foremost proponents. See the *Nihil Unbound* Chapter ‘The Enigma of Realism’ for a more extensive and exacting treatment.

³ “The presentation of being is subtractively inscribed in such a way as to obviate any straightforwardly metaphysical way or phenomenological correlation between thought and being” (Brassier, 88). For a more extensive treatment of Badiou, *Nihil Unbound*’s Chapter ‘Unbinding the Void’ is a brilliant introduction to the elder thinker.