

4
engl

That Which is Not: Philosophy as Entwinement of Truth and Negativity

Ray Brassier

American University of Beirut

That Which is Not: Philosophy as Entwinement of Truth and Negativity

Abstract

Plato's dialectic of essence and appearance is not a two-world metaphysics of phenomenon and noumenon but a formal dualism of idea (*eidos*) and body (*soma*). This formal dualism provides the necessary precondition for materialist monism. By breaking Parmenides' interdiction on thinking that which is not, Plato suspends the equation of thinking with being and winnows substance from idea. Concomitant with Plato's metaphysics of negation is a certain negation of metaphysics understood as tautological iteration of the equivalence thinking: being. In acknowledging that what is not, somehow is, we are also bound to recognize that what is, somehow is not. Conversely, those brands of metaphysical materialism that deny non-being unwittingly consecrate the idealist fusion of thinking with being. Thus Plato's exposure of the entwinement of being and non-being in thinking about what is harbors an instructive rejoinder to those contemporary sophists who deny the norm of truth in order to affirm the immanence of being.

Keywords

materialism, non-being, Plato, sophistry, truth.

Philosophy, Truth, Negativity

I'd like to make a case for the persisting relevance of philosophical thinking (as distinct from institutionalized philosophical practice) by underlining the significance of the link between the philosophical premium on truth and critical negativity. Such a link is, of course, a familiar trope of post-Hegelian critical theory, specifically as practiced by the Frankfurt School. But the version of it I propose to sketch here will be different, both in its conception of truth and its account of negativity, and as a consequence, may, I think, call into question the familiar contrast between uncritical "philosophy" and critical "theory." My aim here is to reaccentuate the occluded potency of a *philosophical* compact between truth and negation whose most powerful advocates have been Plato and Hegel—both arch-idealists of course, but part of what is at stake here involves reappraising the presumptive alliance between critical negativity and materialism. My contention is simply this: anyone wanting to repotentiate the power of the negative against an increasingly complacent "affirmationist" consensus in contemporary theory¹—conspicuously exemplified by the resurgence of unabashedly vitalist and pan-psychist metaphysics—will have to reconsider the valence of critiques of conceptual truth (and therefore of philosophy, to the extent that philosophy is the discipline of conceptualization—or what I will also call formalization—par excellence) predicated on appeals to non-conceptual or material "force," understood in the broadest possible sense: non-identity, intensity, power, affect, etc. It is, in part, a question here of rehabilitating the truth of negativity by challenging the skeptical exposure of truth *as* force. To do so involves contesting the Nietzschean (but not only Nietzschean) reduction of truth to force by exposing the untruth of the concept of force through which truth is supposedly circumscribed as effect or symptom.

The issue here is not merely that of salvaging the ideality of truth from its materialist depredations—to characterize it as such is to invite the predictable charge of reactionary protectionism—but to rehabilitate truth's critical potency with regard to a postmodern materialism whose reverence for what is oscillates between cynicism and inanity. It is to do so, moreover, in such a way as to subvert the facile opposition between critical materialism and conservative idealism. It is not news to observe the dialectical complicity between the materialization of the idea and the idealization of matter. What is new, however, is the revelation that a genuinely critical materialism requires acknowledging the way in which the non-being of the idea is entwined with the being of matter. This is an insight we owe to Plato. Sometimes, old ideas reveal their proper depth only when measured against the actual contours of their successors. What

¹ For an acute critique of this consensus, see Noys 2010.

I wish to do here is underline the persistent critical salience of Plato's discovery of non-being, in contrast with the pathologization of the negative promulgated in the name of a post-critical—both anti-Kantian and anti-Hegelian—metaphysics. The names most frequently associated with this post-critical metaphysics are Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze. Among the implications of the view I wish to propose is that it is precisely those who inscribe ideation within the immanence of material being who find themselves endorsing the substantive equivalence of thinking and being, whereas those who follow Plato in defending the transcendence of the idea substitute formal correlation for substantial equivalence, thereby preserving the autonomy of the real. So I agree with those who, like Badiou, think it is a mistake to reduce Plato's dialectic of essence and appearance to a two-world metaphysics of phenomenon and noumenon. Plato's is a formal dualism of *eidos* (idea) and *soma* (body), rather than a substantial dualism of mental and physical. And such formal dualism provides the necessary precondition for materialist monism. Conversely, it is in the varieties of metaphysical materialism, including dialectical materialism, rather than in Platonism, that the ostensibly idealist fusion of thought and being is consecrated. Thus, one of the most interesting consequences of Plato's suspension of the Parmenidean axiom is the winnowing of substance from idea: concomitant with Plato's metaphysics of negation is a certain negation of metaphysics understood as tautological iteration of the equivalence *thinking: being*. What does this negation entail? Simply that in acknowledging that what is not, somehow is, we are also bound to recognize that what is, somehow is not. Plato's exposure of the entwinement of being and non-being in thinking about what is, remains the most authoritative rejoinder to those who would subordinate the autonomy of thought to the immanence of being. It is hardly surprising, then, that the overturning of Platonism remains the indispensable prerequisite for reinstating the unity of mind and nature. This unity is the ultimate figure of reconciliation and the desideratum of all metaphysical idealism. Yet dialectics, from its Platonic inception onwards, is a method of division and an antagonistic medium (*antilogikon*) within which every temporary resolution is haunted by its unrecconciled remainder. This negative remainder is, of course, the phantom twin of every affirmation, and Plato's invention of dialectic is the first and arguably most decisive step in honing the *logos* to the point where it can puncture the otherwise impenetrable opacity of *phusis*, or natural being.

Plato's Sophist

It is Plato who first grasps that the problem of the negative is the problem of thought. Why? Because to think is to be bound, whether one wants to or not, to the norm of truth, yet the *form* of truth is constitu-

tively related to *that which is not*. What is the nature of this “not”? To ask this question, as Plato recognized in the *Sophist*, is to ask about the being of the negative and thereby, Plato realizes, to ask, “What is non-being?” The attempt to clarify the nature of negation involves enquiring about the being of non-being. To ask about how *that which is not (to mē on)* is implicated in the thought of *that which is (to on)* is to raise the issue of thought’s relation to the reality it seeks to circumscribe; it is to enquire about the position of thought in relation to the being it thinks, or more accurately, to ask how the being of thought is implicated in the thought of being. The problem of the negative is the problem of thought’s ability to discriminate between that which is and that which is not. Already with Plato, the acknowledgement of the link between truth and negation is the potentiation of thought, while the disavowal of negativity and the glorification of affirmation is the debility of thought, thought’s sophistical capitulation to the expediency of what is.

What forces us to confront the reality of non-being? It is precisely the issue of semblance and the status of images (*eikones*), appearances (*phantasma*), and falsehood (*pseudos*). What is the sophist? There is a fundamental difficulty with defining the sophist since he bears multiple determinations, none of which can lay claim to definitive authority. For how is it possible to define, that is, seize, the intelligible form (*eidos*) of someone who imitates what he is not (i.e., the philosopher), and manufactures semblances, that is, things, that *are not*? Yet how could we be confident of what the sophist is not unless we already have some sort of grasp of what he is? The distinction between philosopher and sophist is already precarious. And it is precisely the sophist who knows how to stave off his own philosophical identification as an imitator of wisdom by denying the possibility of distinguishing between the true and the false, essence and appearance, philosophy and sophistry. Thus the founding gesture of the sophist is to *deny negation* while denying that he is denying anything. For to deny is to intend what is not. But since the sophist insists that what is not cannot be intended, it cannot be denied. Thus, the sophist maintains, negation is impossible, since to think what is not is *not to think*. Therefore, the sophist concludes, not only is every thought *of* something, and hence affirmative, it is itself something that is. Thinking is doubly affirmative: it affirms *what is thought of* as well as *that one is thinking*. Here we encounter the substantive equivalence mentioned earlier: thought and thing are rendered equivalent. Underlying this equivalence is the alignment of non-being with absence construed as the contrary of being. Since it is manifestly impossible to think the contrary of being, because every attempt to think nothing turns it into something, then it seems to follow that non-being is a chimera. (It is worth noting the parallels between this sophistical refutation of non-being and Bergson’s dismissal of negativity as an artifact of intellection in *Creative Evolution*.) The challenge facing those who would discriminate between essence and appearance is to ex-

plain what they mean by appearance, and how they propose to identify it in contradistinction to essence, given that appearance is precisely what is supposed to be devoid of essential form. For the very question—*What is appearance?*—insofar as it enquires about the formal being or *eidos* of appearance, endows appearance with the intelligibility (ideality) it is supposed to lack. Only once we have obtained the form of appearance will we be in a position to state what the sophist is and does.

Our provisional definition of the sophist is as an imitator of wisdom: he produces copies of true ideas. Plato's Eleatic Visitor distinguishes two basic kinds of imitation: likeness-making and appearance-making. Likenesses are true or faithful copies, bearing the mark of filiation to the original (resemblance); appearances are false or unfaithful copies, orphaned from any recognizable progenitor. But in order to understand this distinction we must understand the difference between truth and falsity. Since what is true *is* and what is false *is not*, we cannot hope to understand truth and falsity unless we understand what we mean when we say that something is or is not. Thus the relation between truth and falsity is connected to the relation between being and non-being: we must be able to think the latter in order to understand falsity as the claim that that which is not *is* and the claim that that which is, *is not*. So the question becomes, what does the expression "that which is not" apply to? When we deny that something is the case (e.g., "It is not raining"; "Harry Potter does not exist"), must not the thing denied possess some kind of being? Otherwise, what is it that we are denying? Consequently, we must understand the nature of *negation*, which is tied to the nature of non-being: that which is not. For it seems only something that *is* in some sense can be negated: otherwise, what content can negation or denial have? But that which is not cannot refer to something, since *something* is a sign of one thing and hence always refers to a being (something that is), just as *some things* (plural) refers to several things. But then whoever says or utters "that which is not" cannot be referring to anything, whether one or many. Consequently, it seems we cannot analyze what we mean when we say that which is not, since it cannot refer to anything that is either one or multiple. Thus the expression seems to be devoid of sense. But then are we not denying something again and hence invoking the very thing which we just said cannot be invoked? If we say that that which is not is meaningless, it seems we have to treat it *as* something which is in order to deny it the property of intelligibility. Clearly then, the assumption that being and non-being are mutually exclusive generates contradiction. So the Eleatic Visitor concludes that we have to try to think of being and non-being as somehow mixed together. Only then we will be able to understand how it is possible for someone to think or state something meaningful about what is not the case. And we need to do this in order to be able to understand what a false belief is.

Theaetetus and the Eleatic Visitor concur that having false beliefs about the world consists in believing either that that which is, is not, or that that which is not, is. So in order to understand how people can have false beliefs about the world, it is necessary to understand how that which is not, somehow is, and that which is, somehow is not. But the difficulty in understanding what we mean when we say that something is not is closely tied to the difficulty in understanding what we mean when we say that something is: the latter is as obscure to us as the former. Previous philosophers had proposed various theories about how to understand being: some, like Parmenides, had said that everything is one, so change and multiplicity are not; while others, like Heraclitus, insisted that everything is multiple and in constant flux, so unity and stability are not. Still others tried to reach a compromise by stating that everything is a combination of two or more basic elements: movement and rest, harmony and strife, etc. Finally, there are those, like Socrates, who maintain that corporeal bodies exist but so do incorporeal forms or ideas. But all these theories lead to various contradictions. If everything is one, then either a) “one” is the name of being, in which case the difference between the name of being and the being that is named implies a difference between the word and the thing so that there are two things, not one; or b) the name is the same thing as what is named, so that the name is the same as itself and therefore names itself and nothing else. But then it is the name of nothing: if we cannot name the one, we cannot think it, and if we cannot think it, it becomes indistinguishable from nothing or that which is not. If everything is multiple and always changing, then everything is always becoming other than itself. But if everything is other than itself, how are we to distinguish between different things? By destroying unity and identity, the thesis that being is becoming renders it impossible to distinguish anything from anything else and ends up asserting what it initially denied: that is, that everything is really the same. Here and elsewhere, Plato begins to delineate a distinction of momentous import: between entity and property, or essence and attribute. The registration of change presupposes the recognition of an unchanging substrate. Significantly, this conceptual distinction of basic metaphysical import is suggested by the structure of language itself in the shape of the grammatical distinction between subject and attribute. The structural entwining of thinking, saying, and being, or logic, language, and reality, which will prove to be of inestimable importance for all future philosophical rationalism, is clearly intimated by Plato.

Since identifying being with the stasis of the One or the becoming of the Multiple leads to contradiction, being must combine unity and multiplicity, identity and difference. But if being consists of two basic principles, such as rest and movement or harmony and strife, then we must ask whether these principles themselves are. They must be, since we claim that they are something. But if we do, it seems that being is something

they have in common and so is a third thing separate from the two elementary principles. But we still have not explained what this third thing (being) is. If bodies and incorporeal forms both exist, they must have something in common. This something is capacity. Being is the capacity to have an effect on something or to be affected by something. Bodies are always affecting one another and hence always changing. But forms are supposed to be the unchangeable principles or structures common to all bodies. If forms are known by the mind, then they are affected, and if that is so, then they are somehow changed by being known, which is contrary to the definition of form as that which is unchanging. So both the changing and the unchanging have to be admitted as somehow being. But once again this means that being must be a third thing distinct from the changing and the unchanging. We have to understand how it allows the changing and the unchanging to be associated, but also how it explains their separation or otherness. This means that being encompasses four basic forms: movement, rest, sameness, and otherness. But it is otherness that holds these together and explains their mutual participation. Movement is but is other than being since being does not move. Rest is but is other than being since rest is immobile and yet movement is. Rest stays the same but is other than movement. Movement is other than rest yet is and as such is the same as itself. Sameness is, yet shares in movement and rest, so is other than being. Thus otherness is distributed among these four ultimate forms: sameness, rest, and movement *are* and so are all *other than* being. Being and non-being, understood as otherness, are entwined².

Sophistry and Irreduction

Failure to acknowledge this entwining of being and otherness erases the difference between essence and appearance, and stymies the rationalist imperative to explain phenomena by penetrating to the reality beyond appearances. The sophist relinquishes the metaphysical injunction to know the noumenal in the name of an “irreductionism” that abjures the epistemological distinction between appearance and reality the better to salvage the reality of every appearance, from sunsets to Santa Claus.

Bruno Latour is undoubtedly among the foremost proponents of this irreductionist creed. His *Irreductions* pithily distills familiar Nietzschean homilies, minus the anxious bombast of Nietzsche’s intemperate *Sturm und Drang*. With his suave and unctuous prose, Latour presents the urbane face of postmodern irrationalism. How does he proceed? First, he reduces reason to discrimination: “‘Reason’ is applied to the work of allocating agreement and disagreement between words. It is a matter of taste and

² This entwinement is the central focus of Heidegger’s highly illuminating exegesis of Plato’s text (Heidegger 2003).

feeling, know-how and connoisseurship, class and status. We insult, frown, pout, clench our fists, enthuse, spit, sigh and dream. Who reasons?" (2.1.8.4)³. Second, he reduces science to force: "Belief in the existence of science is the effect of exaggeration, injustice, asymmetry, ignorance, credulity, and denial. If 'science' is distinct from the rest, then it is the end result of a long line of coups de force" (4.2.6). Third, he reduces scientific knowledge ("knowing-that") to practical know-how: "There is no such thing as knowledge—what would it be? There is only know-how. In other words, there are crafts and trades. Despite all claims to the contrary, crafts hold the key to all knowledge. They make it possible to 'return' science to the networks from which it came" (4.3.2). Last but not least, he reduces truth to power: "The word 'true' is a supplement added to certain trials of strength to dazzle those who might still question them" (4.5.8).

It is instructive to note how many reductions must be carried out in order for irreductionism to get off the ground: reason, science, knowledge, truth—all must be eliminated. Of course, Latour has no qualms about reducing reason to arbitration, science to custom, knowledge to manipulation, or truth to force: the veritable object of his irreductionist afflatus is not reduction per se, in which he wantonly indulges, but explanation, and the cognitive privilege accorded to scientific explanation in particular. Once relieved of the constraints of cognitive rationality and the obligation to truth, metaphysics can forego the need for explanation and supplant the latter with a series of allusive metaphors whose cognitive import becomes a function of semantic resonance: "actor," "ally," "force," "power," "strength," "resistance," "network." These are the master-metaphors of Latour's irreductionist metaphysics, the ultimate "actants" encapsulating the operations of every other actor. And as with any metaphysics built on metaphor, equivocation is always a boon, never a handicap: "Because there is no literal or figurative meaning, no single use of metaphor can dominate the other uses. Without propriety there is no impropriety [...] Since no word reigns over the others, we are free to use all metaphors. We do not have to fear that one meaning is 'true' and another 'metaphorical'" (2.6.3).

However, in the absence of any understanding of the relationship between "meanings" and things meant—the issue at the heart of the epistemological problematic which Latour dismisses but which has preoccupied an entire philosophical tradition from Plato to Sellars—the claim that nothing is metaphorical is ultimately indistinguishable from the claim that everything is metaphorical—much as the claim that everything is real turns out to be indistinguishable from the claim that nothing is real:

³ Included as the second part of Latour 1993. Here and elsewhere, the numbered propositions in *Irreductions* are referred to as such (in parentheses), rather than by page number.

with the dissolution of the distinction between appearance and reality, the predicate “real” is subjected to an inflation that renders it worthless. The metaphysical difference between words and things, concepts and objects, vanishes along with the distinction between representation and reality: “It is not possible to distinguish for long between those actants that are going to play the role of ‘words’ and those that will play the role of ‘things’” (2.4.5). In dismissing the epistemological obligation to explain what meaning is and how it relates to things that are not meanings, Latour, like all sophists (his own protestations to the contrary notwithstanding), reduces everything to meaning, since the difference between “words” and “things” turns out to be no more than a functional difference subsumed by the concept of “actant”—that is to say, it is a merely nominal difference encompassed by the metaphysical function now ascribed to the metaphor “actant.” Since for Latour the latter encompasses everything from hydroelectric power plants to tooth fairies, it follows that every possible difference between power plants and fairies—that is, differences in the mechanisms through which they affect and are affected by other entities, whether those mechanisms are currently conceivable or not—is supposed to be unproblematically accounted for by this single conceptual metaphor. Yet pace Latour, there is a non-negligible difference between conceptual categories and the objects to which they can be properly applied. But because he is as oblivious to it as the post-structuralists he castigates, Latour’s attempt to contrast his “realism” to postmodern “irrealism” rings hollow: he is invoking a difference which he cannot make good on. By collapsing the reality of the difference between concepts and objects into differences in force between generically construed “actants,” Latour merely erases from the side of “things” (“forces”) a distinction which textualists deny from the side of “words” (“signifiers”).

Mortgaged to the cognitive valence of metaphor but lacking the resources to explain let alone legitimate it, Latour’s irreductionism cannot be understood as a theory, where the latter is broadly construed as a series of systematically interlinked propositions held together by valid argumentative chains. Rather, Latour’s texts consciously rehearse the metaphorical operations they describe: they are “networks” trafficking in “word-things” of varying “power,” nexuses of “translation” between “actants” of differing “force,” etc. In this regard, they are exercises in the practical know-how which Latour exalts, as opposed to demonstrative propositional structures governed by cognitive norms of epistemic veracity and logical validity. But this is just to say that the ultimate import of Latour’s work is prescriptive rather than descriptive; indeed, given that issues of epistemic veracity and validity are irrelevant to Latour, there is nothing to prevent the cynic from concluding that Latour’s politics (neoliberal) and his religion (Roman Catholic) provide the most telling indices of the “forces” ultimately motivating his antipathy towards rationality, critique, and revolution.

In other words, Latour's texts are designed to do things: they have been engineered in order to produce an effect rather than establish a demonstration. Far from trying to prove anything, Latour is explicitly engaged in persuading the susceptible into embracing his irreductionist worldview through a particularly adroit deployment of rhetoric. This is the traditional *modus operandi* of the sophist. But only the most brazen of sophists denies the rhetorical character of his own assertions: "Rhetoric cannot account for the force of a sequence of sentences because if it is called 'rhetoric' then it is weak and has already lost" (2.4.1). This resort to an already metaphorized concept of "force" to mark the extra-rhetorical and thereby allegedly "real" force of Latour's own "sequence of sentences" marks the *nec plus ultra* of sophistry.

The Non-Being of the Normative

By granting reality to everything, Latour becomes incapable of acknowledging the reality of anything. By denying the formal difference between essence and appearance, he denies the reality of appearance as surely as that of essence. The issue of the relation between appearance and reality is, of course, intimately connected with the problem of skepticism and the perennial debate between those who hold that we can and indeed do know what is, and those who maintain that we cannot. My contentions here presuppose an account of the structure of rationality capable of demonstrating that every critique of reason remains beholden to certain fundamental rational norms. In light of the rhetorical appropriation of the term "normativity" by philosophical conservatives who insist on freighting it with extraneous ethico-juridical baggage, it is worth emphasizing that the "normativity" invoked here is formal and logical, rather than ethical and juridical. This understanding of the intrinsically normative character of rationality can be traced back to Kant. Kant transformed debate about the status of reason and undermined the premise common to dogmatic rationalism and empiricist skepticism by construing judgments, rather than ideas, as the elementary units of thought. Concepts for Kant are neither innate psychological structures nor abstractions from experience but rather logical forms of judgment. By stressing the fundamentally discursive (i.e., judgmental) structure of cognition, Kant revealed the rule-governed (i.e., normative) character of all conceptual activity. This Kantian insight was taken up and reworked by Wilfrid Sellars under the aegis of a broadly naturalistic theory of mind and meaning according to which concepts and semantic contents are jointly individuated by their role within a linguistically articulated inferential nexus. More recently, Robert Brandom has developed Sellars's inferentialist theory of mind and meaning into a rationalistic pragmatism of astonishing

scope and depth⁴. The important thing to retain is that this inferentialist conception of normativity is entirely formal, and hence austere minimalist, rather than substantive, in the manner of Habermas's communicative discourse ethics. It should not be mistaken for some sort of reactionary transcendental moralism—an unfortunate association which the widespread ideological abuse of the term “normative” continues to conjure up. Obviously, I take this formality to be its great virtue. It follows from an account of rationality predicated upon the postulated equivalence of logical and conceptual form as exhibited in language. Rationality is not a psychological faculty but a socially instantiated linguistic artifact—language and sociality being taken to be interdependent here. To invoke the normative character of conceptual discourse is simply to point out the inferential nexus which renders propositional contents mutually interdependent and conceptual commitments reciprocally constraining.

This inferentialist formalization of rationality leads to an understanding of philosophical theory as the formal *explicitation* of the (socio-linguistic) conditions of conceptualization. To articulate the formal infrastructure of thinking and speaking is to render explicit what was already implicit in conceptual practice. It is to set out the preconditions for knowing how to think and to speak. This shift from implicit know-how to explicit knowing-that involves a kind of reflexive “self-consciousness” on the part of cognitive agents, but one which does not operate at the level of phenomenological presentation: it is not a matter of self-consciousness as presentation of presentation, but rather of the explicit representation of latent representational mechanisms. “Self-consciousness” in this particular sense is no longer a matter of a supposedly self-authenticating experiential realm, but of the ampliative integration of latent content. Reflexivity in this sense is an achievement of theoretical discipline understood as the propositional formalization of practices of material inference. Philosophy as formalization reflects upon the conditions of reflection in extant conceptual practice. It involves the defamiliarization of an extant conceptual habitus in order to isolate its conditions of possibility, followed by the subsequent reintegration of this formal dimension into the conceptual practice, in such a way as to deepen and amplify the latter. This is reflection as retrospective conceptual explicitation of the infraconceptual. Such explicitation identifies what ideology and the critique of ideology both presuppose even as they remain unable to articulate or account for it. Thus, explicitation undermines the impoverished, spontaneous reflexivity of naïve critique by extracting the common core of signification presupposed by immediacy and its immediate negation. This is, of course, a reworking of Hegel's account of mind's coming to self-consciousness. Truth is semantically correct assertability, which is to say op-

⁴ See, in particular, Brandom 1994.

timally justified assertion. Yet truth involves a transition from implicit warrant to explicit endorsement: to know that something is true is also to recognize that one is obliged to assert that it is the case, that one should move from assent to endorsement, where endorsement is the theoretical explicitation of practical inferential assent. Philosophy is the explicitation of truth, understood as the formal manifestation of latent content carried out via the representation of representation.

Despite its minimalist tenor, this inferentialist conception of rationality has a strong claim to be binding upon all conceptual expression. Although I have only sketched rather than defended it here, one of its implications would be that there can be no such thing as an extraterritorial or transcendent critique of reason, since critique is a normative term whose ultimate warrant derives from reason itself. It is important to note that this remains the case even if one accepts, with Hegel, that the structure of human reason is always historically bounded. In this regard, I take Brandom's critical reconstruction of Hegel's account of the self-correcting character of rationality⁵ to demonstrate that a commitment to the uncircumventable authority of conceptual rationality need not entail the metaphysical hypostasis of reason as some sort of supernatural faculty. By the same token, the acknowledgement that reason qua self-correcting enterprise is always socially instantiated and historically conditioned provides no warrant for those varieties of irrationalism that claim to contest its legitimacy in the name of some allegedly a-rational experience or force. Only the scrupulously rational are entitled to skepticism about reason⁶. A coherent skepticism requires a conceptual discipline perhaps attained only by certain refined brands of Pyrrhonism⁷. Anything less is complaint, not critique. But Pyrrhonic discipline issues in an austere and exacting nihilism, at once epistemological and ontological, which is of course anathema to those whose disdain for rationality derives from figures like Nietzsche or Bergson.

What can we conclude from this brief sketch? That the logical infrastructure of conceptual rationality implicated in every attempt to articulate what is cannot itself be reinscribed as part of reality without immediately generating contradictions that stymie the coherence of discourse. The transcendental difference between appearance and reality indexes a form of negativity that is at once the condition of objective truth in

⁵ See "Sketch of a Program for a Critical Reading of Hegel" and "Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism," as well as Brandom's forthcoming book *A Spirit of Trust: Sketch for a Semantic Reading of Hegel*. All these texts are currently unpublished but available online at <http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/hegel/index.html>.

⁶ For a defense of radical skepticism, see Miller 2006.

⁷ For an attempt to reconstitute the rational stringency of Pyrrhonism in all its radicalism, see Trissokas, 2008.

discourse, but also that which cannot be objectified without undermining the possibility of such truth. This negativity does not index a difference between recognizable “things” or entities but a unilateral distinction between the structure of objectifying discourse and its unobjectifiable motor: the non-being of the real as “irreducible remainder” implicated in the originary dehiscence between appearance and reality. This nothingness provides the ultimate source of the non-conceptual negativity that fuels dialectical negativity (i.e., negation in the concept) as contradiction between what is presupposed in conceptual practice and what is stated at the level of conceptual content. Every statement of what is presupposes a normative dimension that cannot be integrated as such into the structure of what is. While it is impossible to articulate the truth about what is without it, it is equally impossible to integrate it into any statement about what is without inadvertently canceling its truth. Acknowledging the non-being of the normative, which is to say, conceptual rationality, remains the enabling condition of ontological objectivity.

References

- Brandom, Robert (1994). *Making it Explicit*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin (2003). *Plato's Sophist*. Trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Latour, Bruno (1993). *The Pasteurization of France*. Trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Miller, David (2006). *Out of Error: Further Essays on Critical Rationalism*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Noys, Benjamin (2010). *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Trissokas, Ioannis (2008). “Presuppositionless Scepticism.” *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 19: 100–126.