

## **Honouring Nihilism<sup>1</sup>—A Review of Ray Brassier’s *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction***

Roy Goddard  
University of Sheffield, UK

**Abstract** *Ray Brassier’s Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction (2007) embraces nihilism as “a speculative opportunity.” In the first part of this review my focus is threefold: on the book’s opening chapter in which Brassier considers the claims for eliminative materialism, a radical position within the analytic philosophy of mind; his second chapter which examines Adorno and Horkheimer’s Dialectic of Enlightenment as exemplary of the tendency in Continental philosophy to denounce “untrammelled scientific rationalism”; and its final few pages in which Brassier gives shape to his notion of nihilism by means of “a cosmological re-inscription” of Freud’s speculations concerning the death-instinct. However, I refer to other sections of the book throughout. In the second part of the paper I discuss questions provoked by Brassier’s argument and conclude with a brief suggestion of its implications for education.*

**Keywords** nihilism, the manifest image, eliminative materialism, the Enlightenment, scientific rationality, dispossession by space, the death-drive

### **Introduction**

Ray Brassier’s *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (2007) is of interest as a limit case of what is meant by nihilism. Where other thinkers have looked squarely at the thought that human existence is meaningless and then have sought to overcome this possibility, Brassier embraces nihilism as “a speculative opportunity.”

My paper begins with an attempt at a sympathetic reading of Brassier’s book. What I mean by sympathetic reading is an effort at understanding a text in as “innocent” a way as possible, suspending personal judgement as far as is achievable and deferring all critical impulse, except for that interpretive function which aims at

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Adorno’s comment that “thought honours itself by defending what is damned as nihilism” (cited in Gasché, 2007, p. 281).

clarifying the text's statements and propositions. I will not, of course, enjoy complete success in this endeavour, because I will be selecting from the text and "privileging" those aspects which I take to be the most significant and also because my sympathy will be restricted by my understanding—my reading will be imperfectly sympathetic because, as will be evident, I do not fully understand aspects of the book's argument. I make this attempt not because of intellectual generosity, but because putting together such a reading helped me to come to terms with a difficult text and writing in this way is, in my judgement, the best bet for communicating my understanding to the reader. Coming to terms with the text means putting me in position to ask questions of it and in the second part of the paper I do exactly that—I subject it to critique. This will not, however, be a systematic weighing of the merits and demerits of the book, but a loosely structured consideration of some of its arguments, analyses and themes and their implications for "thought"—thought about philosophy and its relation to the world, to living and (*Nihil Unbound* demands this) to death. I conclude with a few remarks about the significance of Brassier's thinking for education.

*Nihil Unbound* has been described as a "popular success." That would be popular in the sense of appealing to the tastes of readers conversant with, or at least aware of, the registers of neurophilosophy, the analytic philosophy of consciousness, neuroscience, phenomenology, Deleuzian vitalism, various forms of post-Kantian "continental" thought, including the recently identified grouping "speculative realism," and the conjectures of late Freudian psychoanalysis. This list is not exhaustive.

This is a formidably difficult book that makes no concessions to the general reader. It is divided into three sections: Destroying the Manifest Image; The Anatomy of Negation; The End of Time—in which Brassier attempts to give fresh impetus to the Enlightenment's project of disenchantment. What he has in his sights are those forms of "anti-Enlightenment revisionism" which see disenchantment as a process which robs the world of beauty and innocence; disenchantment being the thought that trembles and retreats into irrationality, into a spiritualised transcendentalism, before the brilliance, "the coruscating potency," of reason. The engine of this project of destruction is nihilism.

Brassier's version of nihilism, he makes clear, is not a narcissistic spasm which refuses the world and becomes a pathological withdrawal, but "the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality," a reality that is oblivious to humanity and its concerns, a reality which cannot be made over as our home or worked into any kind of "meaningful" relationship to us. Nihilism is not an existential problem but a speculative opportunity for thought to progress apart from the self-pitying pathos of human existence. His book is an attempt to investigate the possibility that thinking can extend beyond the belief that it is or must be co-incident with "living" and that it

may indeed be opposed to the interests of human existence. I will attempt to explore what Brassier means by this.

My focus here will be threefold: on the book's opening chapter in which Brassier considers the claims for eliminative materialism—a radical position within the philosophy of mind made by Paul and Patricia Churchland; his second chapter which examines Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as exemplary of philosophy “committed to the canon of rationality defined by Kant and Hegel” and which denounces “untrammelled scientific rationalism”; and its final few pages in which Brassier gives shape to his notion of nihilism as the path to a philosophy that faces the truth of extinction by means of “a cosmological re-inscription” of Freud's speculations concerning the death-instinct. I will, however, refer to other sections of the book throughout.

## I

### **The Manifest Image**

*Nihil Unbound* begins with a summary of Wilfrid Sellars's fable about the myth of Jones (Brassier, 2007, pp. 3-6). It is Brassier's account of Sellars's parable that I now summarise. Sellars proposes a history for language and thought which begins with “our Rylean ancestors” who have developed language but have no conceptual apparatus for understanding the complexities of mental states and processes. They are incapable of “sophisticated cognitive behaviour.” Faced with a human behaviour like anger they have at their disposal dispositional terms such as “bad-tempered” which are defined by observable behaviours such as “ranting and raving” and which, for the Ryleans, are sufficient to explain the behaviour, in this case as “rage.” These “operationally defined” concepts limit what Ryleans can explain and understand about human behaviour. Complicated behaviours are beyond their conceptual resources. Sellars introduces Jones, “a theoretical genius,” who proposes the existence of “internal speech-like episodes”—thoughts—which he models on the declarative speech (informational utterances or statements) that can be observed in public language exchange.

The proposition is that these internal episodes have the same semantic and logical properties as the external speech episodes on which they are modelled and that they perform an internal function similar to public declarative utterances—“a discursive and argumentative role.” These internal episodes can occur independently of speech and, Jones suggests, their existence can account for human behaviours, full understanding of which has up to that point eluded human beings. Jones goes on to propose the existence of internal “sensations” modelled on external objects of perception and to suggest that these sensations can initiate cognition and action even when the perceived external object is absent. Furthermore, he proposes

the existence of “relatively lasting” internal states in individuals—intentions, beliefs and desires—that can explain a range of behavioural kinds. Jones’ hitherto behaviourist humans learn “to explain behaviour by attributing *propositional attitudes* to persons via the ‘that’ clauses in statements of the form: ‘He believes that...,’ ‘She desires that...,’ ‘He intends that...’.”

Jones has produced a new theory of human behaviour which can be used to explain the behaviour of others and of *oneself* (my emphasis). In time it becomes clear to Jones’s philosopher descendants that his theory of propositional attitudes entails a complex logical structure that has structural similarities to models of scientific explanation. Sellars’s point is that Jones provided the groundwork for uncovering “the rational infrastructure of human thought.” Brassier notes that “[b]eliefs,’ ‘desires,’ ‘intentions,’ and similar entities now become the basic psychological kinds to be accounted for by any theory of cognition” (Brassier, 2007, p.5).

The proposition that Sellars advances in his fable is that humankind has developed a subtle and sophisticated account of man in the world, a “manifest image” that represents his understanding of himself, a self-conceptualisation that makes meaningful discourse and rational communicative exchange possible. As Brassier notes, for Sellars the prime significance of the manifest image is normative rather than ontological. It is not an accounting of what exists in the world, but rather the means by which we make sense of ourselves as living within a community of rational agents. It is normative in the sense that it is the theoretical framework that enables us to conceive of ourselves and others as human. If the manifest image were to disappear, says Sellars, “man himself would not survive” (Sellars, cited in Brassier, 2007, p. 6).

What concerns Sellars is the status of this image in relation to the scientific image of man as a “complex physical system” which can be assembled from a range of scientific enquiries including, most recently, cognitive science. This scientific image presents a very different man from the manifest image whose development has been fostered by philosophy and within which a great deal of philosophy—in both Anglo-American analytic and Continental traditions—has been conducted. Are these images reconcilable or should one have priority over the other? His answer is that the manifest image has a practical priority since it is the source of the rational purposiveness which is indispensable to us. The scientific image, however, has theoretical precedence. The task for philosophy is to bring about a stereoscopic integration of the two images wherein the manifest image provides a language of rational intention that might allow scientific theory to be joined to human purposes.

Brassier suggests that the canonical philosophers of the divergent traditions of 20th century philosophy—Heidegger and Wittgenstein—share the certainty that the manifest image must be privileged above the scientific image since scientific theory derives from pre-scientific understandings which are presented as “being-in-the-

world” or practical involvement in “language games.” A next step—which he does not quite accuse Heidegger and Wittgenstein of—is to denounce the scientific version of man as “a cancerous excrescence of the manifest image” (Brassier, 2007, p. 7). Brassier argues that developments in brain science have undermined the claims of those who assert the ineliminable necessity of the manifest image to man’s understanding of the world and himself. Philosophy’s task is to “draw out the the ultimate speculative implications of Enlightenment” by “expediting science’s demolition of the manifest image by kicking away whatever pseudo-transcendental props are being used to shore it up or otherwise inhibit the corrosive potency of science’s metaphysical subtractions” (p. 26).

In support of this aim, Brassier draws on the “eliminative materialism” thesis of Paul Churchland (1981). Churchland calls for the wholesale replacement of the manifest by the scientific image of man. His thesis is (and here I draw directly from Churchland’s article)

that our commonsense conception of psychological phenomena constitutes a radically false theory, a theory so fundamentally defective that both the principles and ontology of that theory will eventually be displaced, rather than smoothly reduced, by completed neuroscience. Our mutual understanding and even our introspection may be reconstituted within the conceptual framework of completed neuroscience, a theory we may expect to be more powerful by far than the commonsense psychology it displaces, and more substantially integrated within physical science generally. (Churchland, 1981, p. 67)

Churchland’s argument is that what he calls folk psychology only yields to cognition a very partial representation of the reality (or “information”) that is taken in by the brain, that the “propositional attitudes” of folk psychology (FP) only express a fraction of the “truth,” of the cognitive activity occurring in the brain:

any declarative sentence to which a speaker would give confident assent is merely a one-dimensional projection through the compound lens of Wernicke’s and Broca’s areas onto the idiosyncratic surface of the speaker’s language—a one-dimensional projection of a four—or five-dimensional “solid” that is an element in his true kinematical state. (Churchland, 1981, p. 85)

The burden of Churchland’s argument is not just that FP is an inaccurate and unreliable theory of “our internal kinematics and dynamics” (Churchland, 1981, p. 74), an obstacle to understanding “a deeper and more complex reality,” but also that

the idea of language as the elementary, the basic medium of thought, consciousness and knowledge acquisition, is mistaken. Language use

appears as an extremely peripheral activity, as a racially [sic] idiosyncratic mode of social interaction which is mastered thanks to the versatility and power of a more basic mode of activity. Why accept then, a theory of cognitive activity that models its elements on the elements of human language? (Churchland, 1981, p. 83)

This is the contention that particularly interests Brassier since he is set on undermining the claims of those philosophies which, from Kant onwards, have been constructed on the grounds that knowledge about self and world could be embodied by the exercise of “linguaformal” reasoning. The particular quarry are those “continental” currents of thought which he sees as flowing from phenomenology—“critical theory, hermeneutics and poststructuralism,” as well as Anglo-American common sense and ordinary language philosophy, although he is less attentive to the shortcomings of the latter than the former. These are the schools of thought which have most faithfully conformed to what Quentin Meillassoux has characterised as the Kantian diktat that thought cannot access the real—the outside, the “in-itself”—except through the “correlation.” This is the idea that it is impossible to consider the realms of objectivity and subjectivity independently of each other, that “we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 5).

### **This Is Not All About Us**

It will be apparent that philosophies from Husserl and Heidegger to Gadamer and Derrida have taken language as the originary ground of consciousness and thought, the house of being or, for some, the prison house of being. For such philosophers it is taken for granted that language and thought are crucially related, that we think through language and are formed as subjects (of knowledge and society) by language. Even Foucault, for all his attention to the body and its susceptibility to the disciplined trainings that shape consciousness and understanding, saw, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), the systems of subjectification that allow and inhibit thought as discursive in nature. In Churchlandese, these philosophers assume that the elements of cognitive activity are modelled on the elements of human language. If Churchland is right in claiming that “linguaformal ‘meaning’ is almost certainly generated through non-linguistic processes” (Brassier, p. 27) and that our phenomenological intuitions are conditioned by mechanisms we cannot access intuitively, they have been exploring a dead-end or as Churchland puts it, quoting Imre Lakatos, they have been engaged in “a stagnant or degenerating research

programme” (Churchland, 1981, p. 75). The only way of investigating the “sub-symbolic” reality of consciousness, Brassier suggests, is by way of the third-person affordances of neuroscience.

Brassier recruits Churchland’s eliminative materialism to the task of demolishing the correlationist insistence that we only ever have access to, are doomed to inhabit as thinkers, the reciprocal relation between objectivity and subjectivity, and never to encounter either realm separately. He sees philosophy as shackled or “bound” by a self-imposed limitation that prohibits the production of “truth,” the kind of vigorous investigation of the nature of reality that science engages in. In the final chapter of his book Brassier refers to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s essay “*Can thought go on without a body?*,” (pp. 8-23), citing it as a rare, perhaps unique, example of a continental philosopher addressing the significance for philosophy of death considered as a cosmic event rather than an individual, human occurrence (Brassier, 2007, pp. 223—225).

Lyotard impugns (continental) philosophy for its preoccupation with the “familiar, reassuring terrestrial world” (1991, p. 9) and asks what happens to thought when the terrestrial horizon is placed under the shadow of cosmological time. What happens to thought as “quest,” to philosophy as a search for meaning, for the good life, a justly ordered society or any other of the essentially transcendental concerns that have been formed, as Brassier’s fellow speculative realist Paul J. Ennis has put it, under the sign of Kant’s Copernican Revolution? Such thought “turns philosophy into a meditation on human finitude and forbids it from discussing reality in itself” (Ennis, 2010, p. 2). For Brassier “the collapse of the metaphysical horizon called God” led to the elevation in philosophy of the terrestrial horizon to “a quasi-transcendental status as the ‘originary ark’ (Husserl), the ‘self-secluding’ (Heidegger), or ‘the deterritorialised’ (Deleuze)” (Brassier, 2007, p. 223).

Philosophy’s failure has been to engage with the question, “How does thought think the death of thinking?” We shall see why Brassier conceives of this as an urgent task for philosophy, noting that he appears to view almost the entire post-Kantian tradition in Western philosophy as (disastrously) vitalist in nature.

Brassier’s quarry, then, is philosophy’s tendency to anthropologism, to identify the task of thought with the problem of man and his destiny, and its sentimental attachment to the belief that man’s alienation from his true being can be made good by a recognition of the true conditions of his existence. This is the promise that he can be restored to a true understanding through the agency of historical consciousness, by acts of remembrance that bring into focus how his understanding of the world and himself has been (mal)formed during the time of his existence as a conscious being. Brassier never uses the term but this is the philosophical humanism that has previously been extensively critiqued by post-structuralist thinkers. It is a project that aims (I think we can still use the present

tense) to enable the subject, in Foucault's words, "to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode" (Foucault, 1972, p. 12). Foucault, after Nietzsche and Heidegger, saw this ambition as a delusion shackling thought and creating the conditions in which varieties of fascism and political and social deformations could thrive. However, *Nihil Unbound* displays little or no concern with the claimed socio-political corollaries of philosophical speculation and we discover that Brassier sees post-humanist critics of anthropologism as closet humanists who attempt to reconstitute anthropologism on firmer ground. Their concern is with producing a man, a vital being, who is not bound by nostalgia for a past which never existed, whose being is not subjected to the crippling severities of a law and a telos that he has not willed. This is a man who acts in affirmation of his desire without that self-consciousness that causes him to think at every step whether he is acting in accordance with what it is to be a "man," and who, rid of dreams of power, is at last free. The project of willing such a man, Brassier would appear to say, is still anthropological, in that it ignores man's relationship to Nature and the vast temporal perspectives of a natural history that casts into fleeting significance not only man's consciousness but life itself. Brassier explores what it is to think in the shadow of the statements—about the geological past, cosmological present and the eventual extinction of life, energy and the undoing of matter—that natural science produces. What does it mean for philosophy to contemplate the fact of thought that has no concern with the human when, at least since Kant it has been preoccupied only with the good life and the reconciliation of man and matter—the accommodation, the reduction, of nature to the scale of human concerns? Ennis, commenting on *Nihil Unbound* and endorsing its embrace of nihilism, offers an answer of sorts: "It is in the recognition that this is not all about us that ensures the pre-condition for nihilism is a vigilant anti-vitalism" (Ennis, 2015, p. 29).

### **Philosophy as Natural Theology**

Brassier's second chapter (Brassier, 2007, pp. 32-48) examines Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997) (and does much of the work of identifying where, in his view, continental philosophy went wrong in taking what might be termed the anthropological turn. His account of Adorno and Horkheimer's book is concerned with overturning their argument about Enlightenment's fatal production of the inhuman intelligence of instrumental rationalism and their figuring of science (for which read the project of disenchantment) as the severing of the link between man and nature—as Brassier puts it, the destruction of the principle of reciprocity between animate powerlessness and inanimate power. Scientific conceptualisation, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, turns living being, the body, into "dead matter" and "nature into stuff, material." I will move

now to Brassier's account of how this analysis plays out in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Brassier, 2007, pp. 32-48).

At the heart of Adorno and Horkheimer's argument is the concept of sacrifice, originally an attempt by early humanity to work a relationship of commensurability between a dominating, omnipotent nature and a dominated, impotent humanity. Early man used sacrifice as a means of exercising a form of control over the gods and their real or potential anger—an example being the substitution of the lamb for the new-born child which the gods might wish to take for themselves—and that this represented an advance in human autonomy. However, the lure of control, of mastery, led to man internalising sacrifice, of suppressing internal nature in order to exert greater control over the external world. Civilisation is the product of this introversion of sacrifice.

Civilisation's history is the history of renunciation. Sacrificial magic is credited with establishing the fundamental distinction between animate and inanimate, a first step perhaps towards humanity's idea of its autonomy and a cognitive achievement that, in appointing supernatural figures—"demons and deities"—to particular places in the cosmos, marks the beginnings of a classificatory rationality that will later be developed and deployed by science. According to Adorno and Horkheimer (1997), this is an achievement that science is in danger of betraying by, in Brassier's words, "converting all of nature into an undifferentiated material," (2007, pp. 35-36) which can only be understood by way of science's conceptualisations. The bargain that humanity has struck in order to ensure its preservation is to master nature by sacrificing its living being—as Brassier puts it, "the subject [imitates] the implacability of inanimate nature; it disenchant nature by miming the intractability of inanimate force." (2007, p. 37)

In effect, Adorno and Horkheimer contend, the human organism has subordinated the ends and purposes for which it lives to the control and security offered by the scientific—technical mastery of nature. The means of ensuring the continuance of human existence are prioritised over the ends for which, they claim, humanity lives. This is a kind of thought which orders the world to a naïve and shallow fixation on the actual and the present, that which faces us here and now. This thought is named as instrumental rationality and it fuels the "overt madness" of technological capitalism which treats humanity and nature as mere material for exploitation, mesmerising the subject into passivity through "the dazzlement of false immediacy." Reason can only overcome its alienation from nature—internal and external—by remembering its own history, by a reflexive commemoration of the terrifying dependence on and dread before nature that led the human subject to seek its mastery. Only by the subject recognising the fear that drove it to seek what would become a pathological power, only by active reflection—commemoration—can it come to see how that pathology came about and thus summon the strength to renounce the drive to conquer and enslave nature.

Brassier will have none of this. Remembrance of this sort aims at “inaugurating a ‘second nature’: a nature mediated by human history and reinvested with the full apparel of human socio—cultural significance” (Brassier, 2007, p. 39). He identifies this as an instance of correlationism, the project of “rendering material reality into a depository of sense fully commensurate with man’s psychic needs” (Brassier, 2007, p. 40). Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of scientific reason in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997) is revealed as an attempt to revive an Aristotelian anthropomorphised nature, the source of “anthropomorphically accessible meanings, of essential purposefulness” within which every entity is equipped with a telos that provides “an intelligible index of its moral worth.” Essentially, what Adorno and Horkheimer are engaged in is a form of nostalgia for a past (in which there was a meaningful relationship between man and nature) which never existed. In Brassier’s view they seek to respiritualise nature, to mend the broken chain of being that has led to the rupture between knowledge and value, to restore to human experience the meaningfulness that was the benison of the union of “spirit” and matter, the given meaningfulness that was evacuated by Enlightenment disenchantment. Brassier sees Adorno and Horkheimer as engaged in a repudiation of scientific rationality.

The radical essence of Brassier’s derogation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of enlightenment is encountered at its most abrasive in his deployment of the concepts *legendary psychasthenia* and *the dispossession of individuality by space*. The first of these terms is taken from a 1935 article by the surrealist and social theorist Roger Caillois (1988), an essay on insect mimicry which the author develops into what has been described as a metaphysics dealing with “the whole field of social relations, personal identity and corporal existence” (Merrin W., 2007). *Legendary psychasthenia* refers to the ways in which the appearance of some creatures mimics their physical environment. The leaf insect, for example, has evolved to resemble the food on which it feeds, yet, Caillois points out, such mimicry has limited use—value since its predators are rarely taken in by this adaptation to the environment and since leaf insects often devour each other. Caillois is in part concerned to question the Darwinian logic that sees the attributes of an animal as necessarily matched to its survival needs. Creatures like the leaf insect have acquired an appearance which appears to be ineffective in survival terms and, furthermore, inedible creatures often imitate their environment. Rather than the outcomes of an ineluctable drive for survival, Caillois sees what, in Darwinian terms, is an inexplicable excess, as life overflowing the needs of survival, a “dangerous luxury.” However, it does not suit Brassier’s concerns to pursue the anti-Darwinian directions in Caillois’ argument. What interests him is Caillois’ depiction of mimicry as the thanatropic “lure of space,” the way in which the organism solves the problem of its conflict with its environment by succumbing to what Hegel called the “conceptless exteriority” of space, to a dissolution of

consciousness and life, its abandonment to a “continuously expanding de-individuated space” (Brassier, 2007, p. 43). The insect’s “camouflage” is a surrender to space.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, Brassier argues, such dispossession by space robs reason of the temporal dimension within which it transcends brute circumstance in its acts of reflexive commemoration. In such circumstance—dispossession by space—reason as subjective reflection is engulfed by the object and becomes instrumental reason, which is to say that psychic individuality is dissolved into and “assimilated” by space, an exteriority which, with the dissolution of the subject, cannot be conceptualised and is thus beyond the reach of the kind of dialectical critique—“reason’s reflexive commemoration of its own natural history” (Brassier, 2007, p. 33)—which Adorno and Horkheimer see as indispensable to overcoming the sacrificial impulse that informs reason, rendering it pathological. Brassier depicts dialectical thinking as committed to “expung[ing] space from history” (p. 47). This is a commitment that flies in the face of Darwin’s achievement of reinscribing history into space, thereby refusing to engage with the fact that the “socio-historical mediation of nature is itself mediated by natural history” (p. 48) which includes geology and cosmology alongside evolutionary biology. Adorno and Horkheimer retreat before the brilliant light of scientific thought and fall into “natural theology” and philosophical anthropologism.

### **All Life is Death**

Subsequent chapters of Brassier’s book explore ways out of the hold that correlationism has over the speculative possibilities of philosophical thought and the challenges set to thought once it accepts the rehabilitation of the idea of “a non—correlational reality.” He laments the “division of labour between the ontic purview of the sciences and the ontological remit of philosophy” as a ruse for “evading the fundamental challenge posed to philosophy by modern science’s unveiling of a reality which is as indifferent to life as it is to thought.” (Brassier, 2007, p. 63). What philosophy should be doing is “providing an appropriate speculative armature for science’s exploration of a reality which need not conform to any of reason’s putative interests or ends” (ibid). Philosophy must confront the real. He examines ways of opening up this problem by seeking a critical harnessing of the conceptual resources of Meillassoux, Alain Badiou and François Laruelle, before critiquing Heidegger’s and Deleuze’s privileging of time over space as a sequestering of time and life from the destructive consequences for anthropological thought of an engagement with the real. These are chapters that present a formidable density of argument and there is no space here to give a just account of them in the development of Brassier’s thesis. My summary of *Nihil Unbound* will therefore conclude with a reading of the book’s final chapter in which Brassier attempts to bring critical insights assembled from his earlier investigations to bear

upon Nietzsche's ideas about the overcoming of nihilism. Here he offers a "cosmological re—inscription of Freud's account of the death—drive," apparently as a bringing together of his thinking about nihilism as the route to philosophy recognising its function as "the organon of extinction" (Brassier, 2007, p. 239).

The chapter "The Truth of Extinction" begins with Nietzsche's fable about a star on which clever beings invented knowing and where after nature had taken a few breaths the star cooled and the "clever beasts" had to die. Such a fable, he says, would still not adequately show "how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature" (Nietzsche, 1873, no page). Human knowing did not exist for eternities and when it is over and done with "nothing will have happened". Brassier sees this as Nietzsche driving philosophy to its nihilistic limit: "becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing" the latter writes in *The Will to Power* (Brassier, 2007, pp. 205-206). Nietzsche, having carried out the destruction of the idea of truth as the supreme value (because there is "no true world"), then devotes his philosophical effort to overturning this apparent triumph of nihilism, this incineration of meaning and value. He does this by way of his supreme idea—eternal recurrence.

Nietzsche proposes that existence recurs inevitably, that it returns to the same conditions, the same possibilities without variation. We may think we are confronting the new but we are endlessly returned to the same exigencies, the same possibilities. Eternal recurrence mocks and shatters the illusion of value since it presents the absolute indifference of the universe and the vanity of philosophy's quest for eternal truth. There can be "no recourse to final intentions" (quoted in Brassier, 2007, p. 207). There is only the transience of the moment. What Nietzsche does is to contemplate this nihilistic end-point and to embrace the idea of existence as becoming—incessant becoming—rather than the idea that it is being, which is a conceptualisation aimed at arresting the ceaseless movement of becoming. The thought of eternal recurrence, then, empties existence of meaning and purpose and insists on what Brassier calls its "ultimate valuelessness" (2007, p. 207). Nietzsche overcomes this apparently impassable negativity by proposing an affirmation of the transitory moment, an embrace of the absolute value of each moment of existence. The affirmation of eternal recurrence is, says Brassier, "at once the the annihilation of all known values and the creation of unknown values" (Brassier, 2007, p. 207).

Affirmation thus replaces the will to knowledge which, incorrigibly, is given to judgement, division, vengeful moralism and the subordination of the present moment to future ends. It is the will to nothingness that drives the will to know, which seeks adequation to—becoming equal to—the in-itself, to objective reality, striving for an absolute correspondence between representation and reality, pure identity of, pure stasis in, being. (We may recall Adorno and Horkheimer's contention that the human organism has subordinated the ends and purposes for which it lives to the control and security offered by the scientific-technical mastery

of nature.) Brassier turns to Deleuze's contentious reading of Nietzsche (Deleuze, 1983) treating it as an ingenious clarification of what the latter meant, but never coherently expressed, in "willing eternal recurrence" (Brassier, 2007, p. 207). Deleuze reads Nietzsche's nihilism as a process of revealing the will to power that produced the values and the pieties of European thought, thus making the will to power knowable to us, as a negative force—as the will to nothingness. For Nietzsche, according to Brassier's Deleuze, the history of Western thought is the history of nihilism "understood as the triumph of resentment, bad conscience, and the ascetic ideal" (Brassier, 2007, p. 209). Nietzsche's decisive move is to identify the juncture at which the will to nothingness (which is philosophy's will to truth) turns on truth itself to break thought's alliance with "the rule of knowledge and the norm of truth" (2007, p. 210). This is an uncoupling from those forces that impose the crippling rule of knowledge (the sum of existing values and truth), all that binds it to the impulse to transcendence and thus to the suppression of becoming. In Deleuze's account, according to Brassier, willing eternal recurrence requires a turning away from this "knowable aspect" of the will to power, to an embrace of the will "in its being," as "a flux of perpetual transformation," an affirmation of becoming "without goal or aim." Acceptance of eternal recurrence is to will without extrinsic purpose or end, to will in affirmation of the will itself.

This kind of vitalist thought, whether encountered in its Nietzschean articulation or in the philosophy of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, provokes a number of questions and problems. It appears to rely on an idea of a vital force that escapes the categories of materialist thought and the natural sciences. It appears to assume that willing becoming—the investment of being in the moment—will always lead to an intensification of vital life—in Nietzsche's words, to joy that outweighs pain. It is unclear why this should be the case. To descend to what Brassier would probably term a non-philosophical level of thought, it is not clear how such apparently ecstatic experience of existence could ever be compatible with even a minimal ordering of social life. It dispenses with ideas of morality and appears to suggest that the negativity of the will to knowing, all that imposes restriction on life, everything that inhibits and enervates life—in Deleuze's argument, the Oedipal subjection whose formulation in Freud and Lacan he dismisses as an historical malformation (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004)—can be escaped by an act of creative affirmation, a self-affirmation of the will which will unleash vital difference. The relations that might obtain between the individuals who achieve the becoming that "aims at nothing and achieves nothing" are not made clear—sociality itself, the necessity of even a minimal ordering of relations amongst these new "creatures," appears to be denied, brushed aside as a symptom

or epiphenomenon of the rejected negative will to power and the bad conscience it produced.<sup>2</sup>

Brassier applauds the Nietzschean nihilism that unmasks the will to power underlying existing values and sees Nietzsche as anticipating the full significance of the crisis in the philosophical image of man—the manifest image whose inadequacies Brassier explored in his account of eliminativism in the book's first chapter—but concludes that Nietzsche's analysis was limited by “the scanty resources provided by nineteenth-century psychology,” (2007, p. 209) by his antipathy to positivism and because of his debt to the idealist metaphysics of Schopenhauer. As a consequence, Nietzsche proposes a metaphysical notion of the will to power rather than a more scientifically realist conceptualisation, leading him to formulate “the collapse of the folk —psychological conception of truth” as “an axiological predicament” (Brassier, 2007, p. 209)—a crisis in the understanding of values or virtues—requiring “a metaphysical transfiguration in the quality of the will.”

Brassier suggests that had the achievements of the 20th century cognitive sciences been available to Nietzsche he might have developed a more realist understanding that recognised the crisis in the folk psychological image of man as arising from the erroneous assumption that the propositional attitudes of folk psychology are a reliable basis for construing rationality. For all his evident admiration for Nietzsche's assault on the values of Judeo-Christian civilisation and the futility of its idealist quest for putting a check on becoming and the proliferating differentiation of existence, Brassier concludes that the former's embrace of affirmation leads him to an irrealism, a denial of truth—which he defines as just another value—and to a faith in “the affirmative and evaluative will to lie” (Brassier, 2007, p. 219), the action of conferring fabricated values upon becoming.

In his final chapter Brassier heavily underlines the consequences for philosophy of the fact of extinction. There is no way in which thought can humanise or domesticate the reality of the cosmic annihilation that awaits all life and matter itself, no way in which it can be brought into the comforting enclosure of the correlation, no possibility that it can be made over “for us.” Brassier uses vitalism as an exemplary case of the various philosophical postures adopted in response to this discomfiting presentation of the real, the most honest formulation in the sense that rather than avoiding them, it addresses and attempts to provide an answer to the apparently unsurpassable statements of scientific rationality. There is a sense in which Brassier sees vitalism as the logical reduction of all post-Kantian thought, the final florid bloom of philosophy in flight from the real. His derogation of vitalism may thus embrace those more timid, wary or uninstructed philosophies that inhabit

---

<sup>2</sup> My view of aspects of vitalist thought has intruded here; my scant defence is that they link with observations I make in the second part of this paper.

the correlation. The vitalist, he contends (Brassier, 2007, p. 228), tries to escape “the levelling power of extinction” by asserting that the final cessation of physical existence is not an obstacle to “the continuing evolution of life.” This is a “spiritualist” move: “for what else is the assertion that the termination of physical existence as such presents no obstacle to the continuing evolution of life, if not a spiritualist declaration?” Post-Kantian philosophy—the thought of the correlation—cannot effect a transcendental shift beyond extinction, Brassier suggests, without resort to “metaphysical gesture” (Brassier, 2007, p. 222), a leap of faith over and beyond the scientific factum of universal death into a species of virtual, non-physical, reality.

The final five pages of Brassier’s book are given to “a speculative re-inscription of Freud’s theory of the death-drive, wherein the sublimation of the latter is seen as the key to grasping the intimate link between the will to know and the will to nothingness” (Brassier, 2007, p. xii). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud considers the phenomenon of traumatic neurosis which compels the neurotic subject to relive in dreams an original traumatic incident. The problem put to psychoanalysis is how such compulsive repetition of trauma can occur when the pleasure principle identifies the function of dreaming as wish-fulfilment, the maximisation of pleasure and the diminution of displeasure (Brassier’s term for the antithesis of pleasure—most sources render the German *Unlust* as unpleasure or pain) where pleasure consists in the lessening of excitation and displeasure in the increase of excitation. Traumatic repetition is the means by which the psyche of the dreamer strives to assemble the anxiety needed to bind the excessive excitation; the unconscious attempts to re-encounter the traumatic incident “in a condition of anxious anticipation that will allow it to buffer the shock” (Brassier, 2007, p. 234) and make good the “impotent terror,” the disabling excess of excitation, felt by the organism during the original incident.

Freud understands these compulsive episodes as instinctual in character and suggests that the compulsion to repeat points to the nature of the “drive” as organic life’s urge “to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces” (Freud, in Brassier, 2007, p. 235). The instincts are inherently conservative in nature, aiming not for some new state that had not yet been attained but striving for “an old state of things” from which it has been forced to depart. That prior condition is the inorganic, the state to which all living organisms return. Freud then offers two axiomatic statements: that the aim of all life is death and that inanimate things existed before living ones.

Brassier’s gloss on these axioms is that life’s spiralling divergences from the inorganic are only temporary extensions, bound to contract back to an original inorganic state. Furthermore, Freud’s notion of the aim of life as death cannot be recruited to the Aristotelian idea of a telos as an intrinsic—an internal—

purposefulness guiding an entity's development, since Freud's "realist" statement that inanimate things existed before animate ones cuts the ground away from any idea of inherent purposefulness activating the death drive. Rather, death—"the principle of decontraction"—is not a condition existing in life's past or its future. The inorganic is a state which exists in distinction from life; and death, therefore, cannot be recuperated to any notion of vital purpose. Death is a return to the "originary purposelessness which compels all purposefulness, whether organic or psychological" (Brassier, 2007, p. 236). Brassier suggests that the trauma that drives neurotic repetition can never be fully repaired, never extirpated, by the "binding capacities" of "the perception-consciousness system" (Freud's term), since it is a trauma that was experienced prior to consciousness, leaving a trace, "permanent and indelible," in the unconscious that denotes something that cannot be managed by "the filtering apparatus of the perception-consciousness system." He then turns to "a remarkable speculative hypothesis" (Brassier, 2007, p. 237) proposed by Freud, which identifies the origins of this filtering apparatus with the moment of "organic individuation," the genesis of life itself.

Freud hypothesises an organic life-form of the simplest kind, a "vesicle," which sacrifices part of itself, "its outermost surface," to form a shield against the lethal excess of external excitation, so that "the energies of the external world are able to pass onto the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity" (Freud, in Brassier, 2007, p. 237). The outer layer is sacrificed—it dies—to protect the deeper levels from death. Brassier's take on this hypothesis is to note that organic life is won at the cost of an aboriginal death, a death that enables the organism to separate from inorganic exteriority and to create the conditions that will allow evolutionary development and sexual reproduction: "not only does this death precede the organism, it is the precondition for the organism's ability to reproduce and die" (Brassier, 2007, pp. 237-238). If, as Freud speculated, the death-drive, as the compulsion to repeat, is the primordial force driving organic life, the motor of this compulsion is this "aboriginal trauma," the violent moment in which organic individuation was achieved. The death-drive is the trace of this originary death, compelling the organism to repeat the death that gave it birth, a death that is "exorbitant" because it can never be repeated since it marked the "scission" between the organic and the inorganic. This death, carried as a trace within the organism, preceded life and cannot therefore be incorporated into the organism's psychic economy. Philosophy, says Brassier, is the attempt to bind "the trauma of extinction," the objective reality, the nothingness, that determines thought, to subdue the aboriginal trauma that disturbs phenomenal consciousness. The outcome of this attempted binding is the will to know, which Brassier sees as an attempt to overcome the horror of meaningless, purposeless objectivity—the real—by becoming equal to it, by affecting an adequation that brings the real into the safer, comforting confines of anthropological thought. Philosophical thought—

at least, thought since Kant—characteristically aims to produce a total knowledge that corresponds to reality, in effect containing the real within a representation that harmonises with human purposes and meanings.

Brassier’s book is an argument for a different kind of philosophy whereby “[i]t is no longer thought that determines the object, but rather the object that seizes thought and forces it to think it, or better, according to it” (Brassier, 2007, p. 149). The object “thinks through the subject” (ibid.). Such a philosophy accepts the cancellation of meaning. The senselessness and purposelessness that ensues from this extinction of meaning is “a gain in intelligibility,” a clearing away of the illusory goals that have misled thought into attempts at binding the horror of the aboriginal death, “the traumatic scission between organic and inorganic” (Brassier, 2007, p. 238), the scission that, Brassier contends, cannot be contained (bound) within the organism’s psychic economy but which exists as a trace that drives an insatiable demand for organic life and its obverse, an awareness of the inorganic “being nothing” that preceded life and to which the human organism will return. This scission cannot be bound but philosophy can bind the reality of extinction by bringing the will to know into a commensurate relationship to objective reality, a relation that does not attempt a correspondence between thought and reality but an adequation without correspondence. Such an adequation is enabled by thought accepting its determination by the object.

## II

### Questions

Nihil Unbound provokes a number of questions. This is in part because of the book’s uncompromisingly elevated mode of address—its ideal reader is the professional philosopher who shares the concerns and the associative philosophical background of Brassier. A familiarity is assumed with the concepts, ideas and arguments that are central to the writer’s purposes, with the general reader left to do the work of repairing any gaps in her knowledge. This is not uncommon amongst philosophers but in Brassier’s case the difficulties presented to the reader by his severely elliptical style are exacerbated by the text’s compression. This relatively brief book careers, chapter by chapter, through vast territories of (sometimes colliding) thought. The impression is of a writer in a hurry.

Brassier places his account of Churchland’s neurocomputational theory of cognition in the first chapter of the book for strategic purposes. He offers these ideas as an example of how the findings of scientific enquiry can allow philosophy access to the real, to a direct relationship with reality that “the correlation” claims to be an impossibility. It thus provides a grounding for his later assaults on post-Kantian philosophy. In addition, the neuroscientific evidence Churchland presents

undercuts the foundational claims of those philosophical projects—dominant in continental philosophy and also, for a large part of the 20th century, in analytic philosophy—that have taken language to be the basic medium of thought. These are the philosophies of “the linguistic turn.” A “deeper and more complex reality,” a neurocomputational one, underlies consciousness and cognition. Language, with its affordances and its insufficiencies, is not the bedrock of thought, but an epiphenomenon of neurophysical processes —“only one among a great variety of learned manipulative skills...mastered by a brain that evolution has shaped for a great many functions, language use being only the very latest and perhaps the least of them” (Churchland, 1981, p. 83). The usefulness of this to Brassier’s argument is that the philosophies that have, since phenomenology, taken language to be the elementary medium of thought and knowledge acquisition, are precisely those that have been most uncompromisingly insistent on the finitude of human understanding and the impossibility for philosophical enquiry of accessing and formulating the real.

At a stroke Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and many others are, as it were, taken out of the game—except in so far as they have incidental insights that can be utilised by Brassier. Their attempts to chart the extent to which language might enable, frustrate, defer or destabilise meaning become redundant if we can gain access to the scientific real of cognition. There is no room in this paper to debate the validity of Brassier’s judgements on the thought of the various philosophers with whom he engages, nor to examine in depth the conclusions he comes to about the proper function of philosophy. In the remainder of the paper I will consider questions that are not simply occasioned by the semantic density of the text, but by what seem to be absences—questions the text does not submit itself to—and it is questions of this order that I will raise in what follows. They are, perhaps, less purely philosophical—in the rigorously delimited sense of that word that Brassier seeks to impose—questions, such as the following.

- How is the transition from the manifest image and folk psychology—philosophy’s reliance on propositional analysis—to a neurocomputational model of cognition to be achieved?
- What would be the outcomes, beneficial or otherwise, of an “integration of the first-person point of view into the third-person scientific viewpoint” (Brassier, 2007, p. 31)?
- What does it mean to say that thought must go beyond serving the interests of the human, that it should be the “organon of extinction”? (I take organon here to mean philosophy as an instrument for uncovering the truth of reality, its ontological structure). What would

be the value of philosophy adopting the third-person perspective of science?

- Why does science need a metaphysics that is “worthy” of it? What would such a metaphysics look like?
- Does knowledge of ancestry and extinction imply this kind of philosophy as the only option? Are all the philosophies of the correlation infused, as Brassier seems to think, by the pathos of human finitude and do they all seek to valorise the “familiar, reassuring terrestrial world”? Is philosophical concern with, for example, justice, power and government, mistaken?
- Is Brassier’s speculative realism just the latest emanation of a puritanical rationalism, a high and intolerant theoreticism that seeks to cleanse thought of the mess of the timely, the mundane and the particular in favour of the “abstract, timeless, general and universal” (Toulmin, 1990, p. 35)?<sup>3</sup> Is it an arid preoccupation that reproduces the brutalisations of rationalist projects?
- Is Brassier in fact engaged in a spiritualised endeavour?
- Brassier sees the scientific gaze as the instrument for cleansing thought of irrationality. There is (scientific) reason and unreason. He neglects the possibility that there is not a single form of reason but that reason has multiple forms. Is not reason situated, local and contingent? In this regard the 18th century Enlightenment was defeated or stalled, not by unreason, but by other rationalities specific to different social domains—to families, social classes, ethnic groups and other subaltern discourses. Each of these have rationalities that are functional and effective within their specific domains. How will a completed project of scientific rationality be of usefulness to these situated instances of reason?

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Toulmin’s *Cosmopolis* is an assault on the scientific rationalism that he sees, in a line from Descartes and Newton to Kant and the Enlightenment, as leading Western thought away from the earthy, pragmatic humanism of Erasmus, Montaigne and Shakespeare and into a bloodless theoreticism that imposes rigid hierarchical structures on human life. Interestingly, the non-humanist Michel Foucault shares something of Toulmin’s analysis.

I will, in the remainder of this article, focus on the first two of these questions in order to bring into focus some of the problems provoked by Brassier's argument. In doing so it may be that I will touch on some other of the questions I list above.

### **From Proposition to Neurocomputation**

Brassier emphatically rejects Sellars's proposal that there be a "stereoscopic" integration or synthesis of manifest and scientific images, so that scientific theory might be joined to human purposes. Instead, as we have seen, he proposes the demolition of the manifest image and its replacement by the scientific image in order to achieve the "philosophical consummation of the Enlightenment" (Brassier, 2007, p. 26). Brassier does not make clear how this supersession might be managed. Paul Churchland is more forthcoming (Churchland, 1981, pp. 85-88). He envisages three possibilities. The first is that "a new kinematics and correlative dynamics for what is now thought of as cognitive activity" is developed with which "some segment of the population, or all of it" might become familiar, so that its vocabulary and laws come to displace folk psychology. The second possibility is that "a new system of verbal communication" is developed, one based on emerging knowledge of the innate structures of the brain which indicate a level of complexity far beyond the capacities of natural language; this would be a language, "entirely distinct from natural language," that availed itself of the full machinery of the brain's neural architecture. Once constructed this new system of communication proves learnable and in two generations sweeps the world and folk psychology is eliminated. Churchland outlines a third, "even stranger" possibility. The brain's two hemispheres embody "two physically distinct cognitive systems" which can operate independently, but which can exchange or share information by way of the corpus callosum, a broad "cable" of neurons, a "commisure" connecting them. People born without such a connecting cable exhibit "little or no deficit," suggesting that the two hemispheres have learned to use other pathways that exist within the subcortical regions in order to exchange information.

Churchland asks why, if two separate hemispheres of a brain can learn to communicate, two distinct brains shouldn't learn to do so. The gain of such a possibility would be that communication would bypass language which only manages to make use of a tiny amount of the information channelled through the corpus callosum. He suggests the possibility of an artificial commisure, "a transducer," to be implanted in the brain at a site which research identifies as suitable, which would convert the "symphony" of neural activity into "(say) microwaves radiated from an aerial in the forehead" (ibid.) and to convert the microwaves into neural activity. Once such a commisure is established two or more people could learn to exchange information and co-ordinate behaviour "with the same intimacy and virtuosity displayed by [an individual's] cerebral hemispheres" (ibid). We are invited to imagine how this might benefit sports teams, ballet

ensembles and research teams. If everyone were thus “fitted out” spoken language might disappear altogether. Libraries would house “long recordings of exemplary bouts of neural activity” (ibid) rather than the antique machinery of the propositional attitudes (books and their sentences and arguments).

The first two of these speculations are similar in that they are examples of hopeful thinking rather than possibilities grounded in a careful consideration of the social, moral and cultural programme that would be required to realise them. It is just possible to envisage that a small portion of the world’s population—say, a fragment about the size of the neuroscience and neurophilosophy communities—might learn a new form of cognitive comportment that would replace folk psychology; if, of course, such a kinematics and dynamics were ever to be formulated. However, notions of a new system of communication spreading irresistibly across the world call forth recollection of the last time this kind of possibility was imagined. The Enlightenment supposed that what it referred to as reason would, through the vehicles of scientific research and education, sweep away the irrationalities that persisted from earlier benighted periods and institute a fully rational (and, notoriously, fully human) society. We know how that project went. It is difficult to imagine that the kind of programme required to fulfil Churchland’s imaginings would find any more secure lodging in the human breast than the earlier project. Since a surging world-wide enthusiasm for adoption of a new system of communication (again—it should be stressed—if one were ever to be constructed) is more of a wish than a carefully calculated possibility and since a conventional educational programme would encounter the same resistances as those on which previous attempts at mass enlightenment have foundered, it would seem important to consider alternative ways in which the replacement of the manifest image of man by the scientific image might be managed.

Traditional educational means having been ruled out, it is clear that any such project would have to be based upon the implementation of technological modifications or enhancements. It is just as clear that this could not be affected by democratic means since similar intractabilities would be met as those which would face an educational programme. The proposal of technological interventions into human cognition, such as neural implants, would be fiercely resisted by various bodies—faith groups, big government sceptics, opponents of mind-body dualism, humanists of an organicist persuasion, the superstitious, the scientifically ignorant, opportunistic politicians and, no doubt, many others. The enforced imposition of a mass programme of neural enhancement, since it would almost certainly provoke widespread unrest and cycles of violence, would transgress the democratic ideals that have been integral to Enlightenment thinking for several hundred years. Additionally, I would suggest that since despotisms have at least as patchy a record as democracies in effecting wholesale changes to humanity’s self-image, a

programme of enforced neural modification could never be implemented across entire populations. No doubt this would not concern an undemocratic government.

A further possibility for the popular dissemination of a fully neurocomputational cognition presents itself. As they are wont to, a democratic government could call upon capitalism and its formidable resources for manipulating human desire and identity, to persuade populations of the necessity and attractiveness of the technical augmentation of learning capabilities. It is unlikely that any philosophical justifications would survive such an alliance. The substantive arguments for neural enhancement—in so far as they have been made—would be lost in appeals to individualised advantage, suffused in the eroticism by means of which capitalism and its arms of persuasion and control—advertising and publicity—distort, pervert and trivialise human desire and purpose. Of course, actually existing democracies are thoroughly capitalist and would have no problem with such an outcome. Philosophical realists presumably would.

It might be objected that the above observations are mere speculation bereft of evidence and thorough argument. I would plead that such speculation can be a useful provocation to thought, particularly if it is conducted with a modicum of care, an endeavour that Churchland neglects. Brassier notes that Churchland's naturalism is "an impoverished metaphysics, inadequate to the task of grounding the relation between representation and reality" (Brassier, 2007, p. 25) and that philosophy's goal should be to render the findings of science "metaphysically coherent." However, Brassier's book is essentially an attempt to provide the groundwork for such a metaphysics rather than a more textured account of what such a metaphysics would look like.

### **All Too Solid Flesh: Virtuality and the Real**

There is a temptation, which I shall not entirely resist, to mock the social and, indeed political, naiveties displayed by certain kinds of analytic philosophers and, indeed, the shallowness of their thinking about the likely (r)evolutionary impact of their projections on what it means to be human. Churchland assumes that the transformations he envisages will simply smarten up, immeasurably, the cognition of their subjects who will remain the regular sports—and arts—loving guys who happen to have university research projects but are nevertheless pretty normal. The world remains—naturally, as it might be put—the liberal, bourgeois place enjoyed by educated people, only made even more fun and more efficient; sportsmen's ability to catch balls will be greatly enhanced, ballet dancers will interact with unprecedented cohesion and sensitivity and the efforts of research teams will yield ever more precisely informative results.

It is, I would suggest, closer to a certainty than a probability that the kinds of modifications to the processes of cognition wished for by Churchland would incur profound changes in the behaviour and self-understanding of the animal that we

refer to as human. It is, for example, possible that that animal might not have a concept of anything like a self to understand nor any vestige of the kinds of attitude that might cause the animal to look for meanings in things.

I am not, for now at least, arguing for the necessity of either a concept of self or of meaningfulness as a necessary component of human identity and least of all am I seeking to defend an idea of essential human nature, but I am of the view that the materialist eliminations or subtractions of Churchland and Brassier should offer consideration of their likely effects upon human social being and individual comportment. Realist speculations need to go beyond the folksy humanism of the former and the latter's high-minded commitment to a belief that philosophy should seek truth cleansed of human concern. Brassier plausibly argues that "understand[ing] the meaninglessness of existence" (Brassier & Rychter, 2011, no page) represents a fundamental advance in cognition yet fails to explain how such cognitive advance would affect what he recognises as the "deep-seated human need" for meaning, for narratives about humanity's place within the cosmos. Would such a need continue to be in tension with "the truth" or would such psychological confusions disappear (would psychologies of the self and individual psychologies themselves wither away)?

Churchland's third conjecture deserves more serious consideration, despite the fact that its mention of aerials in foreheads incites amusing recollections of B movie sci-fi. It deserves attention because its speculation is based within a plausible advance of scientific knowledge and technological expertise. Accepting, then, that such a modification in cognition might be possible, we find ourselves in the territory of transhumanism. Here I use the term transhumanism in the definition provided on the website [Posthumanism.com](http://Posthumanism.com), as the view that humans should develop the technological means for "the exploration of the posthuman realm of possible modes of being" in order to overcome the biological constraints that impose limitations on thought, emotions, enjoyment, health and longevity.

I distinguish transhumanism from posthumanism, which I associate with the philosophical critique of traditional philosophical humanism. Churchland and Brassier are primarily concerned with the the possibility of the first and, in Churchland's case, to an insignificant extent, with the second of these enhancements—to thinking and enjoyment. However, this more severely constrained and narrowly focused consideration of transhumanist possibilities does not exempt either philosopher from the debate about the technological enhancement of human abilities. This debate covers issues such as the fate of the body within transhumanist speculation, the new selfhoods that might be imagined, (the often unwittingly) projected by passing of the symbolic order and the relation between reality and the real.

Slavoj Zizek summarises most of the problems attending the transhumanist project in his essay "No Sex, please, we're post-human!" (Zizek, no date). His

understanding of transhumanism comprehends, in addition to the increase of human potential through technological modification, the freeing of human experience from bodily limitations by way of virtual reality technologies. This widening of the field brings into play questions which are inherent, but unaddressed, in the arguments of both Churchland and Brassier. Disdain of the body or of matter and escape from the compulsions and limitations of embodied existence is a theme that haunts transhumanist discourse. It is an ancient thought which might be observed, variously inflected, in, for example, Plato, Judaeo-Christian scriptures and thought, as well as in early Christian era Gnostic texts. What preoccupies such thinking are three aspirations: freeing humanity (or, in the more individualist lexicon of contemporary transhumanism, the individual self) from the suffering, the violence and the physical enslavement of incarnation (or, in a variation that is well represented on the internet, the inhibitory prohibitions imposed on sexual activity); from the horror of death; and, the aspiration that governs these first two, for bringing about union with the real—entry into the ultimate truth of things. Sex, death, the real. Matter is corruption and incarceration of desire/spirit/reason and must be escaped.

There is a temptation to submit such thinking, such longing, to a conventional psychoanalysis. Instead, I will offer a few simple points for consideration. There is an apparent paradox in the transhumanist wish for freedom from bodily limitations and the desire for an untrammelled, blissful indulgence of bodily pleasure. What the transhumanist seeks, of course, is a virtual body which can engage with other such bodies in a virtual realm. Žižek characterises this as a spiritualised materiality, “a proto-reality of shadowy ghosts and undead entities.” He questions whether this can be an engagement with the real, the in-itself, of sexuality, whether it is merely an importation, managed by the “same old self” of a contingent, socially determined sexual imaginary into the spectral world contrived by technology. He argues that what is engaged here is the “same old” reality and in no way an entry into the real. It may be objected that this example neglects the case of the technological, neuronal enhancement of brain or genome, but such interventions must, like cyberspatial excursions, be conducted by “the same old Self which phenomenologically relies on the gap between ‘myself’ and objects ‘out there’.”

Cyberspace pornography readily discloses an imaginative banality in its importation into the virtual realm of the tropes and heavy weight of embodied desire. It exhibits the impossibility of the same old self escaping its social determinations in order to choose a self and a world that is transcendently other than the self and the world it seeks to escape. The goal of Brassier’s speculative realism, inherited from Nietzsche, but dazzled by the achievements of the scientific gaze, is, in essence, a relinquishment of the self and its distracting neediness. The decision involved in such a move cannot, however, be made freely, without the colouration of a prior subjectivity. Speculative realists like Brassier and (avant la

lettre) Churchland, concerned with the release of thought from the shackles of its current physical imprisonment, eager for immediate engagement with the real and true, share with virtual reality “theorists” and cyberspace sexual adventurers a contempt for the imperfections and heaviness of all too solid flesh, a yearning for escape from embodied existence. In the case of speculative—and more high-minded virtual-realists entry is sought into a realm of what looks like (for what else would the survival of thought after the abandonment of the physical body be?)—pure spirituality.

Brassier has little to say concerning the consequences for the individual and society were “untrammelled scientific rationalism” (Brassier, 2007, p. 31) to lead to replacement of “the manifest image” and “folk psychology” by the scientific image and a non-propositional, neurocomputational mode of intellection and communication. There is an ongoing debate within the analytic philosophy of mind about such a prospect and Brassier quotes Fodor’s comment that the collapse of intentional psychology would be “the greatest intellectual catastrophe in the history of the species” (Brassier, 2007, p. 10). Lynn Rudder Baker (in Hutto, 1999, p. 4) goes into more detail, suggesting a range of disastrous outcomes: social practices depending on the explanation and prediction of behaviour would become unintelligible; moral and legal practices would become senseless; linguistic practices would become “mysterious”; and psychological theorising would be problematic.

Advocates of the benefits of the replacement of the folk psychological by the scientific gaze argue the near incalculable benefits to humanity’s modes of cognition and communication. Brassier and Churchland have little to say about the impacts on human self-understanding and social relations. I conclude this paper with some observations about the likely effects of the transformation for which they argue.

### **The Obsolescent Unconscious**

If the scientific image of man were to take up residence in the human brain—an eventuality that Churchland anticipates with enthusiasm—the near instantaneous communication between brains and the release of information that is obscured or rendered unavailable through the clumsy workings of language would, according to eliminative materialism, immeasurably enhance human understanding and, it appears, social interaction. The slippages, postponements, imprecisions and deceptions inherent to language—which have so interested philosophers of the linguistic turn and have been the very stuff of their investigations—would be bypassed. The unconscious operations of the brain would become conscious and access gained to “the sub-symbolic reality of phenomenal consciousness” (Brassier, 2007, p. 27). It would appear that two other versions of the unconscious would lose their significance—the cognitive unconscious, excavated in the cognitive

psychology of researchers like Daniel Kahnemann and Jonathan Haidt, and the Freudian unconscious. The former version uncovers the unconscious errors of reasoning—in the view of some psychologists the anachronic remnants of our evolutionary past—that distort our judgement of the world and lead us to behave in ways that do not accord with rationality. Presumably, such unhappy misjudgements would be sidelined by a more purely rational mode of cognition. The consequences of the elimination of the Freudian unconscious seem more complex.

One website (Seoul Philosophy Club, no date) concludes an essay on eliminative materialism, written as a discussion paper for a philosophy reading group, by quoting Paul Churchland:

How will such people [individuals who have been fitted out with the transducers and brain implants we referred to earlier] understand and conceive of other individuals? To this question I can only answer, 'in roughly the same fashion that your right hemisphere 'understands' and 'conceives of' your left hemisphere—intimately and efficiently, but not propositionally.

The writer concludes his piece with this comment:

If we want to know what the possible consequences of a thorough—going materialism entirely beholden to the scientific image of man looks like, this is it: the complete collapse of the symbolic order. The Borg! So much for Wilfred Sellars's stereoscopic image.

The Borg are a race which appears in Star Trek films as enemies of humanity. They have become cybernetic organisms who recruit members of other species by a process involving the surgical insertion of microscopic nanoprobes which gathers them in to the hive mind or Collective. Interestingly, their goal as a species is "perfection."

The Borg represent a standard and tired trope in humanist scepticism about scientific enlightenment—the erasure of individual identity by way of its absorption into an unquestionable group mentality, with a consequent loss of individual agency and such human qualities as kindness, love, humour, curiosity and so on. I suspect that the outcome of Churchland's imagined technological enhancement would be less ordered—less orderly—than a technologised, machine version of the ant's nest. A more plausible outcome might be chaos and societal breakdown. However, the author of the above quote accurately identifies what might be lost if neurocomputational cognition were—by whatever, as yet unknown, means—to replace folk psychology. The symbolic order would be bypassed.

I offer a summary of what I understand by the term “the symbolic order.” Entry into the social order is possible once the child enters the system of language, which Lacan referred to as the social institution on which all other institutions are based. Language is the medium through which the human being communicates with others and is able to conduct through symbolisation his/her relationship to the world and to others. At the same time language stands between the subject and the direct experience of things, marking the impossibility of an unmediated relationship with the world. It marks the loss of the immediate satisfaction of desire which the child enjoys within the closed, dyadic relationship with the mother and it marks (and effectuates) the rift, the unbridgeable rift, between the real of existence, the in-itself, and the realm of the human social order.

It is a loss which can never be shrugged off, a separation that the individual must throughout life “tarry with” (Hegel), a rupture which produces in the human being a sense of lack, of incompleteness; from now on, s/he will negotiate his/her relationship with the world through language which only ever stands in for unmediated access to the real. At the same time, entry into the symbolic order affords the individual with a capacity for managing life that is not bounded by instinctual drives. Language is constructed and used in awareness of the Other, consciousness of the threatening presence in the world of other individuals.

However, the social order—submission to a law that structures human relationships—is the outcome of this recognition of the Other. The human being is enabled to engage and combine with others in ways that are beyond the capacities of animals who have a direct relationship with the real and whose actions are strictly limited by instinctual drives. At the same time entry into the symbolic order consigns the human being to an inescapable sense of loss and incompleteness which s/he must manage throughout life.

The demise of language (Churchland’s strong case of the cognitive transformation) would presumably entail the circumvention of the processes through which the social order, its institutions, its conventions and the possibility of ethics and the law, are established and sustained. How, then, would sociality be constructed? In a weaker version of the transformation (Brassier’s version, although his position is never entirely clarified) fully scientific, neurocomputational reason might be applied when the philosopher is engaged in philosophy, whilst in less rarified occupation s/he would resort to propositional logic “as a set of pragmatic social strategies” (Brassier, 2007, p. 26). The effects upon the subject of such switching invite exploration, a labour which Brassier declines.

Brassier urges that time not be wasted in trying to effect “a synthesis or reconciliation between the manifest and scientific images,” but that the “philosophical consummation of the Enlightenment” should be achieved by “expediting science’s demolition of the manifest image” (Brassier, 2007, p. 26). It is just about possible to read this as a call for philosophy simply to abandon its

“pseudo-transcendental props” and to apply a rationality that is based on the findings of neuroscience and a scientifically rigorous cognitive psychology, in which case one is obliged to recognise his proposal as a perfectly defensible argument which can be subjected to critique, but not an argument that is particularly radical. In effect, it simply urges that philosophers just need to be more realistic (in the philosophical sense of that word) and sharpen up their act. However, Brassier’s language—at times impatient, violent and prophetic in tone—clearly signals the necessity, if truth is to be served, of the kind of comprehensive change in human cognition that would entail a transformation in human consciousness—or the obliteration of “human consciousness.” If this is indeed his proposal, I would suggest that justification for this end include consideration of the kinds of questions and concerns I have raised.

### **Nihilism and Education**

My questioning of aspects of Brassier’s speculative realism should not be seen as a negative judgement tout court on his thinking. I have suggested that *Nihil Unbound* suffers from the want of a wider social and cultural consideration of the impacts of his argument, but his argument itself is deserving of attention as a rigorous rebuttal of what Graham Harman describes as “the central teaching of Kant’s Copernican Revolution, which turns philosophy into a meditation on human finitude and forbids it from discussing reality in itself” (Harman, 2010, p. 2). The book’s unrelenting pursuit of the logic of nihilism represents a bracing challenge to previous conceptualisations of the idea, in effect indicating that the material conditions of reality as they have been laid out by science can offer no solace to the possibility of human desire escaping the fact of death, at the level of the individual and of the species. There can be no overcoming of extinction, no survival of a Nietzschean free and vital spirit: finally there really is nothing. His treatments of the philosophers he discusses on his way to the book’s conclusion deserve a closer critical attention than I have been able to give them here, but *Nihil Unbound* is a welcome disturbance to the settled assumptions of continental philosophy (and although he does not labour the point, to the innocent naturalism and Darwinism of a good deal of analytic philosophy).

The relevance of Brassier’s ideas to education may seem at first sight opaque. In fact the implications of his thought for the strange and contested endeavour of education are quite clear, although, because of his austere theoretical focus on the necessity of philosophy engaging with the mind-independent reality uncovered by science, his thinking does not immediately suggest anything like an ethos and a praxis of a Lockean or Rousseauian kind. Clearly his aim is to re-energise the Enlightenment’s disenchantment of the world, hailing it as “the most far-reaching (and still ongoing) intellectual revolution of the past two thousand years” (Brassier, 2007, p. xi).

Education was, of course, the instrument by means of which humanity was to be raised to enlightenment. As has previously been noted, this was an enterprise that appears to have failed, in that scientific rationality has not come to determine how human individuals see the world and human societies are not governed or conducted according to reason; reason still has to compete in the world with thought that is based on prejudice, self-interest, superstition and ignorance.

It would seem that we cannot look to Brassier for a rebooted educational project geared to Enlightenment goals. We have seen some of the options available, or at least distantly feasible, for pursuing the goal of the scientific perfection of humanity. They involve direct physical modifications to the brain or genome rather than interventions of an educational nature. However, as we have noted, Brassier appears to have little interest in Enlightenment as a project for bringing about a rationally ordered society. Just as a scientist wants only to do the best possible science, he wishes only to do philosophy in a true and proper way.

Perhaps the single service that Brassier's thought does for education is to remind it of the fact, ignored by progressive educators of every stripe, that education is as much about destruction as construction. If education is to have a future it should welcome (whilst submitting to critique) Brassier's unrelenting assault on what he sees as the comforting self-deceptions of those philosophies which have contemplated the void of being and, retreating from it, sought shelter for an idea of humanity in a variety of mythologies. Education, like philosophy, is not "a medium of affirmation," nor a "sop to the pathetic twinge of human self-esteem" (Brassier, 2007, p. xi). Neither is it about inspiring young people, giving them hope or recruiting them to a sociopathic project of interminable entrepreneurial self-reinvention. If (and it is an if) Brassier has brought the thought of nihilism to an end point, it is from there that education should commence to think (or rethink) its purposes.

## References

- Adorno, T. W. & Horkheimer, M. (1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Brassier, R. (2007). *Nihil unbound: Enlightenment and extinction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brassier, R., & Rychter, M. (2011). *Ray Brassier interviewed by Marcin Rychter: I am a nihilist because I still believe in truth*. Retrievable from <http://www.kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151,896>
- Caillois, R. (1988). *L'Homme et le sacré*. La Flèche: Folio/Essais
- Churchland, P. M. (1981). *Eliminative materialism and the propositional attitudes*. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 78, (2), 67-90.
- Deleuze, G. (1983). *Nietzsche and philosophy*. London: Athlone.
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2004). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. New York: Continuum.
- Ennis, P. J. (2015). Anti-vitalism as a precondition for nihilism. In S. De Sanctis & A. Longo (Eds). *Breaking the spell: Contemporary realism under discussion* (pp. 19-29). Milan: Mimesis International.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Gasché, R. (2007). *The honor of thinking: Critique, theory, philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Harman, G. (2010). *Towards speculative realism: Essays and lectures*. Ropley, Hants: Zero Books.
- Hutto, D. D. (1999). *The presence of mind*. John Benjamins Publishing Co: Philadelphia.
- Lyotard, J-F. (1991). *The inhuman: Reflections on time*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Merrin, W. (2007) *Myspace and Legendary Psychasthenia*. Retrievable at [http://mediastudies2point0.blogspot.co.uk/2007\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://mediastudies2point0.blogspot.co.uk/2007_09_01_archive.html)
- Nietzsche, F. (1873). *On truth and lies in a nonmoral sense*. Retrievable from: <http://www2.fiu.edu/~harveyb/HI-NietzEssay.htm>
- Seoul Philosophy Club (no date). *Eliminative materialism and the propositional attitudes*. Retrievable from: <https://seoulphilosophy.wordpress.com/2013/06/25/eliminative-materialism-and-the-propositional-attitudes-by-paul-churchland/>
- Toulmin, S. E. (1990). *Cosmopolis: The hidden agenda of modernity*. Chicago: Chicago Press.
- Žižek, S. (no date). *No sex please, we're post-human!* Retrievable from <http://www.lacan.com/nosex.htm>

**Author Details**

Roy Goddard is an Associate Lecturer in Education at the University of Sheffield  
Email address: [r.goddard@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.goddard@sheffield.ac.uk)



This work by Roy Goddard is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)