

Ernesto Castro

# Postcontinental Realism

Ontology and Epistemology  
for the Twenty-First Century



*Reality and Hermeneutics 3*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Reality and Hermeneutics

Bonn Studies in the New Humanities

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Ontology and Epistemology  
for the Twenty-First Century

Translated from Spanish  
by

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Original title: *Realismo Poscontinental. Ontología y Epistemología para el siglo XXI* by Ernesto Castro © Segovia. España: Materia Oscura Editorial, 2020.

Published with the support of Fundación Sicómoro



ISBN 978-3-16-161883-3 / eISBN 978-3-16-161884-0

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-161884-0

ISSN 2751-708X / eISSN 2751-7098 (Reality and Hermeneutics)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset by epline in Böblingen using Minion typeface, printed on non-aging paper and bound by Hubert & Co. in Göttingen.

Printed in Germany.

## Contents

Foreword by José Luis Villacañas .....	XIII
Preface .....	XIX
§ 1. Introduction .....	1
§ 1.1. Philosophical Realism and Its Enemies .....	1
§ 1.2. But What Is Reality? .....	5
§ 1.2.1. The Translations of “ <i>ousia</i> ” .....	6
§ 1.2.2. The Reality of the Categories .....	7
§ 1.3. Transcendentals or Transcendents? .....	11
§ 1.3.1. The Naturalistic Fallacy .....	14
§ 1.3.2. The Principle of Individuation .....	18
§ 1.4. The Problem of Universals .....	24
§ 1.5. The Problem of the External World .....	36
§ 1.6. Continental and Postcontinental Philosophy .....	50
§ 2. Quentin Meillassoux .....	63
§ 2.1. This Is Not Realism .....	63
§ 2.2. The Ontological Proof .....	65
§ 2.3. The Epistemological Proof .....	73
§ 2.4. The Figures of Factuality .....	78
§ 2.4.1. The Canonical Question .....	79
§ 2.4.2. The Principle of Non-Contradiction .....	81
§ 2.4.3. The Principle of Identity .....	82
§ 2.4.4. The Non-Being of the Whole .....	86
§ 2.5. Divine Irreligion .....	88
§ 3. Ray Brassier .....	97
§ 3.1. Somewhere In La Manche .....	97
§ 3.2. Non-Philosophy .....	98
§ 3.3. Non-Materialism .....	102
§ 3.4. From Mysticism to Nihilism .....	107
§ 3.5. The Extinction of the Human Species .....	112
§ 3.6. The Two Images of Brassellars .....	119

§ 4. Graham Harman .....	127
§ 4.1. Readiness-To-Hand and Presence-At-Hand .....	127
§ 4.2. The Question Concerning the Thing .....	132
§ 4.3. Intention and Consciousness .....	137
§ 4.4. Undermine, Overmine, and Duomine.....	144
§ 4.5. The Quadruple Object.....	149
§ 5. Iain Hamilton Grant .....	159
§ 5.1. It Is Easier to Imagine the End of the World Than the End of Postmodernism .....	159
§ 5.2. Beyond the Sokal Scandal.....	162
§ 5.3. The Post-Kantian Nature-cide .....	165
§ 5.4. Animal or Number? .....	168
§ 5.5. The Physics of Everything .....	172
§ 5.6. An Incomplete Dualism .....	174
§ 5.7. Graschelling’s Abyss of Forces .....	177
§ 5.8. An Additional Idealism .....	180
§ 6. Maurizio Ferraris.....	183
§ 6.1. Concerning the Italian Embezzlement of Continental Philosophy....	183
§ 6.2. Negative Thought and the Crisis of Reason .....	184
§ 6.3. Weak Thought and Negative Realism .....	186
§ 6.4. Rational Aesthetics and the Definitions of “Interpretation” .....	191
§ 6.5. What’s Dead and What’s Alive in Kantian Philosophy? .....	195
§ 6.6. Unamendability.....	200
§ 6.7. Documentality .....	203
§ 6.8. Social Objects .....	208
§ 6.9. From the iPhone to the European Union .....	211
§ 7. Markus Gabriel.....	215
§ 7.1. A Pundit from Germany .....	215
§ 7.2. German Idealism for Postanalytic Philosophers .....	219
§ 7.3. The Definitions of “Metaphysics” .....	230
§ 7.4. Naïve, Critical, and Special ontologies.....	240
§ 7.5. Sense, Existence, and Modality .....	245
§ 8. Conclusions .....	253
§ 8.1. Those Who Learn From History Are Doomed to Repeat It? .....	253
§ 8.2. Postcontinental Realism and the Problem of the External World .....	258

§ 8.3. Postcontinental Realism and the Problem of Universals . . . . . 263

§ 8.4. Postcontinental Varieties of Nominalism, Idealism, and Skepticism .. 268

Acknowledgments . . . . . 269

Bibliography . . . . . 271

Index. . . . . 291



*To my mother,  
M.A.ster and commander.  
And to my grandfather, Antonio,  
Captain of an English ship.*



*This is the end of our studies, this the reward of fruitless and useless toil, of endless vigils: namely distress, anxiety, worry, solitude, and the loss of all life's pleasures – a life like unto death, a life to be spent in the company of the dead and in struggling, talking, thinking; to shun the living and lay aside the care of one's private interests; to destroy the bodily physique by training the mind. From this cause come diseases, often madness, and always death.*

*Francisco Sanches, That Nothing Is Known*



## Foreword

by José Luis Villacañas

This book opens up with a quotation from our great skeptic, Francisco Sanches, one of those Sephardims for whom the Iberian peninsula was never a frontier, even if, out of insecurity, persecution, and exile, they had to open themselves up to the wider European continent and its conversations, finding a home beyond the Pyrenees. Ernesto Castro is too refined a writer to have placed this quotation in the very first pages of his work without deep existential grounds. And, in a way, one would be advised to take this quotation as a reader's guide. This quotation by Sanches, extracted from his book *That Nothing Is Known*, elicits a reflection from me which is worthy of the attention of the international reader of this book. This is why I offer it here, in this foreword, as a way to contextualize the importance of *Postcontinental Realism*.

The misadventures of Spanish philosophy are, in themselves, a subject worthy of study, and they certainly inform our understanding of Spain's problematic relationship to European modernity. We can pin down an introductory act to these adventures in the fifteenth century, a formative period where the role of the protagonist was played by Alfonso de Cartagena. In a way, he was the first to maintain written correspondence with Leonardo Bruni and with Pier Candido Decembrio, and to know Nicholas of Cusa and Il Panormita. He was part of the pre-Humanist republic of letters. Juan Luis Vives, who died in 1540, stands on the threshold of this story. He was still part of the European conversation, in dialogue with Erasmus, Thomas More, Guillaume Budé. As for Sanches, he was born in Sepharad but lost ties with his country. After these, we have but a few isolated rendez-vous – Spain will be markedly absent from the *République des Lettres* and its project of philosophical modernity. Only the great Francisco Suarez, propelled by the sounding board of European Jesuitism, will manage to rise to the front ranks of a reformed and Catholic Europe – but European modernity was precisely about overcoming, and not setting up camp in, the trenches of these dualities.

We will have to wait for the twentieth century and José Ortega y Gasset, within our grandparent's generation, for a Spaniard to be part of an elevated, albeit at times limited, European conversation, as is shown by Ortega's unbecoming euphoria about his relationship with Martin Heidegger, and his quasi-heroical defense of his own cause, which speaks volumes about this philosopher's mental uncertainties. The Spanish Civil War and Franco's long dictatorship once again eroded the basis of this dialogue, returning every practitioner to the time-honored stew of Tomist subjects. However, making virtue out of necessity, some in-

dividual talents were sharpened by the frequent contact with the scholastics, giving fresh instances of that perennial strain of Hispanic wit.

What identifies *ingenium* as a form of understanding intellectual life is the obstinacy of self-affirmation. This mental and temperamental disposition produces a powerfully militant ethos, makes conversation difficult, and begets solitary works, at times isolated in their brilliancy and extemporaneity. That was the bread and butter of Spanish philosophy during the age of the Generalísimo, as displayed in its best representatives, Xavier Zubiri and Gustavo Bueno. The opening up to democracy, after the popular referendum on the 1978 Constitution, brought an élan of Europeism and normalization that captures the experience of my generation. All known philosophical franchises set up shop in Spain, and managing one of these intellectual conglomerates became the chief aspiration of some of the best philosophical talents in the country. The conversation with Europe was reestablished, but our peripheral position became palpable when the principal activity of our local administrators turned out to be that of translating the foreign intellectual movements of the day. And so we had the Marxist franchise, with its appointed translators: Manuel Sacristán and Jacobo Muñoz. We had, too, the analytic franchise, with its orthodox translators such as Javier Muguerza. In between these two camps, there was the brief rule of Jürgen Habermas and Karl O. Appel, whose philosophy became dominant because it offered a theoretical framework which eased the problems of legitimacy within our newly-formed Spanish democracy, and promulgated a Constitutional style of patriotism. It was not long before the French, too, brought their own franchises, chiefly the new philosophy led by Derrida and his translators; and also that of Deleuze, Foucault & Co., not to mention Baudrillard, Lyotard, et al.

What Spanish philosophy of my generation did not do was to produce a voice that could hold its own within the European conversation – that could aspire to something more than rendering French, German, or English ideas into Spanish. We were always behind, repeating the echoes of an already forgotten conversation. It is true that our academic philosophy improved and became more pluralistic once we were given access to the philosophical traditions of the world, a feat which would have not been possible without the help of our Latin-American colleagues. Without their great publishing houses – without Fondo de Cultura Económica, Eudeba, Amorrortu, Monte Ávila, Sur – the Spanish language would not have become a language capable of translating the wisdom of the world. But still, even then, there was no Latin-American conversation.

It is worth bearing in mind that it was not until Ernesto Laclau and his *Populist Reason* that the Spanish language was able to produce an impactful philosophical project in both the English- and Spanish-speaking worlds. The key to Laclau's success lies in the way he has gathered and made an organic and articulate synthesis of poststructuralism, philosophy of language, Marxist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and Heideggerianism. The advent of Laclau represents the

formation of an ontological basis with a highly technified constructivist nominalism. His work cannot and will not be understood if it is not elevated to the field of ontology – only within this field can one dispute its unquestionless hegemony over the world of Spanish-language philosophy, particularly in Latin-America. The book that you are reading deals, too, with ontology, and it will be worth studying its consequences and ramifications in dialogue with the ontology of populism.

Ernesto Castro is, without a doubt, the most gifted of all philosophers of his generation who are, at present, nearing the third decade of their lives. As such, he embodies a new and altogether unknown type of philosopher, at least in Spain. In fact, he is a complete novelty at the European level, too. His greatest virtue – something we all have lacked – is his resolute self-confidence. Castro is a bold thinker. He takes up every intellectual fight, lecturing one day about videogames as the total work of art, the next day publishing a study on Trap as cultural expression the next, moving from political reflection around the 15-M movement, to the overcoming of the positions set up by the *indignées*; from art reviews to aesthetic theory, without sparing sundry observations on his own place within the academic tradition in Spain.

Across all these fields which capture his attention, bringing new perspectives and returning in a ceaseless production of ideas, he has the wit and instinct to maintain an overarching theoretical coherence. His basis is the critique of post-modernity. That critique, which forced him to constructively confront the philosophical tradition of modernity, is the origin of this book. And this is so because Castro is profoundly aware that one's philosophical position is ultimately defined within the field of ontology, and that no argument can be evaded in said field. Ontology is, to a certain extent, a discourse made up of timeless arguments. Such is the privilege of logical and ontological argumentation, that here Pyrrho and Plato are as contemporary as Markus Gabriel. On this point, and perhaps on this point alone, Castro seems to agree with Laclau. But against the extreme nominalism of the latter, the former has chosen the postcontinental realists as his workshop.

This is what he seeks to do with this work: his fundamental aspiration is to show us to what extent he is aware of the tools of ontological debate displayed in the twenty-first century, thus far. Castro locks himself up in the company of Meillassoux, Brassier, Harman, Grant, Ferraris, and Gabriel, and he swings across all their philosophical positions. Yet the reader feels that he, Castro, stays outside, in a sideline position. In this sense, his argumentative versatility knows no limits; the vivacity and freshness of his objections are also proverbial. Here, as noted before, his self-confidence is subordinated to the task of putting the finger in the wound. This is what differentiates him from the franchise-promoters which continue to grace the Spanish philosophical scene to this day: Castro addresses the philosophers of today with the irreverence of a philosopher of the future.

He does not wish to be the echo of a perfect conversation whose results it is the translator's duty to convey. On the contrary, he shows the argumentative weaknesses, too, the cacophonies, the incoherences, within the ongoing conversation. Of course, with this work, Ernesto Castro has shown himself capable and knowledgeable (and, indeed, erudite) enough to be welcomed into the philosophical conversation of this future, but the reader is not to find here his first, or indeed final, words on the subject.

I suspect that the positions surveyed by Ernesto Castro in this work, his inspection of the current philosophical battlefield, leave him rather unconvinced. In this sense, his task is that of showing the profound contingency of his models, the impossibility of bringing an intellectual proposal to a satisfactory conclusion. As we peruse this book, we get the impression that we need yet another effort, that in these first decades of the twenty-first century, we have been shifting stances and are still in a precarious situation, and that Castro's interlocutors have not been able to formulate a position, follow it through to its final consequences, and respond along the way to their colleagues' objections. Castro is more than happy to inhabit these open positions. In fact, throughout the length of this book he opens these contradictions up even more, and could go even a step further to resolve them, since it seems clear that, at this point in his career, his eclecticism is only provisional. I dare say that once his eclecticism is resolved, and his critical cautions are elaborated, Castro's ontological insights will illuminate a variety of fields of knowledge, from politics to aesthetics, ethics and economy.

I also anticipate a different aspect of his career. Of all philosophers from his generation, Castro is, moreover, the one that knows the Hispanic tradition best, and is the most conversant with its intellectual history – not only from a scholarly point of view, but from an existential one. His biography and his background will allow him to make a critical assimilation of the experiences of the previous generation, so that his perceptions will be honed by the caution not to commit the errors of the past. The way to produce philosophy, as Bourdieu has shown, depends on the social *habitus* and the way one understands and increases one's social capital. Castro has strong and deep-seated assets on that front, which will lead him forward with unerring instinct. I think that once his eclecticism gives way to a *prise de position*, this relationship with a firmly metabolized and existentially relevant Spanish tradition will play a crucial role in the elaboration of his philosophy.

Meanwhile, Castro sharpens his dialectical weapons in this book's profound discussions about realism, nominalism, universalism, idealism, and skepticism; weapons which – we can mention in passing – he has deployed in a variety of other intellectual fronts. For all these reasons, Castro deserves to be defined as an event on the contemporary landscape of Spanish philosophy. This book is nothing but his business card. It serves to demonstrate his mastery of the sword in the midst of a fencing match featuring the best from each field. This degree of

dialectic capacity, paired with a matchless philosophical competence for someone who is barely thirty years old, is a philosophical feat worthy of an intellectual prodigy. We must hope that his future will be on par with his present. For our present is opening itself to a new age, one that will require free talents, gifted and caparisoned to take on the direst challenges. As Max Weber said, in the wake of the Kantian tradition, tracing the limits and proportions between the realist, nominalist, constructivist, idealist and skeptic dimensions of our knowledge: “But it comes a moment when the atmosphere changes. The significance of the unreflectively utilized viewpoints becomes uncertain and the road is lost in the twilight. The light of the great cultural problems moves on. Then science too prepares to change its standpoint and its analytical apparatus and to view the streams of events from the heights of thought. It follows those stars which alone are able to give meaning and direction to its labors.”<sup>1</sup> These are the situations before which our new luminaries must rise. There is no question that we are living in such an age, and this is the rose with which Ernesto’s generation will have to dance. And he, no doubt, will take up that dance.

In that same passage, Max Weber quotes a line from Goethe which encapsulates the adequate response to these challenges, proving that nobody is ultimately epigonic: “The newborn impulse fires my mind, I hasted on, his beams eternal drinking.”<sup>2</sup> I am too old to make this quotation mine, but I am certain that Ernesto Castro embodies it in his own way. Before the poignant and heartening certainty of his example, I can only repeat the second phrase with which this book opens, that phrase once whispered by Derrida, where, without abusing the confidence, he manifested that he had never felt so old and so young at the same time.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, “Objectivity’ in Social Science” in: *Methodology of the Social Sciences*, (trans.) Edward A. Shils/Henry A. Finch (Glencoe: Free Press, 1949), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Johann W. von Goethe, *Faust: a Tragedy*, (trans.) Bayard Taylor (New York: Modern Library, 1950).



## Preface

Allow me to begin by whispering a confidence that I will not abuse: never have I felt so young and at the same time so old. *Jacques Derrida*<sup>1</sup>

This work is the culmination of a process of intellectual ripening whose first fruit was the essay *Against Postmodernity* published in 2011. Up until that point, my interests as a philosophy student had revolved around literary and artistic questions tackled from the perspective of the Continental tradition – an intellectual school that had inevitably led me down the path of postmodernism. *Against Postmodernity* became a point of no return in relation to the idea of philosophy that I had inherited from both the academy and my familial context. The writing of this book coincided with the social upheaval of the 15-M Movement, which markedly influenced its tone and content, redirecting my philosophical interests toward economic and political questions, and encouraging me to adopt analytical Marxism as a provisional frame of reference.<sup>2</sup>

In 2013, I enrolled in the master's degree in Analytic Philosophy at the University of Barcelona, a year after which, quite disenchanted with philosophy, I began to research the biography of Alberto Cardín – the godfather of queer theory in Spain.<sup>3</sup> As I was in Oviedo, gathering material for this project, I came across the work of Gustavo Bueno who renewed my hope in philosophy and has since become my main philosophical point of reference in the Spanish-speaking world. In 2015, I was awarded a predoctoral fellowship from the Complutense University of Madrid which, over the span of four years, gave me an opportunity to lecture on philosophy of the mind, the history of aesthetic ideas, and the history of philosophy, helping me further my knowledge of tradition and the classics.

This work deals with a contemporary philosophical movement from the point of view of the aforementioned tradition and classics. Furthermore, this book is one of the first individual works written in the Spanish-speaking world on speculative realism and new realism, two of the most stimulating and refresh-

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Punctuations: The Time of a Thesis," (trans.) Kathleen McLaughlin, in: *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ernesto Castro, *Contra la postmodernidad* (Barcelona: Alpha Decay, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Alberto Cardín, *Guerreros, chamanes y travestís. Indicios de homosexualidad entre los exóticos* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1984).

ing schools of thought of the twenty-first century thus far.<sup>4</sup> “Speculative Realism” was the name of a conference held at Goldsmiths, University of London in 2007, which was attended by the philosophers Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, and Iain Hamilton Grant.<sup>5</sup> As we will see later on in this book, while the choice of name was rather incidental, the idea of an impending “realist turn” penetrated the philosophical landscape of the late 2000’s. In fact, we could say that “new realism” – the philosophical movement founded by Maurizio Ferraris and Markus Gabriel in the summer of 2011 – is but an echo of this realist turn on the European continent.

Despite the popularity of these two labels – “speculative realism” and “new realism” – I think it is more precise to group the six authors I deal with in this book under the category of “postcontinental realism,” and this for three reasons. First, none of the four authors who participated in the Goldsmiths conference currently describe themselves as “speculative realists.” Secondly, the expression “new realism” is equivocal, given the number of movements and schools that have defined themselves as such throughout the history of philosophy. In fact, the term brings to mind the new realism of the early 20th century, which sought to overcome subject-object dualism by way of an Aristotelian ontology that resembled what was then termed “radical empiricism” (William James) or “neutral monism” (Bertrand Russell).<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, the main characteristic shared by all these six authors is that, though they originate in the Continental tradition, they all overcome or break away from it, often reverting to references and arguments from the analytic tradition.

Writing about these six post-continental realists has allowed me to rehearse the skills and interests I have acquired throughout a decade of studying philosophy both inside and outside the academy. On the one hand, the fact that these authors are beyond the opposition between analytic and continental traditions has given me the possibility of evaluating both schools in an equanimous light. On the other hand, the fact that they draw upon canonical authors and problems such as realism has forced me to expound upon my readings of the classics, par-

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<sup>4</sup> This is one of the first *individual*, but not *collective*, works on speculative realism. That honor belongs to Mario Teodoro Ramírez (ed.), *El nuevo realismo: la filosofía del siglo XXI* (México DF: Siglo XXI, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> The conference held at Goldsmiths, University of London, was organized by Alberto Toscano who, the following year, wrote one of the most interesting critical reflections on speculative realism: Alberto Toscano, “Against Speculation, or, a Critique of the Critique of Critique: A Remark on Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* (After Colletti),” in: *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, (ed.) Levi Bryant/Nick Srnicek/Graham Harman (Melbourn: re.press, 2011), p. 84–91.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Edwin B. Holt, Walter T. Marvin, William Pepperell Montague, Ralph Barton Perry and Edward Gleason Spaulding, *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1912.

ticularly those of the scholastic tradition, whose prose style I have come to appreciate thanks to the influence of Gustavo Bueno.

This work's focus on ontological and epistemological issues such as the reality of universals or the existence of the external world does mark a rupture with my career which, up until this point, has been chiefly dedicated to aesthetic or practical questions.<sup>7</sup> This stems from the problems touched upon by the authors I write about: we still eagerly wait for Grant or Gabriel to compose a single line on aesthetic or practical matters; Brassier has a practical philosophy, but not an aesthetic one; and Ferraris, on the other hand, has an aesthetic and not a practical philosophy. Only Meillassoux and Harman give equal length to both subjects. As such, the ontological and epistemological focus of this work is merely a reflection of the most fruitful developments of postcontinental realism.

Texts are defined by what they leave out. In our case, we could have tackled several movements surrounding postcontinental realism such as object-oriented ontology, accelerationism or post-Internet art. Such a work would have no longer been a thesis-based book, but rather a portrait of the age. Our thesis is that postcontinental realism is an answer to classical ontological and epistemological questions, such as the reality of universals or the existence of the external world. This is an argument that cannot and should not be defended in the case of object-oriented ontology, accelerationism or post-Internet art. Thus, we will postpone our discussion of the interesting works by the various authors from these movements – such as Tristan Garcia, Nick Land, or Hito Steyerl – for future articles, essays and books.<sup>8</sup>

The structure of this work is no enigma: an introduction where we expand upon the debates on realism that are at the origins of our philosophical movement, followed by six chapters, each one focused on one of the philosophers that make up the postcontinental realist school. The fact that each postcontinental realist comes from a different country – with the exception of Grant and Brassier who are both British – has allowed me to expand, at the beginning or at the end of each of their chapters, on the philosophical landscape of the country where they published their work, thus taking stock of the state of philosophy in France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Each chapter is a self-contained whole, focused on the exposition of the thought and influences of a single postcontinental realist. It is therefore not until the conclusion that I put these authors in conversation with each other, thus picking up again on the problems of realism that were presented in the introduction, and evaluating how

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ernesto Castro, *Un palo al agua: Ensayos de estética* (Murcia: Micromegas, 2016); Ernesto Castro y Fernando Castro Flórez (ed.), *El arte de la indignación* (Salamanca: Delirio, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Tristan Garcia, *Forme et objet: Un traité des choses* (Paris, PUF, 2011); Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007* (London: Urbanomic, 2011); Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London and New York: Verso, 2017).

these postcontinental realists tackle them. Each of the chapters can therefore be read out of order. In light of this, I recommend those of my readers without a previous philosophical education to jump directly to the middle chapters and, once read, to go back to the introduction and reconsider the problems of realism within a wider historical-philosophical context.

Stylistically speaking, this work is meant to spare the time and patience of its readers. Its style seeks density and rejects artifice. What can be said in a paragraph, I have endeavored to say in a phrase. In the body of the text the reader will find in English all titles and quotations from other languages. Unless otherwise noted, all translations come from the appropriate English-language versions. Except for bibliographical purposes, I have included as few footnotes as possible as it is my belief that what cannot – or must not – be said in the body of the text is not worth saying at all.

21 September 2019

*Vegas de Matute*

## § 1. Introduction

Philosophical systems also require a dimension of necessity drawn from a rigorous confrontation with the history of thought they inherit, and from which they cannot escape. Even if we might like to, we cannot go back to being pre-Socratic philosophers. Nathan Brown<sup>1</sup>

### § 1.1. Philosophical Realism and Its Enemies

*Philosophical realism* is the thesis according to which there exists a reality independently of us which can be known in some way. The first surprising thing about this thesis is that it is being discussed at all. Who is going to argue against such a platitude? To answer this question, we must first distinguish between the ontological and the epistemological parts of this thesis. The *ontological* part asserts that there is a reality that exists independently of us, while the *epistemological* states that said reality can be known in some way. In its turn, the ontological part is divided into two subparts: that which refers to the *existence* of a reality and that which refers to the *independence* of said reality in relation to us. Now, depending on the part or subpart of the realist thesis that is being refuted, we can reach three philosophical positions: nominalism, idealism, and skepticism.

Negating the existence of a given reality leads to – in the widest sense of the term – *nominalism*. This term was originally coined to refer to those medieval philosophers who, in the debate on the reality of universals, defended that universals were mere names – literally, “vocal farts” (*flatus vocis*). The founder of this movement was Roscelin of Compiègne, who in the eleventh century maintained that there was no reality shared by two or more individuals (an argument from which he also concluded that each one of the persons of the Holy Trinity was an independent God).<sup>2</sup> The term “nominalism” has been recovered by contemporary analytic philosophy to refer to those philosophical positions that deny the existence of universal or abstract entities. The main artificers of this revival were Nelson Goodman and Willard V. O. Quine who, with their 1947 article “Steps Toward a Constructive Nominalism,” postulated that only particular

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nathan Brown, “Speculation at the Crossroads. Review of Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 188 (2014): 50.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Constant J. Mews, “Nominalism and Theology Before Abelard: New Light on Roscelin of Compiègne,” *Vivarium*, no. 30 (1992): 4–33.

or concrete individuals exist.<sup>3</sup> Thus, nominalism in the larger sense, is equivalent to what we would today call “reductionism,” “eliminativism,” “fictionalism,” or “error theory”, all of which believe that certain types of entities do not exist – that they are mere names, fictions, or errors which must be eliminated from our image of the world through its reduction to other types of entities.

It is important to keep in mind that nominalism cannot be absolute; it has to assume the existence of at least one entity to carry out the elimination of all the rest. If no entity exists, there is no base denominator to which to reduce fictions and errors. The nominalist must at least be a realist about names and accept that these exist, even if they do not refer to anything present or effective. This is the position of linguistic or cultural constructivists against which postcontinental realism has now taken up arms. Those who assert that there is nothing outside of the “prison-house of language” have to admit that at least the prison-house exists.<sup>4</sup> Complete and absolute nominalism is self-nullifying: its own existence refutes its primary and principal thesis.

*Idealism*, on the other hand, can indeed be complete and total. By “idealism” we mean the denial of reality’s independence from us, and not the original meaning of “idealist,” pioneered by Gottfried W. Leibniz in 1702 to refer to Plato’s theory of ideas.<sup>5</sup> In the field of philosophy of mathematics, Platonism is considered to be the realist position par excellence (and reasonably so) since Platonists believe in the existence of mathematical beings independently of us. In positing the existence of immaterial entities, this form of objective idealism does not oppose realism but rather materialism. We will return to this in our discussion of the influence of Friedrich W. J. Schelling – a philosopher often labeled as an “objective idealist” – on postcontinental realism.

The branch of idealism which opposes realism is that which states that reality depends on us. Needless to say, this definition varies according to how one defines “dependence” and “us.” Dependence can be considered within the frameworks of being or of knowing. In the first category we find *ontological* idealism, such as George Berkeley’s; the second includes an *epistemological* idealism much like Immanuel Kant’s. The reach of the “us,” however, can be broadened or restricted as long as something remains outside of it – as long as we acknowledge the existence of a “you” or an “it” – thus keeping idealism from falling into platitudes along the lines of “The Whole depends on The Whole.” Epistemological idealists tend to restrict the reach of the “us” to the ensemble of human

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Nelson Goodman and Willard V. O. Quine, “Steps Towards A Constructive Nominalism,” *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1947): 105–122.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gottfried W. Leibniz, “Réponse aux réflexions contenues dans la seconde Édition du Dictionnaire Critique de M. Bayle, article Rorarius, sur le système de l’harmonie préétablie,” in: *Die philosophischen Schriften* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–1890), pp. 554–71.

beings, whereas ontological idealists tend to amplify it to the point of including God. There are, moreover, intermediate positions such as that of Nicolas Malebranche, according to which “we know all things in God,” and extreme positions, such as that of solipsism, which restrict the “us” to the point of leaving nothing but the self.<sup>6</sup>

Solipsism, the doctrine according to which only the self exists – or that I only know myself – is very close to *skepticism*. For skeptics there is no firm or certain knowledge; it is better to suspend judgment (*epoché*) instead of adhering oneself to a changeable opinion. Thus, skepticism refutes the epistemological part of the realist thesis; it denies the possibility of knowing reality in some way. In fact, the appearance of skepticism in the third century BCE was motivated by the proliferation of different philosophical systems, each one supporting their own separate doctrine. It is, therefore, not altogether surprising that this school resurfaced in the sixteenth century as a result of the disputes between Catholics and Protestants about religious truth and authority, with skeptic philosophers such as Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Charron, and Francisco Sanches.<sup>7</sup> In Antiquity there were two schools of skeptical philosophy: the *Academic*, which counted Arcesilaus and Carneades among its members, for which there were no true or false propositions, only more or less plausible and probable ones; and the *Pyrrhonian*, of which Aenesidemus, and his ten modes against the possibility of knowledge, was part.

Agrippa reduced Aenesidemus’s ten modes to five: 1) social dissent (not everybody thinks the same about the same things); 2) the progress of demonstrations ad infinitum (all demonstrations rely on a previous demonstration so that, no matter how much we progress in the demonstrative chain, we will never run into an undemonstrated or undemonstrable first principle); 3) the relativity of all things (things change as our point of view changes); 4) *petitio principii* (which consists in basing an argument upon an undemonstrated premise); and 5) vicious circularity (which consists in justifying *A* with *B*, *B* with *C* and *C* with *A*, thus closing the circle). Sextus Empiricus reduced the skeptical battery of arguments even more by grouping the modes into three classes – those that depend on the subject, those that depend on the object, and those that depend on both – thus concluding that the main epistemological problem was that of relations, specifically: what is the relation between being and knowledge?<sup>8</sup>

Idealism has tried to solve this problem by establishing a relation of identity between both terms. This attempt appears time and again throughout the his-

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the concept of us from the point of view of object-oriented ontology, one of the branches of postcontinental realism, cf. Tristan Garcia, *Nous* (Paris: Grasset, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, ch. 15.

tory of philosophy, from Parmenides (“To think is the same thing as to be”)<sup>9</sup> to Hans-Georg Gadamer (“Being that can be understood is language”).<sup>10</sup> What is, on the other hand, the realist solution to this problem? Leaving aside the naïve or dogmatic realist position – which equates being with thinking, just as idealism does, only by reducing the latter to the former – realist positions regarding the problem of knowledge can be grouped in two classes depending on whether they privilege the ontological subpart of the realist thesis which refers to the *existence* of reality or that which refers to the *independence* of said reality from us.

Those who emphasize the subpart that refers to the existence of reality tend to defend the position that the only reality that exists is that which we know for certain. We could thus label this epistemological stance as the *position of certainty*. This is the position which props up the ontological commitments of Willard V. O. Quine.<sup>11</sup> According to this doctrine, we only have to commit ourselves to entities grounded (“existentially quantified”) in our best scientific theories. What this position wants to avoid is affirming the existence of entities which can reveal themselves to be illusory. With that aim in mind, this stance subordinates ontology to epistemology and only commits itself to those entities whose existence is indispensable to our understanding of reality. Unfortunately, one of the antirealist consequences of this subordination of ontology to epistemology is that all scientifically disposable realities are dealt with as if they do not exist. What is the difference, then, between this type of realism and scientific constructivism, according to which all of reality has been constructed and invented by the sciences?<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, those who give a greater weight to the subpart of the realist thesis that stresses the independence of reality from us tend to maintain that our beliefs can be completely unfounded. We can label this epistemological position as the *position of uncertainty*. This position underpins the aphorism of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein against the existence of private mental languages.<sup>13</sup> As Wittgenstein argues, if the reality of private mental entities is no different from our beliefs about them, then those entities are not real. This is what the position of uncertainty strives to avoid – our confusing beliefs with reality. In order to do that, this position subordinates epistemology to ontology and argues that our beliefs can never identify themselves with reality. Unfortunately, one of the anti-realist consequences of this subordination of epistemology to ontology is that, for this

<sup>9</sup> Parmenides, *On Nature*, fr. 3. Translation ours.

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 474.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Willard V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper, 1953), pp. 1–19.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between realism and scientific constructivism, cf. Antonio Diéguez Lucena, *Realismo científico: una introducción al debate actual en la filosofía de la ciencia* (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, in: *Werkausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), vol. 1, § 243 ff.

position, the closer our beliefs come to reality – that is, the more we know about something – the less real that something is.

As shown above, there are as many forms of realism as there are responses to nominalism, idealism, or skepticism. We must therefore begin by giving a historical review of the debates on realism, starting with the meaning of the very term “reality” and focusing our attention on the ontological part of the realist thesis (which, from now on, we will refer to as “ontological realism” tout court).

## § 1.2. But What Is Reality?

The word “reality” comes from the Latin “*res*” which means “thing.” When combined with other Roman terms (“*res publica*,” “*rei vindicatio*,” etc.) this word takes on rather obvious sociopolitical meaning which can also be found in the etymology of other related words: in French “*realiser*” originally meant “to monetize” (“to render into metal”); in Old High German, “*thing*” referred to both political and judicial assemblies; in Medieval Spanish, “*cosas*” (in plural) also came to be used to designate groups of people.<sup>14</sup> Does this mean that the debate about the existence of a reality independently of us is meaningless, given that the etymology of “reality” and other related words inevitably point toward us, human beings? Not in the least. Etymology suggests, but never categorically binds, the meaning of philosophical terms.

In philosophy the term “reality” is sometimes used in a modal meaning, as a synonym of “actuality” or “effectivity.” The real, in this definition, is what exists in a contingent fashion – what isn’t merely possible nor absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, this meaning of the term “reality” falls into a *petitio principii* regarding the first of the two problems of ontological realism: the problem of existence. If “reality” is a synonym of “contingent existence,” then we don’t even need to formulate the question of whether the real exists or not. We need a different definition.

The real could be defined in opposition to appearance, just as truth is defined in opposition to falsehood, or depth in opposition to superficiality. Reality would then be conceived as something truer and deeper than fake and superficial appearances. This conception of reality immediately brings up the question of the existence of reality since it is evident that appearances exist, but it is unclear if there is anything deeper or truer than what is apparent. To interrogate the real in less of a trifling manner, we must first distinguish between appearance and reality. Unfortunately, this distinction does not allow us to pose the second problem of ontological realism: the problem of reality’s independence. If we dis-

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Juan Corominas and José A. Pascual, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico* (Madrid: Gredos, 1991–1997), vol. 2, p. 219 and vol. 4, p. 805.

tinguish between a reality in itself and appearances that only exist for us, it is superfluous to ask whether reality is independent of us. This conception of reality is also lacking.

In the debates surrounding ontological realism, the term “reality” has often referred to one of two things: either the “entity” (*ousia*) of something or the external world. The former was the predominant meaning from antiquity to the modern period; the latter, from the modern to the contemporary age. I have translated “*ousia*” as “entity” to avoid the misunderstandings that have piled up around this ten-dollar Greek word. But, as the history of philosophy is also the history of accumulated misunderstandings, of bad translations and of even worse paraphrases, we must first perform a historical-philological digression on this point.

### § 1.2.1. The Translations of “ousia”

“*Ousia*” is the feminine participle of the verb “*eimi*” (to be). In archaic Greece it referred to the property or properties of a person in the narrowest meanings of both terms; in the classical period, by extension, it came to refer to what belongs to any entity. Plato used the term to indiscriminately refer to beings, entities, and essences.<sup>15</sup> Aristotle was the first to establish a systematic use of the term when he made a distinction between the first *ousia* (which is the individual, the logical and ontological subject of predicates) and the secondary *ousie* (which are the predicates of gender and difference).<sup>16</sup> The most faithful translation to Latin would have been “*entitas*,” but Roman orators thought it too severe, favoring instead the less barbaric-sounding “*substantia*,” though this word is only suitable for the first *ousia* or *hypokeimenon* (literally: “what is under [the predicates]”).<sup>17</sup>

Things got messy with Plotinus. He spoke of the One, the Intellect, and the Soul as “*hypostasis*,” a word that Aristotle had used as a synonym of the “first *ousia*.”<sup>18</sup> When Christian theology copied the model offered by the Neoplatonic triads and placed it over the Holy Trinity, they faced the problem of distinguishing between “*ousia*” and “*hypostasis*” – a problem they solved by translating the former as “*essentia*” and the latter as “*persona*,” despite the fact that these words were already translations of the Greek “*to ti esti*” (“that which is”) and “*prosopon*” (“mask”), respectively.<sup>19</sup> From Boethius onwards, a person was defined as an

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 472b; *Protagoras*, 349b; *Phaedo*, 101c; *Republic*, 486a, 509b and 585b; *Sophist*, 246a.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a ff.; *Metaphysics*, 1017b, 1028a–1041b.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, II, xiv, 2 and VIII, iii, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads*, III, iv, 1 and V, vi, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Marcel Richard, “L’introduction du mot ‘hypostase’ dans la théologie de l’incarnation,” *Mélanges de science religieuse*, no. 2 (1945): 5–32 and 243–70.

“individual substance of rational nature” (*naturae rationalis individua substantia*). Augustine of Hippo, in turn, argued that the essence is to being what wisdom is to knowledge: the substantiation of a verb, of an action, which in its manifest and full meaning belongs only to God.<sup>20</sup> This is the origin of Anselm of Canterbury’s idea that God is the being whose essence consists of existing, so perfect that it cannot be thought of.<sup>21</sup>

It all became increasingly lost in translation with the Western recovery of Aristotelianism by way of Arabic philosophy. The Arabs translated the straightforward “to on” (“being” or “entity”) as the complicated “*huwiyya*,” which Latin translators rendered as the even more complicated term “*ipseitas*.” Despite these missteps, there were a number of apposite translations made throughout this process of cultural transmission. “*To ti en einai*” (“what being was”), one of the Aristotelian formulas to designate the second *ousia*, was aptly translated into Arabic as “*mahiyya*” and into Latin as “*quod quid erat esse*” (shortened into “*quidditas*,” which we can translate into English as “thingness”). According to Avicenna, in entities other than God, existence is an accident which is added to their thingness. The first *ousia* is translated in Avicenna as “*anniya*,” which matches what John Duns Scotus understood as “*haecceitas*” and which we could translate as “thisness” – what makes a thing be this and not that.<sup>22</sup> Two entities in violation of the principle of identity of indiscernibles, having the same predicates but still different, would have the same thingness but different thisness.

### § 1.2.2. The Reality of the Categories

We have seen that, throughout the Middle Ages, there was an imbroglia of terms (“substance,” “essence,” “thingness,” “thisness”) which all meant approximately the same thing. The debate on philosophical realism, at least in its first instances as a debate about the ontological status of universals, was chiefly an attempt to distinguish between the different definitions of what we have termed the “entity of things.” The origin of this debate was – fasten your seatbelts – Boethius’s *Commentary* to Porphyry’s *Introduction to Aristotle’s Categories*.<sup>23</sup> In this, as in other treatises from the Aristotelian *Organon*, there is a distinction between *predicates* or *categories* (the predicates that designate things) and the *predicables* or *catogermes* (the predicates with which we think). The key to Aristotle’s theory of the predication is the notion of convertibility or substitution. If a subject can be converted or substituted with its predicates, we are dealing with a definition according to genus and differences (“Man is by nature a social animal”); if that is not

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Boethius, *Liber de persona et duabus naturis*, ch. III; Augustine of Hippo, *De trinitate*, V, ii, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, ch. 2–4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 3, q. 6, n. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Porphyry, *Isagoge*, I; Boethius, *Comentatio a Peri Hermeneias*, I.

the case, then we are dealing with an accidental property (“Socrates is sick”).<sup>24</sup> Porphyry systematized this theory when he distinguished between five voices or predicables: three of them essential or substantial (genus, species and difference) and two inessential or insubstantial (property and accident).

Two were the problems with Porphyry’s system. First, Aristotle had stated that the species is to the genus what the subject is to the predicate, hence why he had not included the species among the predicables. Moreover, in using a word so heavily reminiscent of Plato as “idea” or “species” (in Greek: “*eidos*”), Porphyry set the stage for the debate about the existence and localization of the predicates with which we think things. The Neoplatonist could not locate them in the first hypostasis, in the One, because ideas are many. But the Christians, with their triune God, had no difficulty reconciling the unity and multiplicity of the divine intellect. Still, the problem of the relationship between sensible and intelligent species remained all throughout the Middle Ages.

Porphyry’s second problem concerns the fact that essence or substance is not a predicable but a category. In what way can we say that there are essential or substantial predicates? In other words: what is the connection between predicables and categories? It is not neither clear nor obvious because, to begin with, the number and names of the categories changes across Aristotle’s books. In the *Categories* and in the *Topics*, there are ten categories; in the *Physics*, there are eight. In the *Categories*, the first category is called “*ousia*” (“substance”); in *Topics*, “*to ti esti*” (“essence”).<sup>25</sup> However random this may seem, there is a logic to this list of categories. Given that in Greek “*kategoria*” means “accusation” and is opposed to “*apologia*” (“praise”), philologists regard Aristotle’s categories as inspired by the questions that can be addressed to the accused in a trial; an interrogatory which seems to overlap with the six wh-questions of contemporary journalism: 1) substance/essence (who?); 2) quantity; 3) quality (how?); 4) relation; 5) place (where?); 6) time (when?); 7) situation or posture; 8) possession or habit; 9) action (what?); 10) passion (why?). But the question remains: which one of these categories can be considered essential or substantial?

Substance/essence aside, we tend to regard quantity, quality, and relation as essential or substantial categories. But in what ways do they differ? According to Aristotle, these qualities are characterized in their having opposites and differences of degree. However, there are properties that satisfy these conditions – such as density, which Aristotle does not call a quality, but rather a relation – and there are properties that do not satisfy them – such as triangularity, which Aristotle does call a quality despite its definitive quantitative character.<sup>26</sup> This fusion between quantity, quality, and relation was developed throughout the

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Topics*, 101b.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, 1b; *Topics*, 103b; *Physics*, 225b.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, 10a.

Middle Ages and was consummated in the fourteenth century, when intensive magnitudes began to be mathematically analyzed; that is, when qualities began to be quantified as if they were relationships. In modern philosophy, extension (a quantitative, spatial relationship) is considered to be nothing more than the primary characteristic of bodies.

Does this mean that quality, quantity, and relation are convertible or substitutable? Here is the key question of the scholastic debate on the reality of relations – a crucial, but often forgotten, part of the polemics surrounding ontological realism. According to Aristotle, not all things that are relative are, moreover, relations. The head and the hand are relative to the body, but they are not relations of the body. Rather, they are parts of it as substance. Relations do not arise directly between substances, but indirectly – by way of their accidents. When we say that an individual has a relationship of fatherhood with another, the relation arises out of pairs of accidents such as that of having reproduced with a woman (in the case of the father) and that of having been given birth to by that same woman (in the case of the son).<sup>27</sup> Of course this analysis of father-son relationships would not have satisfied the scholastic tradition in any way whatsoever, believing, as they did, that nothing done by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is accidental. The Council of Reims in 1148 raised the ante when it anathematized any denial of real relations in God as a “Sabellian heresy.”<sup>28</sup> Hence why most scholastic philosophers held a realist stance regarding relations, and why the subsequent debate had to do with whether that reality could be reduced to a more basic one or not.

Reductionists such as Peter Abelard or William of Ockham would argue that relations merely consist in related accidents.<sup>29</sup> If Socrates is taller than Alcibiades, this relation is nothing more than the respective heights of Socrates and Alcibiades. The problem of this reduction is that it analyzes relational changes as if they were real changes for all related accidents. According to this analysis, if Alcibiades were to grow in height and become taller than Socrates, Socrates’s height would actually change even as it remained the same. To counter this absurd statement, antireductionists such as Albert of Cologne or Duns Scotus defended the notion that relations are something more than related accidents.<sup>30</sup> The fact that Socrates is of a certain height places him in a relation of superiority or inferiority with regards to other entities of a greater or lesser height – a relation that will take place in the mind of those comparing their respective heights. Following this line of argument, non-reductionists propose a distinc-

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, ch. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Nicholas Haring, “Notes on the Council and the Consistory of Rheims (1148),” *Medieval Studies*, no. 28 (1966): 39–59.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Peter Abelard, *Logica “ingredientibus”*; William of Ockham, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, VI, q. 25.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, II, d. 1, q. 5, n. 224; Albert of Cologne, *Metaphysica*, 266b.

tion between *mental* relationships (such as that which exists between genus and species) and *real* relationships (such as those that exist between father and son).

If we take into account that most antireductionists, when it comes to relations, are realists in terms of the universals, we reach the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that those who assert the reality of genus and species tend to be the same as those who assert that the relation between genus and species is not real but mental. And vice versa: those who describe universals as mental entities (nominalism) tend to be the same who argue that there are only real relations (reductionism). But this is not as paradoxical as it may seem. The *reductionist-nominalist* party states that all relations are real inasmuch as they can be reduced to accidents of substance, thus not involving universals. And, following the same logic, because the *antireductionist-realists* assert that there are relations that involve universals, they have to distinguish between real and mental relations. And so, the moral of the story is: one can neither be an absolute realist nor an absolute nominalist – it is as absurd to state that nothing exists as that everything exists. Ockham was of the opinion that the relation of numerical identity is a real relation, that of a thing with itself, whereas Duns Scotus deems it a mental relationship, given that real relations happen between two or more things and, in this case, there is only one.<sup>31</sup>

The compromise position consists in arguing that the relation of numerical identity is a mental entity but that its source is a real property: the unity of substance. This is Thomas Aquinas's solution to the problem of unidirectional relations which are grounded in one of the related substances. An example of this kind of relation is that which exists between God and his creation.<sup>32</sup> According to the Aristotelian theory of relations, if God is perfect and has no accidents, he cannot relate to his creatures; but if we accept the existence of mental relations causally originating in real properties, we can say that God is mentally related to his creatures, even before having created them, thanks to his powers of creation. What is more relevant to the debate on realism is whether that knowledge of reality is a perfect example of that kind of unidirectional relation. In fact, in the *Summa Theologiae* we find an exact formulation of the epistemological problem regarding the existence of a reality independent of us:

Sense and science refer respectively to sensible things and to intellectual things; which, inasmuch as they are realities existing in nature, are outside the order of sensible and intellectual existence. Therefore, in science and in sense a real relation exists, because they are ordered either to the knowledge or to the sensible perception of things; whereas the things looked at in themselves are outside this order, and hence in them there is no real relation to science and sense, but only in idea, inasmuch as the intellect apprehends them as terms of relations of science and sense.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Cf. William of Ockham, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, VI, q. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 7.

## Index

- Abelard, Peter 9, 26–28  
Abramović, Marina 212  
abstraction and precision, distinction  
    between 25–26  
active intellect, debate on immanence or  
    transcendence of 20–21  
Adorno, Theodor W. 113–114, 187  
Aenesidemus 3  
Agamben, Giorgio 184, 185  
Agrippa 21, 220, 225, 228  
    – five modes 3, 219  
Al-Ash'ari 151  
Al-Kindi 40  
Althusser, Louis 110, 183–184  
analytic philosophy XIV, XIX, XX, XXI, 1,  
    29, 50–56  
    – origin of 51  
Anaximander 39  
Aphrodisias, Alexander of 20, 25  
Apollodorus 21  
Aquinas, Thomas 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18,  
    20, 21, 23, 26, 29–30, 34, 36, 37, 43, 47  
Arcesilaus 3  
Aristotle 6, 11, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26,  
    27, 34, 43, 68, 71, 79, 88, 133, 134, 139,  
    151, 167, 168, 170–172, 236, 237, 248,  
    263  
    – argument against Plato's supreme  
    genera 12  
    – categories 7–11, 32, 35  
    – on space 18, 42  
Arthurs, Jane 160  
Austin, John L. 15, 55–56, 215, 243  
Autrecourt, Nicholas of 44  
Averroes 21, 30, 40  
Avicenna 7, 21, 29, 30, 31, 40  
Ayer, Alfred J. 54, 185  
  
Bachelard, Gaston 110  
Badiou, Alain 58, 97, 98, 117–118, 167,  
    168–169, 232–233, 234, 262, 263, 267  
    – influence on postcontinental realism  
    61, 62, 253, 258–260  
Ballard, J. G. 160  
Barthes, Roland 183  
Bataille, Georges 54  
Baudrillard, Jean XIV, 159, 258  
Baumgarten, Alexander G. 191  
Bawerk, Eugen B. v. 186  
Benjamin, Walter 187  
Bentham, Jeremy 52  
Bergson, Henri 22, 80, 84, 137, 140  
Berkeley, George 2, 38, 74, 76, 199  
Bloch, Ernst 187  
Blumenberg, Hans 231  
Boethius 6, 7, 24–25, 33, 43  
Boltzmann, Ludwig 166  
Bolzano, Bernard 165  
Bosanquet, Bernard 159  
Bradley, Francis H. 13, 34, 88, 53, 151  
Brandom, Robert 98, 120, 121–122, 219,  
    267  
Brassier, Ray XV, XX, XXI, 58, 59, 60  
    – analysis of the “masters of suspicion,”  
    124  
    – break with Laruelle 109–110, 261  
    – critique of object-oriented ontology 123  
    – critique of postmodernism 123–124  
    – influence of Badiou 58, 87, 110–112,  
    118, 268  
    – influence of Laruelle 102, 118, 258, 268  
    – influence of Sellars; Brassellars 119–  
    122  
    – non-philosophical analysis of materi-  
    alism; non-materialism 102–107  
    – on Churchland's neurocomputational  
    model 106, 115  
    – on Meillassoux 116–117, 122  
    – on nihilism 108–109, 113  
    – on solar extinction 109  
    – on the distinction between mimesis  
    and mimetism (*mimikry*) 113–114

- on the opposition between science and ideology 110–111
- structures of his texts 103–4, 112
- Brentano, Franz 14, 137–139, 140, 247
  - definition of phenomenology 137
  - on mental phenomena 138
- Bricmont, Jean 162
- Brown, Nathan 1, 144
- Bruno, Giordano 19, 21, 45, 66
- Büchner, Ludwig 216
- Bueno, Gustavo XIV, XIX, XXI, 38, 107, 141, 205
- Burckhardt, Jacob 39
  
- Cacciari, Massimo 185–186
- Cage, John 212
- Canterbury, Anselm of 7, 66
- Cantor, Georg 46, 233
- Cantor's theorem 259, 263
- Cardín, Alberto XIX, 189
- Carnap, Rudolf 51, 53–54
- Carneades 3
- Castro, Ernesto I, XV–XVII, XIX, XXI, 182, 256
- Cavell, Stanley 238, 250
- Cervantes, Miguel de 238
- Champeaux, William of 26–27, 30, 32, 33, 35
- Charron, Pierre 3
- Christ's body, problem of substantial form 20
- Churchland, Paul 106, 115, 239
- Chrysippus of Soli 45
- Clarke, Samuel 46–47
- Coleridge, Samuel T. 52
- common natures 29–32, 34
- Compiègne, Roscelin of 34
- Continental philosophy XIX, XX, 29, 50, 58, 59, 61, 71, 78, 97, 111, 120, 123, 165–166, 181, 183, 185, 219, 229, 268
  - debates with analytic philosophy 52–56, 264
  - origin of 50–52, 166
- Cordemoy, Gérard de 72, 151
- Crane, Tim 235
- Cronenberg, David 160
- Cusa, Nicholas of XIII, 19, 45, 156
  
- Dedekind, Richard 46
- Deleuze, Gilles XIV, 60, 61–62, 63, 84, 100, 102, 104, 140, 148, 159, 162, 168, 183, 184, 253, 258
- Derrida, Jacques XIV, XVII, XIX, 52, 57, 61, 71, 99, 184, 192, 208, 210, 258, 264
  - Debate with John Searle 55–56
- Descartes, René 20, 36–39, 55, 57, 64, 76, 97, 134, 191, 199, 220–221, 236, 239, 268
  - proof of the existence of god 37–39
- Dewey, John 130, 131
- Donnellan, Keith 250
- Dreyfus, Hubert 130
- Duchamp, Marcel 212, 255
- Dummett, Michael 53, 224
  
- Eco, Umberto 190
- Eddington, Arthur 136, 137
- Ehrenfels, Christian von 14
- Eilish, Billie 139
- “empathy” (*Einfühlung*) 143
- Ennis, John P. 83, 254
- epoché* 3, 142, 203, 220
- Eschenmayer, Carl A. v. 166
- Eudoxus of Cnidus 45
- evil, problem of existence of 16–17, 174
- external world, existence of 16–17
  - Faraday, Michael 166
  
- Ferraris, Maurizio XV, XX, XXI, 58, 181, 187, 254, 256, 258, 261, 262, 265, 268
  - definitions of interpretation 193–195
  - five principles of Ferraris's ontology 204
  - influence of Searle 208, 255
  - on aesthetics as first philosophy 191–192
  - on “archiwriting,” 210
  - on ideal objects 204–206, 264
  - on Kant's equivocal use of the term “knowledge,” 197–199
  - on Kant's transcendental fallacy 196–197
  - on natural objects 204–205, 206
  - on Nietzsche 192–193
  - on perceptions and apperceptions 204
  - on political documents 213

- on social objects 204–206, 207–211
- on the distinction between traces, registers, inscriptions 209–210
- on the experience/science distinction 203
- on the external/interior world 201–202
- on the goals of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* 199–200
- on the reality/truth distinction 201
- on works of art 212–213, 255
- on writing in the age of the mobile phone 211–212
- realist turn 56–57, 191–192
- Ferrater Mora, José 54
- Ferry, Luc 184
- Fichte, Johann G. 20, 52, 118, 167, 174, 175, 177, 226
- fictional entities 2, 28, 56, 138–139, 235, 246
- Fisher, Mark 195
- Forge, Louis de 72
- Frege, Gottlob 14, 51, 52–53, 139, 165, 223–224, 225, 229, 241, 242–243, 245, 249, 250, 265
- Freud, Sigmund 109, 124, 160, 176, 184, 193, 194, 262
- Foucault, Michel XIV, 63, 181, 183, 184
  
- Gabirol, Solomon ibn 23
- Gabriel, Markus XV, XX, XXI, 50, 57–58, 87, 181, 182, 253, 257–258, 259, 262, 263, 265
  - accusation of plagiarism 58
  - against nominalism; “legocentrism,” 239
  - against the “fallacy of finitude,” 249–250
  - against the notion of possible world and its modal ontology 248
  - argument of the color green 240–241
  - argument of the self-refuting list 247
  - critique of formal languages, particularly set theory 233–234
  - critique of Meillassoux 250
  - four definitions of metaphysics 230–231
  - hybrid position in the philosophical landscape 216
  - interpretation of the lord-servant dialectic 216–218
  - on Descartes’s refutation of academic skepticism 220–221
  - on fields of sense 234, 238, 243, 245–248, 250, 253, 258, 265
  - on Frege’s ontology 242–243
  - on Heidegger’s ontology 244
  - on Kant’s nihilism 221–222
  - on Kant’s ontology 241–242
  - on metametaphysical nihilism 259
  - on Schelling and Hegel’s discrepancies; modal ontology 227–228
  - on Schelling’s distinction between positive and negative philosophy 228–229
  - on Schelling’s *Essence of Human Freedom* 223–224
  - on Schelling’s theory of predication 226–227
  - on the goals of philosophy 219
  - parallels between Gabriel’s ontology and Meinong’s 246–247
  - theory of weak essentialism 232, 237–238, 240
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg 4, 56, 183, 191, 192, 193, 194, 268
- Gage, Mark 256
- Garcia, Tristan XXI, 1, 3
- Gargani, Aldo 186
- Geulincx, Arnold 72
- Glucksmann, André 185
- Goldmann, Lucien 55
- Goodman, Nelson 1
- Gracián, Baltasar 192
- Grant, Iain H. XV, XX, XXI, 40, 58, 59, 60, 232, 253, 256, 258, 262, 264, 265, 268
  - against transcendentalism 181–182
  - influence of Schelling, Grascelling 177–181
  - on abandoning the category of substance 178–179
  - on “additional idealism,” 180–182
  - on car culture 160–161
  - on continental philosophy’s relationship with science 165–166
  - on misinterpretations of Plato 167–169
  - on “nature-cide,” 166–167

- on postmodernism and technoscience 163–164
- on potentiality being prior to actuality 178
- on potentiality not being exhausted in acts 179
- on space, time, and speed 161
- on the centrality of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* 176–177
- on the multiplicity of potentialities 178
- Schellingian interpretation of Plato 173–174
- Gregory of Rimini 44, 45
- Guattari, Félix 159, 183, 184
  
- Habermas, Jürgen XIV, 216, 222
- Hadid, Zaha 256
- Hägglund, Martin 71–72, 81, 90
- Hallward, Peter 78, 83
- Han, Byung-Chul 216
- Harclay, Henry of 34
- Harman, Graham XV, XX, XXI, 37, 50, 58, 59, 60, 63, 64, 72, 123
  - influence of Husserl 143–144
  - interpretation of readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand 131–132
  - on correlationism 146–147
  - on fusion and fission 152–155
  - on good and bad essentialism 144–146
  - on Heidegger's notion of time 132–133
  - on occasionalism 151–152
  - on "polypsychism," 146–147
  - on "undermining," "overmining," and "duominging," 147–148
  - reception of his work in the art world 255–256
  - theory of relations 151–152
  - theory of "vicarious causality," 152, 153, 156, 266
- Hartmann, Eduard von 176
- Hegel, Georg W. F. 13, 20, 51, 76, 81, 82, 85, 89, 99, 120, 122, 132, 174–175, 176, 179, 209, 219, 226–227, 228, 229, 232, 233, 239, 247, 249, 253, 265, 268
  - lord-servant dialectic 216–218
  - on skepticism 220
- Heidegger, Martin XIII, 14, 50, 51, 53, 70, 76, 85, 100, 107, 109, 110, 113, 127, 166, 167, 175–176, 184, 187–188, 190, 216, 222, 230, 244, 245, 260, 261, 268
  - "commemorative thinking" (*Andenken*) 132
  - connection to pragmatism 14, 130–131
  - distinction being human beings and rest of beings 128, 150
  - distinction between "readiness-to-hand" and "presence-at-hand," 128–130
  - influence on postcontinental realism 256–258
  - on "fourfold," 149–150
  - on Schelling's *Essence of Human Freedom* 175–176
  - on the thing 132–134, 136–137
  - polemic with Carnap 53–54
  - "thingness" (*Jediesheit*) 132
- Heimsoeth, Heinz 40
- Helmholtz, Hermann von 166
- Henry, Maurice 183
- Henry, Michel 61, 62, 104
- Heraclitus 40, 154
- Herbart, Johann F. 216
- Hilferding, Rudolf 186
- Hippo, Augustine of 17, 19, 38, 43
- Hobbes, Thomas 22, 219
- Hogrebe, Wolfram 226–227, 243, 244
- Hölderlin, Friedrich 54, 225–226
- Horkheimer, Max 113, 114
- Hume, David 47, 97, 199
- Hume's problem or the problem of induction 63, 65, 67
- Husserl, Edmund 35, 50, 51, 52–53, 55, 56, 103, 143–144, 150, 153, 155, 184, 192, 205, 238, 239, 249, 264, 266, 268
  - on consciousness 139–140
  - on imaginative variation 141, 142
  - on mental acts 139–140
  - on perception and memory 140
  - on reduction 142
- idealism XVI, 1, 2–3, 4, 5, 16, 20, 21, 37–38, 53, 74, 76, 98, 102, 109, 115–116, 117, 118, 125, 166, 167, 172, 174, 175,

- 176, 177, 180–182, 196, 197, 199, 219–220, 222, 227, 242, 268
- influence on postcontinental realism 58, 229, 253–254
- idealistic fallacy 16
- identity of indiscernibles, principle of 17, 266
- identity, principle of 7, 17, 82–86, 134, 247, 266
- individuation, principle of 18–24
- infinitude 95, 246, 257
- in Aquinas 43
  - in Aristotle 41–42
  - in Augustine of Hippo 43.
  - in Boethius 43
  - in Descartes 38–39
  - in Parmenides 40
  - in Pascal 45
  - in Plato 40, 41
- is and ought 14–16
- Italian Communist Party (PCI) 185
- Joachim, Harold H. 13, 53
- Jacobi, Friedrich H. 77, 113, 222
- James, William 13
- radical empiricism XX
- Jameson, Frederic 2, 123, 124, 164, 181, 267
- the prison-house of language 2, 181, 192
- Jaspers, Karl 175
- Kac, Eduardo 212
- Kacem, Mehdi B. 71
- Kant, Immanuel XVII, 2, 11, 23, 39, 52, 58, 65, 76, 99, 121–122, 139, 146, 165–166, 177–178, 180, 181, 183, 190, 191, 192, 193, 195–200, 218, 220, 221–223, 230, 241–242, 243, 253–254, 256, 257, 267, 268
- antinomies 47–50, 222, 267
  - on entities 135
- Kierkegaard, Søren 175, 223
- Knobe, Joshua 219
- Koolhaas, Rem 256
- Kosuth, Joseph 137
- Kreis, Guido 232, 233
- Kripke, Saul 121, 145, 235
- Kuhn, Thomas 163
- Lacan, Jacques 128, 162, 176, 183, 184, 212
- Ladyman, James 148
- Land, Nick XXI, 60
- Laruelle, François 58, 61, 62, 97, 98–102, 105–106, 107–108, 109–110, 112, 118, 259, 261
- Philosophy I 99
  - Philosophy II 99–101, 102, 107
  - Philosophy III 101, 102, 107–108
  - Philosophy IV 101, 102, 107, 108
- Latour, Bruno 123, 128, 148, 152, 162, 244, 253, 258, 267
- Lavoisier, Antoine 166
- Leibniz, Gottfried W. 2, 16, 17, 19, 22, 23, 45, 143, 179, 198, 236, 65, 66, 134, 143, 179, 198, 236
- on space and time 18, 46–47, 48
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude 183
- Lévy, Bernard-Henry 185
- Lipps, Theodor 143
- Lombard, Peter 32
- Lotze, Rudolf Hermann 14
- Luft, Eduardo 247
- Luhmann, Niklas 244
- Lukács, György 185
- Lyotard, Jean-François XIV, 108, 109, 159, 163, 258
- Mach, Ernst 165, 185
- Machiavelli, Niccolò 213
- Mackie, John L. 68
- Malebranche, Nicolas 3, 37, 72, 152
- Manzoni, Piero 212
- Marconi, Diego 187
- Mayronis, Francis of 44
- McDowell, John 165, 185
- McGee, Vann 238
- Meillassoux, Quentin XV, XX, XXI, 37, 58, 59, 60, 112, 115–117, 118, 122, 146, 152, 249–250, 251, 254, 257, 258, 260, 263, 264, 265, 268
- analysis of worlds of science fiction 69–70
  - arche-fossil 63, 73, 75, 76, 116, 254
  - correlationism, weak and strong 73–74
  - correlationist circle 63, 73, 77, 78, 118, 254, 260

- definitions of “immanence” and “transcendence,” 68
- distinction between correlationism and subjectalism 74
- distinction between iteration, reiteration, and repetition 84–85
- distinction between potentialism and virtualism 86–87
- distinction between the Universes and the universe 87
- epistemological proof 64, 73, 78, 254, 268
- fourth World 90, 92–94, 95, 264
- interpretations of contingency 67
- “inversion of Platonism,” 73
- kenotypes 84–85, 263–264, 268
- Meillassoux’s occasionalism 72
- non-being of the whole 82
- on Hume’s ontological problem 65
- on the canonical question 79–80
- on the principle of identity 82, 85
- on the principle of non-contradiction 81–82
- ontological proof 70
- principle of factuality or unreason 63, 64, 70, 73, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81–82, 117, 254, 260, 268
- structure of “Divine Inexistence” and *After Finitude* 64
- three philosophical symbols 88–89
- vectorial subject 93–94, 95
- Meinong, Alexius 14, 29, 139, 246–247
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 55
- Mill, John S. 52
- Millière, Raphaël 81
- monadology and henology 19, 143
- Montaigne, Michel de 3, 77
- Moore, George E. 15, 51, 53
- More, Henry 46
- Münchhausen trilemma 220
  
- Nagel, Thomas 245
- Natorp, Paul 139
- naturalistic fallacy 14–15
- Negri, Antonio 184, 185
- new realism XIX–XX, 57–58, 61, 182, 184, 191
- Newton, Isaac 45–46, 89, 134
  
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 39, 51, 73, 92, 107, 113, 124, 184, 187, 188, 192–193, 194, 200, 262
- nominalism XV, XVI, 1, 2, 5, 10, 30, 36, 239, 267, 268
- non-contradiction, principle of 27, 37, 70, 72, 76, 78, 79, 81–82, 85, 134, 135, 247–248, 253
  
- object-oriented ontology XXI, 3, 58, 59, 60, 123, 137, 143, 146, 149, 150, 164, 178, 203, 255, 256, 258, 261
- Ockham, William of 9, 10, 28, 32–36
  - on the concept of now 44
- Odo of Tournai 26
- Okrent, Mark 131
- ordinary language philosophy 144, 208
- Origen 19, 40
- Ortega y Gasset, José XIII, 14, 226, 237
- ousia* 6–7 8, 14, 133, 168, 172
  
- Paracelsus 21
- Parmenides 4, 17, 34, 40, 148, 151, 172, 188, 235
- Pascal, Blaise 45, 257
- Peckham, John 20
- Peirce, Charles S. 13
- Perelman, Chaim 55
- Pippin, Robert 219
- Plato XV, 6, 8, 11–12, 14, 16, 19, 21, 22, 26, 27, 30, 39, 40–41, 73, 88, 94, 102, 133, 134, 139, 166, 167–170, 171–172, 173, 191, 192, 229, 236, 258, 262, 264–265, 268
  - theory of ideas 2, 18, 34, 35, 71, 144, 151, 169, 171, 268
  - theory of interweaving (*symploke*) 172, 264
- Plotinus 6, 16, 17, 21, 42, 100, 237
- Poincaré, Henri 166
- Popper, Karl 65
- Porphyry 7–8, 21, 24, 25, 28, 186
- Posidonius 21
- postanalytic philosophy 98, 120, 218, 219
- postcontinental realism XV, XX, XXI–XXII, 2, 3, 29, 39, 54, 61, 63, 159, 161, 162, 174, 239, 253
  - main contribution 267–268

- on the problem of the external world 258–262
- on the problem of universals 263–267
- uses and abuses of set theory 263
- postmodernism XIX, 56, 123, 124, 159, 163–165, 167, 183
- Precht, Richard D. 216
- predication 7, 31, 33, 226–227
- principle of identity 7, 17, 82, 85, 134, 247, 266
- Proclus 21, 42
  
- Quine, Willard V. O. 1, 4, 55, 104, 181, 183
  
- Raspe, Rudolf E. 220
- Ravaisson-Mollien, Félix 99
- realist turn XX, 190
- reality
  - definition of 5
  - existence of reality 1–6, 56, 147
  - independently of us 1–6, 74, 76, 162, 268
  - whether it can be known 1–6, 197, 268
- Renaut, Alain 184
- Renouvier, Charles 50
- Rickert, Heinrich 14
- Ricoeur, Paul 99, 193
- Rilke, Rainer Maria 54
- Rohde, Erwin 39
- Rorty, Richard 98, 120, 124–125
- Ross, Don 148
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques 89
- Rovatti, Pier A. 186–187, 189
- Russell, Bertrand XX, 12, 29, 51, 53, 121, 145, 180, 221, 239, 250, 262
  - neutral monism XX, 142
- Russell's paradox 12, 204, 231, 237, 247, 262, 263
- Ruy, David 256
- Ryle, Gilbert 55, 119
  
- Safraski, Rüdiger 215
- Sanches, Francisco XIII, 3
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 187
- Saussure, Ferdinand de 83
- Schelling, Friedrich W.J. 2, 20, 58, 68, 166, 167, 173–177, 178–179, 180, 181, 216, 219, 220, 223, 224–229, 239, 243, 248, 249, 253, 254, 256, 258, 262, 264, 265–266, 268
  - existentialist and hermeneutical interpretation 175–176
  - his five periods 174–175
  - psychoanalytical interpretation 176
  - “unprethinkable being” (*unvordenkliches Sein*) 182, 225, 228, 266
- Schiller, Ferdinand C. S. 13
- Schopenhauer, Arthur 49–50, 176, 185, 216, 223, 236
- Schumacher, Patrick 256
- Scotus, John Duns 7, 9–10, 11, 12, 22, 23, 29, 31–32, 34, 36, 40, 132
- Searle, John 15, 55, 56–57, 204, 208, 212, 233, 255, 264
- Sellars, Wilfrid 58, 97, 98, 119–121, 122, 124–125, 181, 254, 262, 268
  - “myth of Jones,” 119
- set theory 58, 66, 83, 86, 87, 117, 168, 169, 205, 232–234, 259, 262–263
- Sextus Empiricus 3, 168, 220
- skepticism 76, 103, 107, 199–200, 221, 222, 250, 251, 266, 268
  - Ancient skepticism 219–220
- Sloterdijk, Peter 215–216
- Sokal, Alan 162–163
- speculative realism 58–61, 74, 119, 255
  - digital expansion 59–60
  - origin of 58
  - problem with feminism 60–61
  - “Speculative Realism” conference at Goldsmiths 2007 XX, 58
- Spengler, Oswald 40
- Spinoza, Baruch 17, 37, 178, 179, 236, 237
- Stern, Robert 232
- Steyerl, Hito XXI
- Stone, David 147
- Strawson, Peter F. 55, 241
- Suárez, Francisco, I 23, 153
- Substance and subsistence 24
- sufficient reason, principle of 16, 47, 49, 66, 67–68, 71, 72, 74, 77, 79, 87, 99–100, 101, 107, 134, 179, 220, 225, 245, 253, 260

- Thacker, Eugene 160  
 Theophrastus 21, 45, 46  
 theory of everything 74, 102, 235, 250  
 theory of transcendentals or transcendents 11, 14, 24, 27, 29  
 theories of truth  
 – axiology, or value theory 14  
 – coherence theory of truth 13, 53  
 – existentialist theories of truth 13  
 – pragmatic theories of truth 13  
 Trendelenburg, Friedrich A. 216  
 Twardowski, Kazimierz 139
- Uexküll, Jakob J. v. 128  
 universals, problem of 24–31, 32–36, 267  
 unmoved mover 19, 41, 47, 171  
 unwritten doctrines of the Academy 168, 170
- Vattimo, Gianni 184, 186–189, 193, 256, 268
- Viano, Carlo A. 186, 189  
 Vogt, Carl 216
- weak thought 184, 186–187, 188–189, 191  
 Weber, Max XVII, 245  
 Whitehead, Alfred N. 147, 166  
 Williams, Bernard 50  
 Wiscombe, Tom 256  
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig 4, 51, 56, 76, 103, 121, 131, 185, 187, 208, 228  
 Wolff, Christian von 22, 47, 76, 196  
 “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*) 48, 50, 222, 234, 236, 241, 246, 257–258, 267  
 Wright, Crispin 238  
 Wundt, Wilhelm 50, 139
- Yalcin, Seth 238
- Zeno of Elea 18, 40, 41, 48  
 Žižek, Slavoj 167, 176–177, 216.