RELATIONAL MATTERS

*A Critique of Speculative Realism and a Defence of
Non-Reductive Materialism*

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The new materialist movement has spawned a diverse and some-times conflicting array of opinions over how to define its interven-tion in relation to poststructuralism. One of the most prominent approaches, exemplified by Latour, Bennett and the speculative realists, has been an explicitly ontological one that seeks to escape the "haunting association of matter with passivity."[1] Such think-ers argue that the linguistic turn has been debilitated by a suspi-cion of material reality as mechanistically fixed and thus prone to essentialism; although their theoretical orientations vary, they each seek to rehabilitate material, non-human objects as "active," "lively," "agentive," "resistant" and "autonomous." For example, Bennett's materialist vitalism argues that the indeterminacy found in quantum physics and in stem cells suggests that the humanities need to go beyond "mechanistic" and "deterministic" conceptions of matter that are based on outdated Euclidean, Cartesian and Newtonian models.[2]

These ontologies, insofar as their guiding principle is the inherent value of inhuman matter before it is taken up in conscious human activity, represent a distinct break with previous theories of

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1   Jane Bennett, "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism" in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*. Eds. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 49.
2   Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

social constructionism. Indeed, a central component has been a bold call for a return to object-based realism to counter the radical skepticism and relativism of postmodernity. As early as 2004, Latour vigorously argued for the prospects of such a realism, provocatively comparing the "knee-jerk" reaction of social constructionists to conspiracy theorists, and concluding that the conceptual tools of such an approach are philosophically bankrupt.[3]

The most explicit backlash against the linguistic turn has been voiced by the speculative realists. This group of realist ontologists has also been one of the most popular. The movement has its own journal (*Collapse*) and has been widely published (by Zero Books, Continuum and Edinburgh University Press, among others). Graham Harman, the most prolific writer in the movement, has especially developed a dedicated following, most notably with Timothy Morton who has received much attention for his application of Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO) to ecocriticism over the last several years. As a result, there seems to be a growing consensus that speculative realism is "a serious disciplinary question" across the humanities.[4] For example, literary scholars, from medievalists to modernists, have widely taken up the call for the development of object-oriented approaches to literature.[5]

Despite some internal differences (which will be mentioned at the beginning of the next section), speculative realism is centred on *anti-relationality*: a rejection of any approach that substitutes relations (of words, ideas, representations, power, etc.) for real objects in themselves, independent of human consciousness.[6] On the one

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3   Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" in *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225-48.

4   Kate Marshall, "The Old Weird" in *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 3 (2016): 640.

5   See for example *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012), a special issue dedicated to "Object-Oriented Literary Criticism."

6   Meillassoux calls such philosophies correlationist: "the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of correlation. By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other." *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, (London: Continuum 2008), 2, 5.

hand, this valorization of matter in itself is appealing as a crucial part of the effort to create new philosophical concepts to meet the needs of the anthropocene – most importantly, to combat the consumerist, capitalist view of the environment as expendable and fully instrumentalizable. Yet, there have been growing concerns over the difficulties facing such a putative ontological return to objects. Alexander Galloway has argued that the object ontologies of Harman, Meillassoux and Latour share a strikingly similar logic with software programs employed by contemporary capitalist big businesses. If it is true that the speculative realists are "repackaging" contemporary ideology, he believes we should abandon their philosophies as both "antiscientific" and "politically retrograde."[7] This has led him to call for a more thorough return to the debate between realism and materialism in order to find a "special kind of materialism" that doesn't succumb to these pitfalls. While Galloway's findings are perhaps not sufficient by themselves (Harman for example, dismisses the article as an insubstantial analogy), Galloway is not completely alone in his disfavor. Mathematician Ricardo Nirenberg has argued that it is flatly wrong to draw political and philosophical claims from realist mathematical set-theory – which is Badiou's project in *Being and Event* (and a crucial component of Meillassoux's ontological realism in *After Finitude*).[8] Andrew Cole has pointed out that, ironically, the object-oriented approaches of Bennett, Harman and Latour, despite casting themselves as avant-garde posthumanism, rely on a quite traditional, humanistic logocentrism and ontotheology; for example, they consistently claim to do "justice" to objects by listening to them "speak," harkening to their voices, feeling their presence, and "respecting" their autonomous indifference to us.[9] Most provocatively, Jordana Rosenberg has argued that Meillassoux's concept of "ancestrality," Sara Ahmed's "queer orientations," and especially Morton's

7   Alexander Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism" in *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (2013): 348.
8   Ricardo Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, "Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology" in *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2011): 583-614.
9   Andrew Cole, "The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies" in *Minnesota Review* 80 (2013): 106-118.

"queer ecology" – which, tries to find ways of conceiving of matter in some sense as inherently resistant – represent a dangerous return to biologism that threatens to erase any social realities and masks an attitude of privilege and white settler colonialism.[10]

Despite the clear need for a new materialism in continental philosophy, there seems to be growing concern that speculative realism exhibits a counterproductive, reactionary response. Yet, there have been few attempts to seriously think through what this "special kind of materialism" – one that presumably would combine the critiques of social constructionism with a realist, material ontology – might look like. The goal of this essay will be to work through what a materialism that is both relationally constructed and ontologically realist might look like. Before discussing such a materialism, it will be instructive to examine first the decidedly anti-relational philosophy of autonomous, inhuman objects provided by the speculative realists.[11] To this end, I will consider two of the primary "anti-anthropocentric" arguments against such relationality: first, Meillassoux's arguments against Kantian "correlationism" and second, Harman's arguments against "undermining" and "overmining" autonomous, real objects. Both cases, I will argue, fail to provide the substantial critique they claim. Following this, the second section will argue that this anti-relational assumption that constructedness and material realism are incompatible reveals a neo-positivist conception of reality: an atomistic, fundamentally non-relational, non-contextual ontology combined with a muscular, exhaustively absolute objective science that is uncontaminated by human political investments. Finally, having seen the shortcomings of such an approach, I will argue instead for one that is post-positivist rather than neo-positivist in its conception of materialism: it upholds both the status of an object's outer, relational constructedness as constitutive of its inner *thisness*, as well as an objective, ontological realism that contributes to the new materialist agenda of undermining the passive, mechanistic conceptions of

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10   Jordana Rosenberg, "The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present" in *Theory & Event* 17, no. 2 (2014). Online.

11   Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009), 195.

matter as ineluctably alien and non-sentient. Drawing on analytic philosophy of mind, I will call such a position a "non-reductive" materialism, and look to ontologies of flesh in Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Nancy for some crucial examples of such a position on the continental side. This position, I suggest, will provide a more productive direction for the new materialist project of undermining the haunting image of passive matter that is subtended by the rigid sentient/non-sentient binary.

I. Problems with the Correlationist Critique

It will be helpful moving forward to qualify what speculative realism refers to, and the extent to which it can be considered a cohesive movement. Harman is perhaps most responsible for solidifying its status as such, frequently assigning its definitional origin to a workshop held by Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant in 2007 at Goldsmiths, University of London.[12] However, Harman equally remarks on the diversity of the movement: "this was a loose confederation of separate realist approaches, and the four original members quickly went their separate ways."[13] Harman's argument for a realist metaphysics based on the life of objects dates to his idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger in *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Harman uses *Vorhandenheit* (presence-at-hand) and *Zuhandenheit* (readiness-to-hand) to argue for anti-relationality as the central pillar of OOO: the withdrawal and inexhaustibility of objects not just from humans, but from other objects as well. Quentin Meillassoux, on the other hand, draws on three primary counter-arguments against correlationism: 1) scientific evidence for a reality that predates human existence, which he terms "ancestrality" and "arche-fossils," 2) the contingent nature of all such correlations, which he terms "factiality" or simply "Chaos," and 3) building off of Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*, Meillassoux claims that Georg Cantor's

12   Grant's work is less clearly anti-relational than the other three. For the sake of cogency, I have confined my considerations to the central three thinkers.
13   Graham Harman, "The Future of Continental Realism: Heidegger's Fourfold" in *Chiasma* 3, no. 3 (2016): 82.

set-theory – which discovers the paradox that there can never be any set of all sets, i.e., there can be no sum total of all possibilities – is a form of absolute knowledge into this utter contingency of world-as-"Chaos." Ray Brassier (who translated Meillassoux's *After Finitude*), builds off of this concept of chaotic contingency and the ultimate extinction of all being; however, his work is especially distinctive for the way it argues for the scientific inevitability of this nihilism through the concept of eliminative materialism, which is drawn from two analytic philosophers, Wilfrid Sellars and Paul Churchland (and more recently, neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger). Drawing on these thinkers, Brassier supports the eliminative and cognitivist computational paradigm, which argues that there are neither any such things as minds, nor any (philosophically or scientifically) meaningful subject-positions.

Due to these differences, these four have voiced disagreements over how to truly escape anthropocentric correlationism. Harman argues that Meillassoux is guilty of a lingering anthropocentrism,[14] a critique which echoes an earlier one by Brassier, who also argued that Meillassoux's attempt to reclaim math as genuine form of "intellectual intuition" ironically "re-establishes a correlation between thought and being."[15] Iain Hamilton Grant, as well as more process-oriented thinkers such as Steven Shaviro, fault Harman for being unable to account for any genuine changes or interactions between objects; they are baldly given to us as "particular substances" unable to account for any of the "becoming of being."[16] Most polemically, Brassier has attempted to distance himself from the movement, calling it "actor-network theory spiced with panpsychist metaphysics," developed by "bloggers" in "an online orgy of stupidity," which has "little

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14   "Here, humans remain at the center of philosophy, though their knowledge is no longer finite." Graham Harman, "The Road to Objects" in *Continent* 3, no. 1 (2011): 172.

15   Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 91.

16   Iain Hamilton Grant, "Mining Conditions: A Response to Harman," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2011), 43.

philosophical merit."[17]

Given these divisions, Harman's definition of what drew these thinkers together in the first place is useful for arriving at a qualified sense of their unity despite their differences. First, they each were inspired by the weird, horror sci-fi of H.P. Lovecraft as a "mascot" for the movement, "since his grotesque semi-Euclidean monsters symbolize the rejection of everyday common sense to which speculative realism aspires."[18] Although only Harman has directly written on Lovecraft, Lovecraft's influence is clearly borne out in the strange, alien nature of the "hyper-chaos" so central to the projects of Meillassoux and Brassier. Second, they all have a foundational touchstone in Meillassoux's critique of correlationism; both Brassier and Harman write extensively on it and acknowledge it as central to their own programs. The anti-correlationist program, serving as the common cornerstone for diverse speculative realist approaches, holds that the history of continental philosophy since Kant, culminating with postmodernity, gives us only ideas, representations, words or relations instead of actual objects. All continental philosophy, accordingly, is "anti- realist." This is "an intellectual catastrophe"[19] insofar as the future of realism in philosophy is decidedly anti-anthropocentric, "despite the presumptions of human narcissism"[20] to the contrary. Whether in Harman's OOO or Brassier's eliminative materialism there is, then, a shared strategy of anti-correlationism and anti-relationality as a way to reclaim a realist material ontology that ostensibly disrupts traditional, bourgeois definitions of the "human."

Accordingly, I would like to focus on this central thesis of anti-correlationism, and analyze some of the ramifications of its conflation of two hundred and thirty-five years of philosophy into one master error. To do this, I would like to consider the historical starting and ending points of correlationism – Kant and poststruc-

17   Ray Brassier, "Ray Brassier Interviewed by Marcin Rychter: I Am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in Truth" in *Kronos* (March 2011), available at kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151,896

18   Harman, "Road," 171.

19   Harman, "Future," 81.

20   Brassier, *Nihil*, xi.

turalism respectively – as presented by the speculative realists.

Meillassoux (and Brassier and Harman following him) define correlationism as originating with Kant, and develop their arguments against him on the assumption that his transcendental idealism is an extreme form of phenomenalism (whereby objects in space are identical to our mental representations of them). Occasionally, they attribute to Kant a slightly weaker version of phenomenalism that maintains that there are external objects, but their existence depends wholly on our mental representations of them. In this way, Kant's transcendental idealism is supposed to be fundamentally indistinguishable from Berkeleyan phenomenalism – *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived).

While the correlationist critique assumes that this is a self-evident interpretation, this is, in fact, far from the case. Such a common-sense reading of Kant has been a central controversy since the first review of the *Critique*, in 1782, which makes precisely the same attack on Kant that the speculative realists suggest – that it upholds a strong, mind-dependent, Berkeleyan phenomenalism. Yet the speculative realists make no justification of such an interpretation vis-à-vis the fact that Kant himself took enormous pains in subsequent years to explicitly denounce such a reading. First, in the "Appendix" to the *Prolegomena*, Kant vigorously argues that the *Critique* crucially maintains that objects do exist outside and independent of us in space. Secondly, Kant points out that his idealism is purely "formal." That is to say, that while our minds dictate to us the form that objects take in our mental representations, the sensory content of experience does not originate in the mind, but rather originates with mind-independent objects. Kant then deepens his attack on this type of reading of his work as phenomenal idealism with the B Edition of the *Critique*. In one of his most commented-upon passages, "The Refutation of Idealism," Kant argues that inner and outer experiences are crucially interdependent. As a precondition for me to have any consciousness at all, there must already be genuine, real objects existing in space outside and independent of me.

Once this exaggeration of Kant's idealism as grossly Berkeleyan is rectified, it turns out that counterarguments of "ancestrality" and the "arche-fossil" fail to amount to any serious critique. Despite what Meillassoux suggests about correlationist refusal of "ancestral" facts, Kant's transcendental idealism upholds empirical and scientific realism. At the level of phenomena, Kant argues in favor of the naturalist scientific view that there is an empirical in-itself and an empirical for-us, the former of which is an object of valid scientific inquiry; e.g., while there is the empirical rainbow as it appears for-us (a band of color in the sky), there is also the empirical rainbow in-itself (minuscule water droplets arranged and lit up in a particular way). Moreover, Kant believes that science enables us to know, with objective certainty, real things that could never be apparent to human sensory faculties, such as the scientific explanations of magnetism, "lamellae" and Newtonian light particles.[21] In light of Kant's post-A Edition writings, the "ancestral" critique of correlationism appears to depend on a misguided definition of Kant's idealism.

In this case, what do we make of the even more strained claim that poststructuralism is also guilty of the supposed correlationist problems of phenomenalism and anthropocentrism? After all, both Deleuze and Foucault, in different ways, were committed throughout their careers to critiquing the Enlightenment legacy of Kant; thus, lumping them together seems a suspect interpretation. In fact, while the speculative realists routinely reject poststructuralism, closer examination reveals that the Foucaultian/Deleuzean critique of Kant's transcendent apperception subtends the materialism and anti-anthropocentrism that the speculative realists seek to uphold.

For example, in his several discussions of overmining and undermining, Harman has accused both Deleuze and Foucault of

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21   For magnetism, see *Critique of Pure Reason* A226/B273. For lamellae, see Kant's "On a discovery according to which all future critiques of reason have been rendered superfluous by a previous one," in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 298. For light particles, see Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 186–204.

undermining objects. In Deleuze's case, Harman equates "flux" or "becoming" with monism because objects are reduced to "*nothing more than* the fleeting impulse" of some "deeper reality."[22] In Foucault's case – the "so-called 'genealogical' approach to reality" – an object is "taken to be *nothing more than* its history."[23] In a recent essay, Harman claims that Latour represents Foucault's "replacement" as the default citation in the humanities because Latour (like Harman) enables us to take objects "on their own terms," whereas Foucault instrumentalizes objects as "human accessories" – mere means to anthropocentric ends.[24] Both essentialist and constructionist theories, Harman argues, are "naggingly inadequate" due to their "shared assumption that human nature must be the central focus." [25] He concludes: "postmodern 'scenesters'" are responsible for creating an "energy-draining discourse" that amounts to nothing more than "pretending to subvert everything while actually moving nothing a single inch."[26]

How, then, does Latourian network theory (and implicitly the OOO that Harman claims it is tied with as a fellow object-oriented philosophy) get us out of this postmodern hall of mirrors? It turns out that the novelties Harman claims for Latour are considerably indebted to those very philosophies of immanence and posthumanism suggested by Deleuze and Foucault in their own critiques of Kant.

According to Harman, Latour's first major contribution, actor-network theory (ANT), demonstrates his crucial stance as a "thinker of immanence."[27] Harman describes ANT as an immanent or "flat ontology" that makes no leaps beyond the plane that experience or being inhabits: "this means that all entities are *actors*,

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22   Graham Harman, "On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2011), 23.

23   Ibid., 23.

24   "Demodernizing the Humanities with Latour," in *New Literary History* 47, nos. 2-3 (2016): 249.

25   Ibid., 250.

26   Ibid., 272.

27   Ibid., 256.

and are only real insofar as they have some sort of effect on something else… The actor is not an autonomous substance that preexists its actions, but exists only *through* those actions. There are no nouns in the world, only verbs."[28] However, Harman ignores the fact that this aspect of ANT, which he casts as a breakthrough, derives from poststructural critique that he repudiates. Consider, for example, how closely the notion of ANT as no nouns, only verbs resembles Judith Butler's version of performativity as the Nietzschean critique of the "metaphysics of substance." Butler explicitly states that the central definition of performativity is, in fact, from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which she quotes: "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything."[29]

Towards the conclusion of his discussion of Latour's object-oriented approach, Harman discusses the critique of "bad transcendence" or "maxi-transcendence" found in *An Enquiry into the Modes of Existence* (*AIME*). Bad transcendence is the invocation of large-scale, molar forces to explicate empirical phenomena. Latour writes in response to such thinking: "As if there were INDIVIDUALS! As if individuals had not been dispersed long since in mutually incompatible scripts; as if they were not all indefinitely divisible, despite their etymology, into hundreds of 'Pauls' and 'Peters' whose spatial, temporal, and actantial continuity is not assured by any isotopy."[30] Harman argues that it is this aspect of Latour's *AIME* that "reminds us that there are no vast social structures conditioning everything else, but only local assemblies of loosely correlated actors."[31]

Despite Harman's insistence that the poststructural critique of power must be "dethroned," there is a clear link between Latourian "bad transcendence" and Deleuzean "molarity."[32] Deleuze and Guattari argue in a strikingly similar way to Harman's

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28   Ibid., 252-3.
29   Quoted in *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 34.
30   Quoted in Harman, "Demodernizing," 268-9.
31   Ibid., 269.
32   Ibid., 269.

Peter and Paul passage, that schizophrenics are long past the archaic notion of an "I" behind the material desiring-productions of the unconscious: "the schizo sums up by saying: they're fucking me over again. 'I won't say *I* any more, I'll never utter the word again; it's just too damn stupid.'"[33] Such a view substitutes a monolithic, transcendent, unitary subject (a "molar" entity) for what in reality is an immanent, differentiated multiplicity (a "molecular" entity, or what Latour refers to above as "dispersed"). Deleuze and Guattari, like Latour, argue on the contrary for a dispersed materialism that has no proper name representing a proper individual (extensive, molar), but rather only social, outer, material multiplicities (intensive, molecular).

II. "There is no such thing as society": Neo-Positivist Autonomy of the Inner

Such mischaracterizations of their interlocutors constitute a significant problem for the ostensible radicality and tenability of the anti-correlationist intervention. However, perhaps more troubling is speculative realism's unequivocal refusal of the epistemological and ontological status of relationality as unamenable to materialism. Because of the movement's genesis with the critique of correlationism (which sees itself as critiquing all forms of "relational" philosophies from Kantian idealism to poststructuralism), it is understandable that the speculative realists would harbor serious doubts about whether relations between beings ought to be accorded any such status. In its most outlandish form, this leads to the strains of dualism and neo-Platonism in Harman's invocation of "vicarious causation"[34] (given his view that "real objects are non-relational").[35] But even in Meillassoux and Brassier, we see repeatedly that their key frustration is that a hard object has been

33   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, et al., (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 23.
34   This is the view, inspired by mystical occasionalism, that "objects hide from one another endlessly, and inflict their mutual blows only through some vicar or intermediary." Graham Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," *Collapse II* (2007): 190.
35   Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 195.

replaced by a soft, socially constructed relation. Thus, in the return to objects themselves advocated by Harman and the "view from nowhere" advocated by Brassier, there is a distinctly neo-positivist notion of truth predicated on an atomistic, non-hermeneutic view of reality. [36]

Of course, this provocative claim that there is an atomism underlying the anti-relationality of speculative realism needs qualification. One would rightly object on the basis that speculative realism's Lovecraftian view of the "hyper-chaos" of objective nature – as kaleidoscopically grotesque and alien – is distinctly opposed to the atomist "sense-certainty" of historical English empiricism. However, while speculative realism eschews the common-sense, scientific, non-skeptical aspect, it still wants to retain the basic sense of atomism, the notion that objects are basically atomic (individual and independent) and thus non-relational (ergo, non-dependent on an idealist correlation). This is evident in Meillassoux's explicit call for a return to the "pre-critical" atomist thinkers, especially Hume, who believe that one can access "the Great Outdoors" (albeit only in a contingent manner), in order to avoid the correlationist pitfall that has plagued western philosophy since Kant's critical, idealist turn. Hume's induction problem is an especially important touchstone (Meillassoux devotes a whole chapter to "Hume's Problem"); rather than reaching the conclusion of scientism from atomism, Hume synthesizes atomist realism and the underlying alien randomness and unlawfulness of nature. Thus, like atomism, the approach speculative realism is most opposed to is a "gestaltist" one – one that insists that objects can only be perceived as distinguished/differentiated from the contextual field or background they are related to – prefigured by Kant and Hegel, but carried through most forcefully by the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.[37]

36   Harman's dualism argues that there are two levels of objects: the sensual and the real. Real objects withdraw from both humans and from other objects and never actually interact with anything else. Any talk of "relationality" between objects does violence to their autonomy.
37   This is how Heidegger is traditionally interpreted by almost all philosophers excluding Harman.

The specific sense in which I apply atomism to speculative realism, while also broadly applicable to anti-relationality, is especially relevant for Harman's contention that the "watchword" for OOO is the "autonomy" of objects (which derives from their infinite "withdrawal" from all contact with otherness). Interestingly, Foucault analyzes neoliberalism as animated by an atomist logic, which he finds most paradigmatically in Hume's conception of subjecthood. Specifically for Hume, the subject is not defined by a soul in need of salvation or by natural rights in need of justice. The subject is simply the irreducible, non-transferrable possessor of an interest. So the autonomy of self-interest, which falls under economic purview, has a more fundamental logic that will always trump juridical logic. As Foucault puts it, this is what enables *homo economicus*, as distinct from *homo juridicus*, to say to the sovereign: "You must not. You must not because you cannot. You cannot because you do not know, and you do not know because you cannot know."[38] Similarly, on Harman's account, much like *homo economicus*, objects in their inviolable autonomy all withdraw from any gaze that would attempt to subordinate them to belonging in a larger gestalt, field or network. It is precisely this logic – one that is anti-teleological, anti-collective, and anti-relational that is shared by atomism and the return to objects posited by speculative realism.[39] It is interesting to note that such a conception of existence also animates the foundational neoliberal critique of Keynesian socialism. Any attempt to situate the individual's inner experience within a larger social context that mediates it risks sliding into socialism; as Von Mises writes: "Only the individual thinks. Only the individual reasons. Only the individual acts."[40] Or in another, more famous

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38   Michel Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Picador, 2010), 283.
39   Brassier's eliminative realism is beholden to this problem, albeit in a different way. The "nemocentric" view of the brain shares the aspect of neoliberal logic that Wendy Brown describes as follows: "Neoliberalism retracts this 'beyond' and eschews this 'higher nature': the normative reign of *homo economicus* in every sphere means that… there is nothing to being apart from 'mere life.'" *Undoing the Demos* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 44.
40   Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1962), 113.

formulation exemplifying the same ontology of atomistic autonomy: "They're casting their problems on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."[41] In a similar manner, as we have already seen, Harman has called for a "dethroning" of questions of ideology and power as irrelevant to those of ontology – such considerations can only interfere with pure metaphysical attempts to do justice to the autonomy of reality. Similarly, when questioned over the ethics of OOO, Harman responded: "I can't say that I see any 'ethical considerations' at all as concerns calling an army an object. Whether or not an army counts as a unified object is a metaphysical question, not an ethical one."[42] There are no societies of objects, only individual objects that are withdrawn, pure, and never touch each other.[43]

Such statements demonstrate the neo-positivist belief that the true reality is one fully divested of the biases, interests, fallibility, etc., that inevitably arise from the way a particular being is situated in the world. Thus, for Harman and his colleagues, considerations of such relationality and situatedness of being do not have any substantial philosophical status, and can only devalue our investigations into an individually autonomous, non-interactive reality. Inner, real being is not affected by such concerns over outer influences of ideology. The invidiousness of this neo-positivist desire for a "pure" philosophy – what Louise Antony calls a Dragnet theory of truth as "just the facts ma'am" – has been tirelessly demonstrated by poststructural, postcolonial, queer and feminist critics for decades.[44] Such critics would understandably be suspi-

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41   Margaret Thatcher, Interview with Douglas Keay in *Woman's Own*, 31 October 1987, 8–10.
42   Quoted in Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 117.
43   Exemplified by Harman's mystical occasionalism: "When fire burns cotton... The being of the cotton withdraws from the flames even if it is consumed and destroyed. Cotton-being is concealed… from all entities that come into contact with it." *The Quadruple Object* (Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2011), 44.
44   Louise Antony, "Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalized Epistemology" in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectiv-*

cious of anti-correlationist, anti-anthropocentric arguments, and the proposed solution of a "flat ontology that treats humans no differently from candles, armies, and stars."[45] For such a view seems to sanction philosophical disinterest in the epistemologically and metaphysically meaningful ways that social systems of hierarchy and caste, as well as racist and sexist ideology, result in constructing unequal, real, lived experiences. That it is unnecessary, and even unintellectual for our philosophical concepts to be salient vis-à-vis such realities, seems to be entailed by the message offered us by the speculative realists.

III. Externalism: Ontologies of Flesh and Non-Reductive Materialism

Rather than simply assuming that constructedness and material realist programs are incompatible, which seems to lead to neo-positivism, I would like to argue in this section that they are, in fact, compatible. In order to do this, I will look to two ontologies of flesh, Merleau-Ponty's "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" and Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus*. I will analyze these works as making crucial contributions to the new materialist program of combining relationality with realism, as well as finding a middle path between a materialism that is mechanical or behaviorist on the one side, and one that is mystical, monistic or panpsychist on the other. I will call this particular sort of middle-path a "non-reductive materialism," a term that is borrowed from analytic philosophy of mind. Accordingly, a brief look at how this term originally applies is helpful.

In debates over materialism in philosophy of mind, there are at least three positions: eliminative, reductive and non-reductive materialism. Eliminativists, such as Paul Churchland (whose views are foundational for Brassier) and Daniel Dennett, argue that there are simply no minds. Thus, beliefs or "propositional at-

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ity. Eds. Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 185–226.

45   Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), 136.

titudes" do not exist – they are simply vestiges of a mistaken "folk psychology." Reductive materialists, such as Jaegwon Kim, believe that the mind has a reality, but that it is in no way an autonomous domain; it is always reducible to neurobiological causes. A non-reductive materialist, such as Hilary Putnam or Louise Antony, on the other hand, argues both for the principle of psychological realism (i.e., minds do exist, which the eliminativist denies) and for autonomy of the mind (i.e., that it can be viewed as causing events, which the reductivist denies). Antony offers a helpful definition of the non-reductive materialist position: "This is the view that (a) there are mental phenomena; (b) they are material in nature; and (c), notwithstanding (b), they form an autonomous domain." [46] In suggesting that the stance of such non-reductive materialism is a fruitful way to understand what Merleau-Ponty and Nancy are doing, I hope in part to also demonstrate that the new materialisms could greatly benefit from a closer relationship with analytic philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty's goal in this chapter is to undermine binaries of traditional western metaphysics – subject/object, body/mind, self/environment – in a way that is fully materialist, and yet slides into neither a non-relational, mechanistic view of matter nor a monistic, spiritualized view of matter. However, such a non-reductive position is quite a paradoxical, even perhaps embattled position to philosophically uphold. For, as someone who denies or reduces the mind will argue, to think of experience in a way that subtends mental autonomy will inevitably be debilitated by precisely the sort of dualisms one wants to avoid. This is analogous to the speculative realists' assumption that to give any philosophical considerations to context is to slide back into anthropocentrism and correlationism. Indeed, in order to avoid such dualism, any materialist would generally accept the unconditional causal priority of physical material; that is, even a materialist who upholds the causal autonomy of mental events is compelled to agree that

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46   Louise Antony, "Everybody Has Got It: A Defense of Non-Reductive Materialism" in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*. Eds. Brian McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 145.

ultimately those mental events, at some point, always begin with a physical event. If this is the case, then the mental events seem quite superfluous, as the reductivist would argue. How can one accept this causal priority of the physical, and yet still endorse the autonomy of mind? How can a *non-intentional, non-representational physical state* give rise to a state that *is* intentional and representational? These are the problems that scare many materialists into denying the mind. But it is these problems that I view ontologies of flesh as addressing, alongside the similar efforts of new materialists and non-reductive materialists.

Merleau-Ponty's guiding metaphors of chiastic intertwining and reversibility suggest a direction for thinking about being in a way that is both realist and relationally constructed, and also neither binaristic, nor totally flat (e.g, the eliminativist denial of minds or the object-oriented claim for absolute autonomy). Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a profound interlinking between sentience and non-sentience: "an intimacy as close as between the sea and the shore."[47] Yet at the same time, there is always a difference between us and the world around us; for if there wasn't, then the subjective would disappear into the objective, or vice versa. Merleau-Ponty attempts to analyze this intertwining through his ontology of flesh. Deepening his earliest work on gestaltist perception, he argues that *quale* is not just a simple, isolated atom, "a pellicle of being without thickness." Rather, he argues, there is an invisible, non-substantial "connective tissue" that all sensible percepts are subtended by. The *thisness* of a given object is only possible as a difference or a variance from "its relations with the surroundings," a punctuation or a node in a "fabric," "weave," "field," or "constellation."[48] As William Connolly points out, drawing on a neuroscientific example, there is an interweaving of history, habit, and bodily learning, a whole way of being enmeshed with the environment, that preconditions our vision: "adults who have the neural machinery of vision repaired after having been blind from

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47   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 131.
48   Ibid., 132.

birth remain operationally blind unless and until a new history of inter-involvements between movement, touch, and object manipulation is synthesized into the synapses of the visual system."[49] The notion that there is an "absolutely hard, indivisible" object, offered "all naked," is misguided. We find instead "momentary crystallizations" of sensations that we must nevertheless always recognize as sunk into a fabric: "a tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them" and that is neither material nor ideal, but is rather a potency that arises from relation through difference.[50]

Similarly, in order to perceive the depth that subtends objects as distinctly *out there*, Merleau-Ponty insists that the sensation of what it feels like to be seen as an object necessarily structures, or encroaches on our very capacity to perceive objects as other. The subject-position must be imbricated with a sensation of oneself in the object-position. This crisscrossing between touching and being touchable, seeing and being seeable, is a fundamental precondition of perception. As he puts it: there would be no possible touch if the touching subject were not able to also "pass over to the rank of the touched, to descend into the things."[51] As much as we think that we sentient bodies possess the non-sentient when we visualize it, we must also be possessable by the non-sentient.

To evoke this notion of imbrication, Merleau-Ponty suggests that being is a folding or a coiling over of the flesh of the world onto itself, forming the lining of a fabric, or "two leaves" that are an obverse and reverse. Although the structure of experience is this folding or overlapping of the positions of sentient subject and non-sentient object, the opening of touching the world returned by being touchable – even though the body is thus *of* the world – we never get the full experience or ideal essence that philosophy (including Husserlian phenomenology) is often searching for. It is not a question of collapsing the identities of subject and

49   William Connolly, "Materialities of Experience" in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*. Eds. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 137.
50   Merleau-Ponty, "Intertwining," 133.
51   Ibid., 134.

object, but rather realizing that they overlap in a way that is radically de-centred. Thus Merleau-Ponty argues that we experience a never-finished differentiation, fission and dehiscence: "reversibility is always imminent but never fully realized."[52]Any attempt to collapse the touching and the touched into absolute identity, on the one hand, or to maintain that they are firmly separate, dual substances that do not participate in the same field, on the other hand, will end up reducing the complexity of this intertwining.

The way in which such an ontology of flesh-as-fold (thus, naming the way the "human" is open to or interrupted by an affinity for objectness) contributes to a non-reductive materialism is theorized by Jean-Luc Nancy. What I have in mind in particular here is the way Nancy develops his work on the politics of community (in *Being Singular Plural*) into an explicit ontology of flesh (in *Corpus*) which would subtend it at the most basic perceptual levels of subjectivity. The singular plural, a distinctly relational theory, aims to reconceptualize community – largely in response to both the capitalist neoliberal atomism analyzed above that attempts to realize only the singular, and the totalitarian communist regimes that eliminate the singular in order to emphasize only the realization of the plural. To escape this, the singular plural seeks to excavate the ways subjectivity and community are imbricated; it argues, most fundamentally, that being is always "being-with," which means that "I" and "we" are not prior to or reducible to each other, but mutually constitutive.

In order for this relationality of the singular plural to avoid becoming a banal platitude about diversity, Nancy first theorizes it as an actual ontology of flesh. In *Corpus*, one finds that this singular plural involves a discomforting, ambivalent ontology of flesh as being that which has a *thingness* to it, due to the way it is extended in space outside itself. This thingness of flesh is constitutive of the singular plural, for it means that flesh involves a mutual exposure and contacting of other bodies, other singularities, such that it is impossible to reduce flesh to its mere function as a subject-position. This is succinctly expressed by one of Nancy's most impor-

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52   Ibid., 147.

tant terms, *expeausition* (punning on "peau," the French for "skin") which defines flesh's affinity for alien, inhuman thingness and objecthood – that is, its "being-exposed" or the inside which senses it is outside in relationship with other bodies.[53] Being flesh, then, is more capacious than being "human"; flesh names that aspect of being that is *open* space rather than simply space that is already full and thus nonimpenetrable and non-interruptible.

However, where Nancy's ontology of flesh becomes most relevant is in its disruption of inner/outer, surface/depth binaries. He develops this fundamental outsidedness of the body – its aptitude for touchable, penetrable thingness – into one of his most important theses: *exscription*. The *exscription* of the body, according to Nancy, is the way in which flesh is inscribed as outside itself. Based on this notion, Nancy argues that the flesh refers outwardly, relationally to other singularities which situate it, mediate it, consume and construct it. As a result, he develops a powerful theory that appears to be both distinctly materialist, and yet also non-reductive, retaining a notion of the inner mental: "The *soul* is the form of a body, and therefore a body itself."[54] This disruption of dualisms is taken up most explicitly in *Corpus* in the essay "On the Soul." As the title suggests, he is also quite provocatively and blatantly claiming that materialism, in order to be non-reductive, must reclaim a healthy sense of the soul: "I don't want to speak of a body without a soul, any more than of a soul without a body."[55] He insists, paradoxically, that this does not regress into dualism or the bourgeois transcendent subject; it does not entail the insipid belief in "a very ugly Socrates who's very beautiful inside" nor does it mean that "there's a little subject back behind."[56] Rather, Nancy argues that the soul is the form of the body – not that we have the body on one side, as inert non-sentient matter, and then the sentient soul on the other side as the spontaneous thing that gives it shape and or-

53   Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 11.
54   Ibid., 75.
55   Ibid., 129.
56   Ibid., 132.

ganization. Rather, this formal soul is not substance but the mode, articulation or way through which the body exists as a body.

Pushing forward the way that flesh is singular plural, that it is an *open* space, he argues that flesh is that which is not a mass. A mass on the one hand is that which is a "closed, shut, full, total, immanent world, a world or a thing, whichever, so on its own and within itself that it wouldn't even touch itself, and we wouldn't either, a world alone to itself and in itself." On the other hand, "the body is the open."[57] Nancy argues that to be open (what defines a body from the impenetrable mass) means fundamentally to be touchable by something that is other than yourself, which means crucially, he thinks, to be able to be "suspended" or "interrupted" from one's grasp on the world as subject. He suggests then, I argue, that a non-reductive materialism is one where the soul is not some ineffable, "vaporous," authentic, *interior* identity; rather, the soul is that which is *outer* to the body. That is, it is the body's openness, its ability to be touched, interrupted, sensed and exposed to others that gives it its sentience. It is, instead of the authentic inner, the tension with these outer, communal contacts, human and nonhuman alike, that mediate and form the body. This is where Nancy is particularly helpful in clarifying Merleau-Ponty's thought; Nancy critiques the way in which Merleau-Ponty's work with Husserl's famous example of the hands as "self-touching" tends to refer back to interiority. Nancy suggests that this image of flesh as an open fold means the way it always *first* has being on the outside. This is what Nancy means to do by provocatively deploying the word *soul* as a way to further his thesis of exscription: the body is always first outside itself, exscribed and touched as an object in relation to others, *before* it can consequently constitute an interiority. Nancy then gives us a definition of the soul that is diametrically opposed to traditional ones. He insists that we do not have an "interior" soul; rather, Nancy argues that we always begin with an "exteriority" in order to have any sensation of self at all. The soul is literally the body's *extension*, its "being outside," its "*ex*-istence," its "articulation" in relation to other bodies that it touches and that touch it.

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57   Ibid., 123.

This Nancyan ontology of flesh has considerable political implications. Nancy suggests that if we give ourselves soulless, non-touchable bodies (as eliminativists and reductivists claim), then we lose the necessity of a given body's existence; the *haecceity* or *thisness* of the body's soulful exscription. If we instead eliminate soul, we get mass, the body's opposite: "Where there's a mass of bodies, there's no more body, and where there's a mass of bodies, there's a mass grave."[58] However, poststructural ideology critique has dogmatically avoided such ontologies of flesh. As a result, putting ontologies of flesh into dialogue with Foucaultian and Deleuzean political theory, for example, has been regrettably undertheorized. The major innovation of Nancy is to synthesize the way a fully material, real flesh relates to these issues. Recent work has, however, tried to recuperate a sense of political relevance to Merleau-Ponty's work that may be helpful in understanding the politics of flesh so central to Nancy's thinking. Diane Coole for example, points out that both Foucault and Deleuze inherited from Merleau-Ponty the conception of the subject as a fold or as hollow. Similarly, William Connolly puts Merleau-Ponty's work on perception into dialogue with Foucault to suggest that together they give us a more powerful concept of the "micropolitics of perception" – the notion that "power is coded into perception."[59] Connolly argues that both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault show in rich detail that "perception requires a prior *disciplining* of the senses in which a rich history of inter-involvement sets the stage for experience." The result draws together the way ontologies of flesh argue that perception is conditioned by a feeling oneself as passing over to the rank of objects, with a contemporary sense of the way in a disciplinary society this implicit sense morphs into being an "object of *surveillance* in a national security state."[60] Moreover, TV shows like the *O'Reilly Factor*, Connolly argues, intersperse rhythm, image, music, and sound to tap into a tonal, mood-based, gut-level belief that is often much stronger than a fully conscious one. According

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58   Ibid., 123.
59   Connolly, "Materialities," 189.
60   Ibid., 188.

to ad executive Robert Heath, the most successful ads take place at this background level, in such a way that one's full mental attention is not focused on it, but is somewhat distracted. This tactic encourages "implicit learning" below the level of focused analysis. Thus the ad disseminates "'triggers' that insinuate a mood or an association into perception." Such implicit background learning, according to Heath, "is on all the time," is "automatic," and is "almost inexhaustible in its capacity and more durable" in its retention.[61]

Similarly, William Wilkerson has interpreted Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the inseparability of exteriority and relationality from *thisness* as providing a critique of the Freudian *Id*. In Wilkerson's reflective essay on coming to terms with his sexual orientation, he remarks on the phenomenon of how one's own supposedly "inner" desire can be ambiguous and even radically misinterpreted. Glossing an example from Naomi Scheman, Wilkerson argues that the Freudian *Id* does not substantially revise the Cartesian dualism of desire and emotion as something that the "inner" soul has a privileged access to (the sort of interior starting point that both Nancy and Merleau-Ponty criticize, as we have seen). If Descartes gives us a picture of a "stream" of consciousness on which float the clearly labeled leaves of sensation, thoughts and feelings, then Freud merely gives us a picture in which some of the leaves have sunk (been repressed) to the bottom of the stream; one must infer their presence by tracing the minute influences they exert on the surface-level flow of the stream. On the contrary, Wilkerson argues that Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, that I believe is even more profoundly achieved by Nancy's work on flesh as the singular plural, gives a starting point of experience that is radically exterior and predicated on outer, contextual relations. Thus, our desire is not simply there, existing already as a leaf waiting to come to the surface; rather, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory of experience, Wilkerson argues that desire is constructed and "mediated by one's current tasks and social location."[62] It is this constructed nature of

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61   Ibid., 189.
62   William Wilkerson, "Is There Something You Need to Tell Me?: Coming Out and the Ambiguity of Experience" in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Eds. Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García

desire as invested by social relations that makes desire "not self-evidently meaningful but rather contextualized, ambiguous, and subject to interpretation."[63] Wilkerson's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, like Nancy, Coole and Connolly, helps further show how we can think about the micropolitics of perception and ontologies of flesh. Such a reading of ontologies of flesh resonates profoundly with the Deleuzean concept of molecularity and multiplicity, the schizoanalytic critique of the Freudian *Id* and the dogmatic insistence on maintaining the authentic, inner, atomistic "I." Desiring-production, contrary to the concept of the *Id*, is not some hidden reservoir of repressed desires applying pressure on the ego via codified symbols. Desire, on the contrary, is directly related to social production. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the Freudian insistence that sexual libido must be sublimated (and repressed) before social investments can occur is simply to reintroduce "a new brand of idealism" that replaces outer, socio-material productions with inner, impenetrable spiritual representations.[64] Moreover, we can see how profoundly Nancy and Merleau-Ponty show us the depth and accuracy of the Foucaultian aphorism: *the soul is the prison of the body*. In sum, the non-reductive materialism proposed by an ontology of flesh combined with poststructural micropolitics is one of externalism. This externalist account avoids the pitfalls of the neo-positivist, atomist commitment to an autonomous "inner" life of objects, which views the "political" considerations of the external context as inconsequential and even as anathema to the pure, objective "metaphysical" ones.

The externalist, non-reductive account presents instead a post-positivist conception of materiality.[65] Such an account is not predicated on a notion of being as unchanging, unaffected by bias, and accessible by a privileged introspection to the inner self. Objectivity, then, rather than being some authentic truth, would derive from the specific location of a being in relation to its external

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(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 257.
63   Ibid., 262.
64   Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 24.
65   I am indebted here to the work of Satya Mohanty on developing the concept of "post-positivist" and "realist" identity in philosophy of race.

circumstances. This finds a middle-path between relativism and the neo-positivism that baldly rejects the findings of poststructuralism. I have argued that Merleau-Ponty and Nancy crucially advance such an externalist, post-positivist ontology in their work. Moreover, I have interpreted this work as sharing a productive compatibility with the non-reductive materialist position in philosophy of mind. For example, the thesis that being is the *ex*-istence of the body as touchable by other bodies shares much in common with the non-reductivists' rejection of eliminativism and reductivism. Reductive and eliminative positions argue that a single physical state is directly responsible for a single mental state. Similar to speculative realism, such a position is anti-relational: it maintains reliance on a notion of individualism where it is the innerness of an organism's biology alone, in a vacuum, as it were, that determines its behavior. However, the non-reductivist position radically argues that internalism fails to give a robust account for the fundamental outsidedness of matter, being too abstract and interior. Rather, the mental state is radically dependent on its context, such that a phenomenon is always multiply realizable depending on the particular, functional situation at hand. This successfully taps into the fundamental outsidedness, extension and exposure – or even soulfulness – of matter that speculative realism fails to adequately account for in its theories of absolute inner autonomy.[66]

Contrary to the anti-correlationist notion that relationality always slides into a phenomenalist denial of materiality, a radically externalist account is predicated on the finding that relation matters if we are to have successful materialism. Moreover, such an account helps avoid certain pitfalls of the new materialist "return

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[66] This externalism attends to the growing empirical proof of the brain's plasticity. Catherine Malabou's in *Before Tomorrow* is particularly promising for providing a neuroscientific backdrop for the non-reductivism I am suggesting. This work shows that mental states are not linked in any straightforward or exhaustively determinable way to the neural "firings" of specific regions of the brain. Rather, there is a plasticity or alterability between the regions of the brain that cause a given state of being (i.e., being is multiply realizable), supporting the idea that there is, in fact, a radical, hermeneutic indeterminacy, or at least context-dependency of matter's inter-involvements.

to objects," and thus perhaps points the way to the "special kind" of materialist realism that combines external constructedness with a sense of the real liveliness of matter. Here, the world possesses and touches us, and thus seems to exhibit some of the activeness that Bennett, Latour and the speculative realists want to develop. However, this activeness is not biologically reducible to any genetic inherency in the matter itself. Instead, material activeness evolves out of a radical relationality with other matter that, even if "sentient," always knows its equal non-sentience and objectness, rendering any rigid sentient/non-sentient binary untenable. Such a new materialist, non-reductive, externalist ontology is indeed richly amenable to political implications gleaned from social constructionism, notwithstanding the speculative realist's rejection of such a project.