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François Laruelle, the One and the Non-Philosophical Tradition¹

Nick Srnicek

In entering into the difficult thought of François Laruelle, two primary problems present themselves. The first problem, simply, is the unfamiliarity of the framework Laruelle seems to be working in – which I want to argue is ultimately more indebted to ancient philosophy than to modern philosophy. References to the One and the way in which the One relates to the sensible and intelligible world reach back to the Neoplatonics and seem to be operating more within their metaphysical framework than anything else. Obviously these types of questions aren't unheard of in continental philosophy, but Laruelle works deeper within that framework than most.

The second problem is the proliferation of new terms: concepts like the force (of) thought, unilateralization, given-without-giveness, nonautopositional, vision-in-One, philosophical decision, etc. all form an imposing initiation into Laruelle's work.

The wager of this paper is that by combining these two problems, some measure of progress can be made for the new Laruelle reader. This involves trying to resolve the two problems to some degree by aligning nonphilosophy with Neoplatonism and showing the ways in which Laruelle responds to some of their questions. The more familiar aspects of ancient philosophy can be used to shed light on nonphilosophy, and some of the terms Laruelle uses can be explicated from that basis.

To help guide this paper and to keep in mind the complex system Laruelle develops, I've included a map of the concepts involved. Obviously when discussing metaphysical issues, mapping out concepts into spatial relationships is intrinsically problematic, though for introductory purposes it has its uses. So take this map as a heuristic, and a tool to be tossed aside once entrance has been gained into Laruelle's work.

Neoplatonism

We begin then from Neoplatonism. Like Platonism, Neoplatonists organize the world into a metaphysical hierarchy. The bottom level is the sensible, material level of the everyday world, whereas the eternal aspects of reality form the highest, more pure and most real aspects of reality.

¹ Pre-print version.

Beginning from the lowest levels of reality – our sensible bodily experience – Neoplatonists attempt to use reason to derive the highest levels. Since knowledge, for them, must be universal and eternal knowledge, the fluctuations of everyday reality are incapable of providing a ground for knowledge. There must be something more stable. As a result, Platonists and Neoplatonists look to extract the intelligible principles lying behind the material world. The result is a hierarchy of metaphysical levels, with each higher level encompassing more of reality, and simpler than the complex realities below them.

At the highest level, one ultimately reaches what is called the One – the highest principle from which everything derives. Now there are a number of reasons why this highest level must be one – meaning singular, unified and simple. The first basic reason is that if it weren't simple, then it could be decomposed into its constituent parts. The highest principle of reality must not admit of multiplicity, but must instead be the singular principle that itself explains multiplicity. Now as a simple principle, it must be impossible to predicate anything of it. To apply a predicate to it would be to make it many and to separate the predicates of the One from the One itself, invoking a separation within what is supposed to be a unified principle. The One is ultimately ineffable for the Neoplatonists.

Now the second reason for the One being one and not many is that the oneness of beings – meaning the fact that we see unified entities in the world – is argued to be the most basic principle. As Pauliina Remes puts it,

“without oneness nothing can exist: what is, is one, and without oneness it is impossible to conceive of the many. [...] Not having oneness means, according to Plotinus, losing the status of being a thing or entity, and therefore being one is primary. It is both essential for being and ultimately prior to being in the metaphysical hierarchy of things. For this reason, unity must be connected to a first principle.”²

So we can see here that the One for Neoplatonists is both simple and incapable of being predicated. Furthermore it is required for beings in the world to first have oneness, and is therefore itself transcendent to being.

The next major step for Neoplatonists is to explain how this simple One can produce the many entities we experience everyday. We've derived the highest principle, and now we have to work our way back down the metaphysical hierarchy. Their answer is to argue for a theory of emanation: lower levels of reality *emanate* from the One. Now there are numerous problems with this theory, but the approach here will be for merely a descriptive level of what the Neoplatonists say, rather than a critical approach pointing out their flaws.

The basic metaphor of emanation might be considered as an overflowing of the One. Just like water might overflow from a spring, so too it is argued that lower

² Remes, Pauliina. *Neoplatonism*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 38.

levels of reality can overflow from the perfection of the original One. As John Rist has put it, in emanation,

“[Intellect] proceeds from the One [...] without in any way affecting its Source. There is no activity on the part of the One, still less any willing or planning or choice [...]. There is simply a giving-out which leaves the Source unchanged and undiminished. But though this giving-out is necessary, in the sense that it cannot be conceived as not happening or as happening otherwise, it is also entirely spontaneous: there is no room for any sort of binding or constraint, internal or external, in Plotinus’ thought about the One.”³

This overflowing produces the next level, the Intellect, which is then argued to turn back towards its source and recognize its separation from the One. In doing so, the level establishes its separation and establishes the beginning of the Many from the One.

Similar operations occur at each level, but for now there are a few key points to note: first, the One remains the same throughout emanation. It does not act, nor is it affected by its product. Second, the product is a degradation of the original perfectness of the One. Lower levels are less perfect and less simple than the One. Third, as a result, emanation is the transition from the One to the Many.

Nonphilosophy

We can turn now to Laruelle’s project, and try to set it within the framework just established. In particular, the focus will be on the same two key points. The first point is about the nature of the One in nonphilosophy – or better, not what the One *is*, but what the One *does*. The second point will be the theory of determination-in-the-last-instance set in opposition to the theory of emanation. Finally, we’ll see what nonphilosophy in particular aims to do.

The first important point to make is that nonphilosophy resolutely abandons the idea that it should aim at knowledge of the One. Laruelle argues that it has been the downfall of philosophy to invariably aim at grasping the One, or more generally the Real, itself. In doing so, philosophy has always framed the Real in its own philosophically-saturated terms, rather than letting the Real itself act. Nonphilosophy, on the other hand, abandons this project of trying to know the Real, and instead of trying to grasp the Real, it attempts to think about philosophy from the *perspective* of the Real. Different philosophies then become objects in the world, they become ‘material’ for nonphilosophy. In this way, philosophy provides nonphilosophy with what Laruelle calls its ‘occasional cause’. Once a philosophy is given, nonphilosophy can then suspend that philosophy’s theoretical authority and

³ Rist, J.M. *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 67.

use it as an axiomatic instance of the One. So what, then, is the One for nonphilosophy?

To begin with, unlike the Neoplatonic One, the nonphilosophical One is not a principle of unity nor of numerical oneness. Each of these characteristics is itself already a philosophical determination of the nature of the One, which nonphilosophy precludes. The nonphilosophical One is what is already-given prior to any sort of thought of it, or conceptualization of it.

But this is not to say that the nonphilosophical One is non-conceptualizable; rather it is that which is infinitely conceptualizable. Each set of concepts, each philosophical system, is already a perspective on the One by virtue of the One having determined-it-in-the-last-instance.⁴ Thus each philosophical system provides an alternative name for the One – it can equally be multiplicity, difference, unity, oneness, and any number of other names. The nonphilosophical One is ultimately that instance of immanence which allows for the very possibility of these philosophical names to arise in the first place.

Yet while the One can be named and axiomatically described, it can never be encompassed by any particular philosophy. Its naming and its conceptualization can never be exhausted. Laruelle will say it is foreclosed yet entirely immanent to philosophy and to Being.

As foreclosed to philosophy and to Being, the One, to quote Ray Brassier,

“is not an exception *to* Being; nor a folding or a placeholder *of* Being; nor even a fissure or hole *in* Being; but rather that radically immanent foreclosure which functions as the last-instance determining all thinking ‘of Being.’”⁵

How then does the One determine philosophy? This is where we get the functional equivalent of Neoplatonism’s theory of emanation. In nonphilosophy this is the determination-in-the-last-instance, or DLI for short. Laruelle will argue that

“the necessity of the DLI is understood through the essence of the One: how can a radical immanence, which does not escape from itself or alienate itself, act upon an exteriority or a non(-One)? [...] The DLI is the causality of philosophically unforeseeable (non-definable and non-demonstrable) theoretical and pragmatic emergence.”⁶

So the One acts upon philosophy through the determination-in-the-last-instance. Like Althusser’s Marxist use of the concept, the DLI is what creates the horizon for a particular philosophy without necessarily prescribing its particular

⁴ Rist, J.M. *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 117-8.

⁵ Brassier, Ray. *Alien Theory: The Decline of Materialism in the Name of Matter*, p. 23.

⁶ Laruelle, Francois. *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*. trans. Taylor Adkins, p. 11.

contents. The DLI therefore names the unilateral determination of philosophy by the One. But since this is a unilateral relation, the One determines a philosophy, without the philosophy in any way determining it. The DLI therefore forms the non-ontological transcendental condition for philosophy. Three characteristics distinguish it from a theory of emanation. First, there is no sense in which what it determines is some sort of degradation. Since there is no conception of perfection here, there can be no measure against which particular philosophies would be a degradation of the One. Second, there is no metaphorical use of overflowing being used to explain the operation. The question is not ‘what is the One and how does it operate?’, but rather ‘with philosophy being an object determined by the One, what can be done with it?’ And third, it is not a transition from the One to the Many since such a binary is already a philosophical determination of the Real.

So if the DLI determines philosophy, what is the specific nature of philosophy that Laruelle has in mind? For Laruelle, philosophy is formed by what he will call a ‘decision’. A decision in this sense is not a psychological event, but rather the operation which establishes a philosophy while remaining constitutively external to it. It does this by instituting a fundamental binary separation – the type which Jacques Derrida was an expert at analyzing. A division between the One and Many, Being and beings, the virtual and the actual, etc. Since a decision is external, any particular philosophy is incapable of thinking its own decision; rather the decision is its blindspot. Yet it is on the basis of this decision that philosophy can claim self-sufficiency and ultimately its ability to philosophize everything. Philosophy can claim that it isn’t in need of justification from something outside of itself.

From this understanding of philosophy, we can say that what nonphilosophy does is suspend the decisional authority of philosophy. It is significant to recognize that this is a suspension, and not a negation – which the prefix ‘non-’ is apt to wrongly suggest. Whereas philosophy argues that it is self-sufficient on its own and that reality itself is philosophizable, nonphilosophy suspends this absolute autonomy and opens philosophy itself onto its own transcendental determination by the One. Nonphilosophy effectively turns philosophy into just another object in the world – an object which can be analyzed and explained like any other object.

From this basis, nonphilosophy can discern the transcendental conditions of a particular philosophy. This is where nonphilosophy really begins to function, in the operation of cloning whereby a particular philosophy is used as material for nonphilosophical thought. Philosophy as self-sufficient system is cloned as nonphilosophical material. In this process, philosophy’s concepts become not a matter of adequation to the Real, and instead a matter of pragmatic effects. Moreover, with the horizon of a particular thought suspended, nonphilosophy can experiment with philosophies and try to open thought up beyond its current constraints.

It does this by taking the DLI and effectuating it within philosophy itself, bypassing decision’s constitutive exclusion of the DLI. Taking the perspective of the

One (what Laruelle calls the vision-in-One), the DLI is effectuated *within* philosophy as the particular force (of) thought that provides the immanent and transcendental conditions for a specific philosophy. So from the Real conditions of thought we pass over to the transcendental conditions of thought – the line traced by ‘effectuation’ on the diagram included with this paper. This is a properly nonphilosophical thought – a thought which is not of the Real or about the Real, but rather a thought according to the Real.

From this basis Laruelle will then extract the universal conditions of thought proper, what he will eventually name as ‘Man’. This is a properly non-predicable instance of thought, foreclosed to the transcendence of the philosophical world. And as such, Man is without-essence and without-being; Man is not predicable and ultimately non-human insofar as the human designates some specific traits.

This then is one of the final points of nonphilosophy’s position: Man is axiomatically asserted as a name for the Real – a sort of radically immanent, non-phenomenological instance from which the thought-world of philosophy is determined-in-the-last-instance.

So to summarize, while Neoplatonism and nonphilosophy operate in a very similar framework, there are a crucial set of differences:

- 1) For Neoplatonists, the One is singular and simple. For nonphilosophy, the One is foreclosed to the one/many divide and is instead already-given prior to any conceptualization.
- 2) Unlike the Neoplatonist One, the nonphilosophical One is not ineffable, but rather infinitely effable. It provides the basis for an infinite number of names for itself.
- 3) For Neoplatonists, the One operates through emanation. For nonphilosophy, the One operates through determination-in-the-last-instance.
- 4) For the Neoplatonists, the One is beyond Being. For nonphilosophy, Being is beyond the One. The relation of immanence and transcendence is reversed between them. Nonphilosophy’s radical immanence *encompasses* the separation of immanence and transcendence that philosophy institutes.
- 5) This entails that while Neoplatonism has to strive to reach the transcendent One, for nonphilosophy we are always already within the immanent One.
- 6) And as a result, Neoplatonists aim to know the One. Nonphilosophy meanwhile aims to think in accordance with the One.

Gnosticism and Science

So with the strong structural parallels between Neoplatonism and nonphilosophy set out, we can turn to a final open question. Namely, what justifies our knowledge of the One as the determination-in-the-last-instance? Which is to say, not what do we know *about* the One, but what justifies our acceptance of

nonphilosophy and the relation of the One to philosophy? What would compel a philosopher to accept nonphilosophy over one's own philosophies? The traditional Neoplatonic answer is focused on knowledge of the One and says that we have such knowledge through self-reflection on the aspects of the One within ourselves. Self-knowledge becomes the path to knowledge, which ultimately leads to a sort of mystical union with it. Since the One refuses all predication, it cannot be represented in language, but must rather be experienced as such. Plotinus' biographer, for example, says that he knew Plotinus to have had four mystical experiences in his lifetime. Despite Plotinus' polemics against the Gnostics, Neoplatonism is ultimately justified on the same sort of unrepresentable, non-communicable form of individual mysticism. We know the One not through any representation of it, but rather through an experience of it.

Turning to nonphilosophy, in a somewhat infamous debate with Derrida, Laruelle at one point is asked to answer the question of justification. As Laruelle paraphrases the question, "Where do I get this from?"⁷ What, in other words, allows him to justify this complex system? Immediately, Laruelle says he cannot give a philosophical answer, which "would be to say: having reflected upon the philosophical decision and the ultimate prerequisites for transcendence, for the mixture of transcendence and immanence, I concluded that philosophy assumed something like the One and that the One had always been presupposed by philosophy but the essence of the latter had never been elucidated by philosophy."⁸ This type of answer, Laruelle argues, is foreclosed because it operates on the basis of all the philosophical assumptions and tropes that nonphilosophy is attempting to avoid.

Now in response to Derrida's question, Laruelle provides an apparently quite problematic and unsatisfactory answer. Having already refused the traditional philosophical means of justification, Laruelle answers the question of 'where he gets his nonphilosophy from' by answering with the succinct and obscure claim that "I get it from the thing itself."⁹ And further on he says, "We start from the One, rather than arriving at it. We start from the One, which is to say that if we go anywhere, it will be toward the World, toward Being."¹⁰ All of this suggests a sort of immediate, direct, nonphilosophical, and immanent position within the Real. Ultimately, then, it appears that Laruelle relies on an experience of the One in order to justify it.

But despite this claim, which recurs in a few places throughout Laruelle's work, there's another option that he temporarily experiments with, although

⁷ Derrida, Jacques, and Francois Laruelle, "Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy," trans. Robin Mackay, p. 8.

⁸ Derrida, Jacques, and Francois Laruelle, "Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy," trans. Robin Mackay, p. 8.

⁹ Derrida, Jacques, and Francois Laruelle, "Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy," trans. Robin Mackay, p. 8.

¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques, and Francois Laruelle, "Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy," trans. Robin Mackay, p. 12.

eventually dropping it. This is the idea that science provides some unique and privileged form of access to the One. Or perhaps more accurately, it's not that science provides *access* to the Real, but rather that science operates immediately from the Real, in such a way that refuses the imposition of a philosophical decision. And in fact, in his debate with Derrida, Laruelle does bring up this alternative justification as well. As he says,

“If I continually oppose the One of science, which from my point of view explains scientific thought's profoundly realist character, its blind aspect, its deafness to the logos, its unbearable character for philosophy; if I distinguish this particular One from philosophical unity, this is for reasons that are relatively precise, ones which provided the starting point for these investigations.”¹¹

Four characteristics of science are outlined here: first, its realist character, the fact that it speaks the Real, independently of any humanist or philosophical conceits. Second, its blind aspect, which suggests its non-teleological and non-functional aspects. Science is not looking forward and aiming at anything; the progress of science is contingent, nonlinear, and ultimately non-intentional. The third characteristic is science's deafness to the logos, that is to say, its radical annihilation of a meaningful universe. Science does not reveal a meaningful world, but instead systematically destroys these notions. Finally, the last characteristic is science's unbearable nature for philosophy – its exemption from traditional philosophical tropes and its irreducibly distinct mode of operation.

Now while in his later work Laruelle eventually drops the uniqueness of science in favour of a more general consideration of the universal qualities of thought, it's possible to read two strains of nonphilosophy from this. The one is the more, arguably, gnostic strain that Laruelle has carried on. The alternative is the more scientific strain that Ray Brassier has been developing. Neither are particularly friendly to philosophy, and both argue for a realist vision of reality, but their difference lies precisely in the ways in which these respective commitments are justified.

¹¹ Derrida, Jacques, and Francois Laruelle, “Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy,” trans. Robin Mackay, p. 12.

Neoplatonism versus Nonphilosophy

