Research Article

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Being Truly Wrong: Enlightened Nihilism or Unbound Naturalism?

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Abstract: I present an account of nihilism, following Foucault and Nietzsche, as a sort of colonization of our thinking by a religious form of normativity, grounded in our submission to truth as correspondence, in the idea that the facts themselves could be binding upon us. I then present Brassier's radicalization of nihilism and showed how it remains subservient to this religious ideal of truth. I argue, further, that far than showing how a commitment to Enlightenment reason and science demands a cold metaphysics of death, in dismissing the irreducibly plural ways in which what is determines thought, Brassier's attempt to secure a fit between thought and disenchanted world suggests that the view is an expression of the unliveable condition of nihilism, rather than its proof. Finally, I present a form of naturalism that makes legitimate claim to the legacy of Enlightenment, drawing from French historical epistemology, and dispenses with the problems animating Brassier's nihilism by radically transforming the concept of truth and how we relate to it.

Keywords: speculative realism, prometheanism, Ray Brassier, scientific naturalism, Nietzsche, Canguilhem, Foucault, truth, practice, normativity

1 Introduction

In the manuscripts that Foucault prepared for his final two sets of lecture courses at the Collège de France, one finds two substantial passages concerning nihilism that he never delivered. We do not know why he chose to cut them from his presentation, but we do know that the question concerned him enough to return to it, repeatedly, as context for his investigations into the production of truth in ancient philosophy. In brief, these remarks concern, first and foremost, a suggestion that we ought to question the basic assumptions that have to be in play for a charge of "nihilism" to have any bite whatsoever; second, he places nihilism in the contexts of classical Cynicism and Skepticism as an "episode, or rather an historically well situated form of the problem… of the relation between *will to truth* and s*tyle of existence*."[1] In this article, I want to explain why *truth* is a – if not *the* – central concept for articulating nihilism and, at the same time, for its overcoming along broadly Foucauldian lines.

Given Foucault's deep intellectual debts to Nietzsche, it is worth thinking through the specifically Nietzschean diagnosis of nihilism. According to Lee Braver's account of the history of anti-realism in Continental philosophy, Nietzsche viewed "realism" itself as a form of nihilism. This is roughly correct, though properly appreciating it requires understanding two other commitments. The first is that a true

1 Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 190, emphasis mine.

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description of the world independent of human beings will not include values or normativity. The second is that truth is a value or, at least, a fundamentally normative concept. Thus, to the extent that realism is a commitment to inhuman truth, it is self-undermining, i.e. nihilistic. Moreover, there is a deeper nihilism at work here. To the extent that we think that not only our knowledge but also the normative structure of our form of life needs to be grounded in truth, a true description of the world is an apocalypse of value.

I take this concern very seriously, as I am committed to the view that, when it comes to taking inventory of the furniture of the world and describing the relations between them, the empirical sciences are authoritative. Thus, for the purposes of this article, we shall reject any responses to nihilism that rely, for example on the idea that there is some exceptional domain, whether metaphysical or phenomenological, over which the corrosive rule of the sciences does not hold sway, such that its true description would not lead to the same nihilist conclusions.

The thinker who has committed most fiercely to this form of nihilism, and set the most impressive bar against any facile attempts to overcome it, is Ray Brassier, whose *Nihil Unbound* aims, precisely, to take thought to its absolute extreme and confront it with its ultimate meaninglessness and even its impossibility. However, at least in this early work, Brassier sees in the nihilism of knowing an expression of *reason*, committing to what David Roden has called a "rationalist inhumanism."[2] On this view, the triumph of (Enlightenment) science is a triumph of *reason*, a reason whose power and scope far exceeds, and indeed vitiates, the existential concerns of the human animals who occasionally wield it.

Thus, in this article, I will explain and engage with what I take to be the central argumentative moves and – importantly – the motivations and upshots of Brassier's nihilism, in order to contrast this sort of inhuman rationalist approach to nihilism with a view, inspired by Foucault, and the tradition of historical epistemology from which he emerges, that instead allows us to rethink the role that "truth" plays in thinking and in living, so as to subsequently allow us move beyond nihilism. In particular, I want to explore the possibilities of *naturalism*, as opposed to rationalism, for allowing us to move beyond nihilism *without overstepping or challenging the sciences in which nihilism finds its pinnacle*.

This position is worth reflecting on, if only because by and large "naturalism" has become a pitiful figure in Continental philosophy, alternately inflated into a boogeyman or deflated of meaning. It is often understood as synonymous with "scientism," the view that the sciences (and almost always implicitly only the "natural" sciences) are the only meaningful or valuable mode of knowing or exercise of thought, and hence an important object of critique.[3] Conversely, it is applied to robustly metaphysical positions or novel forms of *Naturphilosophie*.[4] Neither of these capture the common sense of the term as derived from, e.g. Quine or Neurath, nor do they do justice to the sort of naturalism embraced by Nietzsche himself, from which the problem of nihilism emerges.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that a similar form of naturalism might be a fruitful orientation for thinking through, and moving beyond, the return of metaphysics in Continental thought, understood as a response to and rejection of philosophical disenchantment.[5] Insofar as, with respect to nihilism, there is at bottom a form of disenchantment at work; I will try to do something similar, in order to describe a way of thinking about the truth that allows us to sever the normative from the real, freeing error from correspondence and providing a glimpse of a form of life beyond nihilism.

So, to sum up: I will be defending a (broadly) Nietzschean conception of naturalism, and its attendant nihilism. In order to do so, I will be thinking with and against the openly, wildly nihilistic rationalism of Brassier. Finally, attempting to think with Foucault, I contend that once we have fully grasped to implications of this naturalism for our concept of "truth," the landscape of our forms of life may open up to a horizon beyond nihilism.

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2 Roden, "Subtractive-Catastrophic Xenophilia," 43.

3 For an explicitly reductionist and scientistic critique of Continental philosophy, see Bakker, "From Scripture to Fantasy." For a sense of the general discontent with scientism, see scattered remarks in Cogburn, *Garcian Meditations*; and Gabriel, *I Am Not a Brain*.

4 See, e.g., Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism*; or Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*.

5 Gamez, "Metaphysics or Metaphors for the Antropocene."

2 Nihilism

2.1 Answering to What Is

"I am simply a Nietzschean," said Foucault shortly before his death. However true this might be, it is not straightforwardly so. In many ways, Foucault rejects key tenets of Nietzsche's thought. For example, where Nietzsche thought *health* could be a guiding value for a sick modernity, Foucault might diagnose a symptom of *biopolitics*, the insidious system of technologies and demands that we always be *fitter*, *stronger*, *more creative*. But, I think, they are deeply linked in the way that they think about the truth, and what truth has to do with nihilism. Here, I will simply focus on the Nietzschean genealogy of the nihilist condition, before briefly returning to Foucault in §4, after exploring Brassier's radicalization of Nietzsche's point in §3. I concede that my discussion is limited; I will not be delving deeply into Nietzsche's many, varied, and often contradictory statements about truth, but rather largely focus on the *Genealogy of Morality*, with a view to interpreting "the ascetic ideal" and the role that truth plays in its third essay. The aim is to give a sense of the nihilism that is, allegedly, at stake for Nietzsche and, I would argue, for contemporary nihilists like Brassier.[6]

For context, in the first book of the *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche notoriously challenges the ethical monopoly held by our moralistic concepts of "good" and "evil." The point, for Nietzsche, is not to challenge these concepts *individually* but to note that they form an intrinsically related dyad, as two poles of a coherent evaluative scheme. For many – if not most – of us, to say that some action or character or way of life is "good" at the very least colloquially connotes that a moral evaluation is being made. And on any realist interpretation of what it means to make a moral evaluation (even error theories), regardless of the *content* of one's morality, that is how one accounts for good-making features, the relationship between the good and the right (or the bad and the wrong), and so on, I take it that many of us would think that what it *means* for something to be good (or evil) is for it to accord with a real normative order *in the world*, external to us in some important sense, though shared, and thus objective.[7] In a very formal sense, then, the "moral" system of evaluation as sketched by Nietzsche is a matter of *submission to an external authority*. To be moral is to act in accord with the moral shape of the world. Indeed, the *normativity* of morality derives from the *facts* about the way the world, and the people in it, ought to be, presenting a model for conduct or goals to strive for, such that we can be held accountable for deviating from them.

And, unsurprisingly, this sort of morality will be an ascetic one. Not out of any necessity, but contingently, because the sort of animals that we are, with the kinds of interests and varieties of reasons that we have, we will come into conflict with the moral shape of the world. It is simply a brute fact that we are not all inclined, much less predestined, to obey the dictates of morality. Nietzsche thinks this as a matter of historical conflict – the values of a complex, but sickly, caste of priestly nobles that stand opposed to the strong healthy values of a warlike elite – and while that may well be the case in the history of the West, nothing substantial hangs on the historical claim for my purposes.[8] We don't need to cut through the mists of the past to recognize that morality, whatever else it may do, often requires us to sacrifice our wellbeing or our vital interests and that, crooked timber that we are, this demands of (at least some of) us that we

6 I will also not be engaging debates in Nietzsche scholarship over whether nihilism in Nietzsche is fundamentally a cognitive or affective state or disorder. See, e.g., the quick overview in Katsafanas', "Review of Creasy, The Problem of Affective Nihilism in Nietzsche." Rather, I am focusing on nihilism as an objective cultural-epistemic condition, to which one might have either or both cognitive or affective responses.

7 I ignore here the reflexive relativism of the undergraduate, whose mostly-indifferent insistence that all morality is a matter of "opinion" or subjective affirmation is ultimately incoherent (though, as we shall see, for Nietzsche the importance of *affirmation* cannot be understated). On the other hand, I include in this characterization "constructivist" accounts of morality; for we of course are in the world, and even for constructivists, the rational or animal interests in which morality is grounded is not subject to our wilful or capricious manipulation and thus is external to us in an important sense.

8 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 15–8.

diminish or mute (at least some of) our appetites. It is, in this sense, *reactive* or *reactionary* insofar as we are *obligated* to some sort of existential rigour in service to "the way things are."

But morality is not *just* this reactive submission, which could in principle be limited or circumscribed. Rather, Nietzsche describes it as springing from a spirit of *ressentiment* – a slave revolt in morality, "slavish" first and foremost not because of external oppression but rather out of an innate weakness and inability to affirm one's own values. Again, according to Nietzsche, the moral system of evaluation, the system of good and evil, is not only conceptually reactive, but historically so. On Nietzsche's account, the entire evaluative framework of "good and evil," or morality, is fundamentally a reaction *against* the historically earlier "noble" framework of evaluation, that is the framework of "good and bad." To get a sense of the contrast, note that, though the language of "evil" seems somewhat florid for contemporary everyday moral judgement, it makes perfect sense to describe an agent as being good or evil, or somewhere on a spectrum between them, or a complex mix of both. On the other hand, while we can certainly make value judgements about, say, a graffiti mural or a black metal album, and hence place them within an evaluative scheme as "good" or "bad," it only rarely makes sense to view such artefacts as *evil*. The *positivity* or *affirmative nature* of this evaluative scheme can be seen from the relative force of negative and positive judgements compared to the framework of morality. In the latter, *evil*, or negativity is *primary*, insofar as the fundamental mode of normativity is a correction of our behaviours or character to conform with an authoritative external order; one can go wrong, and the norm is a norm of conformity, which is why moral condemnation can have such fury and force behind it. In the former, according to Nietzsche, the strong *welcome* challenges from those whose values oppose them, provided their challengers are also noble and strong; what matters is not so much the *content* of their values but whether or not they express and affirm the strength of those who hold them.[9] On this view, negative judgements are secondary, derivative of a form of normative guidance that aims not at conformity but at excellence in being oneself.[10] In this way, morality alters not just the substance but also what might be called the *pragmatics* of evaluation, that is what it is we do when we evaluate and how we do so.

We don't have to accept all of Nietzsche's speculative history in order to recognize the difference in the form or shape that "morality" gives to normativity.[11] One effect of this alteration of the pragmatics of evaluation is that moral demands – what Bernard Williams simply calls *obligation*, and which, I take it, contribute to his characterization of morality as "that peculiar institution" – trump all else. As he puts it, "*only an obligation can beat an obligation.*"[12] As the entire extent of reality comes to be governed by a normative order, there is no impulse, wish, dream, or project that can authoritatively override that order. Morality takes control. And, for Nietzsche, this is no accident. Though on his view the slave morality of *ressentiment* is born from the creative spirit of "priestly" nobles, it nevertheless establishes a form of evaluation, and hence a form of life, opposed to self-affirmation and self-expression at every point. While of course Nietzsche conflates the substance of common morality with the Christianity of the Beatitudes, valourizing the weak and the poor over against the strong and noble, this works at the level of form as well: what the strong *do* when they evaluate is already a failure to conform and, above all, a failure to treat an external order as absolutely authoritative. Morality demands that we be answerable to what is, rather than to what we would be.

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9 "How much respect a noble man has for his enemies! – and a respect of that sort is a bridge to love … For he insists on having his enemy to himself, as a mark of distinction, indeed he will tolerate as enemies none other than such as have nothing to be despised and a great deal to be honoured! Against this, imagine "the enemy" as conceived of by the man of *ressentiment* – and here we have his deed, his creation: he has conceived of the "evil enemy," "the evil one" as a basic idea to which he now thinks up a copy and counterpart, the 'good one' – himself! …" (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 22).

10 We will return to this important aspect of "noble" morality in our concluding remarks.

11 For fascinating discussion of the different shapes that normative guidance can take, see Railton, "Normative Guidance."

12 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 180.

2.2 The Normativity of the Cross and the Religious Way of Knowing

When reading through the *Genealogy*, one might be struck by the diversity of topics covered. While it is easy to *feel* the connection between the topics involved, from the "slave revolution" of morality to the origins of punishment to ascetic ideals to the meaning of asceticism for artists and scientists, it is less straightforward to convincingly establish a tight conceptual connection between them all. And I won't try to do so. Nor will I engage in much of the way of textual exegesis. What I will suggest, here, whether it is a completely accurate assessment of Nietzsche's intentions or not and even less whether it can make coherent sense of the *Genealogy* as a whole, is that the "will to nothingness," as a historical condition that Nietzsche identifies at the core of nihilism is ultimately a pathology borne of *morality's colonization of rational normativity as such.*

Of course, this thesis is too strong to defend completely in this essay. Nevertheless, I will attempt to render plausible at least the very broad outlines of such an account. Luckily, since Nietzsche, many have criticized the hold that "morality" has had over practical reason, from Elizabeth Anscombe to Bernard Williams to less familiar voices like Hans-Georg Moeller's Daoism-and-systems-theory-inspired work.[13] Indeed, it seems that much of the revival of virtue ethics over the past several decades can be viewed in this light. While not all who aim to expand ethical life beyond a dissatisfying "morality" share exactly the same concerns or put forward exactly the same arguments, all of them share some sympathy with the idea that any answer to the question of how one ought to live must in some way be responsive to the *sorts of creatures we are*. Some might focus on the idea that what is good (morally) must also *be good for us*, such that we cannot envision an ethical life as obedience to a normative order *indifferent* to the human being.

While this goes part of the way, any view of this sort, if still grounded in the idea that there is an objective way for a human life to go well, remains in the thrall of an external authority, a "way things are." Nietzsche himself dances on the knife's edge here; his criticism of morality is often presented as grounded in a broader picture of human well-being, namely, *health*.[14] However, to his credit, his is a *non-moral* criticism; the force of Nietzsche's critique of moralistic nihilism does not lie in any claim that slave morality "gets it wrong," and misunderstands morality. Rather, it pits one frame of evaluation – the moral – against another, namely, a healthy noble one, and while Nietzsche thinks that this sort of aristocratic health is ultimately a condition of the possibility of evaluation, it does not serve as a final normative authority in virtue of its quasi-transcendental status. At any rate, the idea that morality must *serve* us or, better, that an ethical life is supposed to be a fulfilling life has, at best, a difficult time breaking away from a robust normative picture of the world as it is.

Indeed, those who might reject a more explicitly otherworldly Platonic form of Christian morality in favour of ethics aimed at human flourishing seem likely to appeal to some form of "natural law," often, if not always, descended from the metaphysically robust teleological conception of the nature one can find in Aristotle's work. In its classical form, this might take the form of richly purposive cosmos, packed with objective functions, and governed by regularities. In a slightly more deflated, contemporary form, this might simply take the form of a "common" or "natural" or even a "rational sense" that allows one to grasp when a course of action or outcome would violate the natural law, the natural order of things.

Relatedly, two other crucial dimensions of the moral form of normativity are its dual tendencies towards legalism and totalization. This becomes clearer when we foreground the religious aspects of "morality," at least as they manifest in the West. Without making any claims about whether the religious aspects of morality are in some sense prior or foundational, it's fair to say that they are deeply imbricated. So, for Nietzsche, morality as such *just is* Biblical morality. In the remainder, I present some ways in which one might see the specifically Christian bent of the form of normativity that Nietzsche has in his sights, what one might call the "normativity of the cross." I don't intend these remarks to exhaust every dimension of Christianity – in particular, I do not here spend any time discussing its ritual or mystic aspects – nor am I

13 See, e.g., Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy;" or Moeller, *The Moral Fool.*

14 And we will try to develop a response to nihilism that eschews such grounding in §4.

claiming that they represent the "essence" of Christianity or its necessary history. Rather, I am simply describing some characteristic elements of the Christian tradition that have been, at various points, more or less dominant, and can be seen expressed, often forcefully, in other areas of our culture. The aim here is to flesh out the broad Nietzschean picture, not to insulate it from critique or disagreement, or the recognition of contingency.

In recent years, scholars of religion like Jan Assmann have argued – convincingly, to my mind – that the legalism of the Abrahamic covenant and the "exclusive" monotheism of the Biblical monotheisms represent "revolutions" with respect to previous forms of polytheism (and even earlier forms of monotheism).[15] What distinguishes "Mosaic" monotheism is precisely its introduction of an "absolute truth" into religion, with the idea that there is but one true God, and that obedience to this God – the ultimate external authority – is in itself a commitment to a single, correct account of the way the world is. Further, the specifically Biblical relationship to this single, absolute God is one on which God is, precisely, a legislator, who (in however rough a form) creates a legal code which governs his subjects, constituting a people through a covenant demanding their submission and obedience, and in turn promising his protection.

So, though Nietzsche dates the victory of the "slave revolution" of morality to the emergence of Christianity as a cultural and philosophical force, we might still reasonably see it as responsible for some of our more cherished features of modernity, such as the rule of law. For what is the rule of law except the submission of all before an external authority, an objective normative standard? This is precisely what distinguishes it from the caprice of rule by men and marks it as an impressive cultural achievement. Once made, law provides a touchstone that, at least in principle, at least potentially, applies to all and, leaving aside for the moment the question of judicial interpretation, at least purports to apply equally and impartially, *rationalizing* society and subjecting human endeavour to governance by *rules*.[16] While in modern democracies, the purported source of (the authority of) these rationalizing rules may be, in some sense, the "will of the people," this will is nevertheless externalized and rendered objective in such a way that no one's will, values, desires, or motivations, let alone their beliefs, can alter their applicability. But what matters here is the idea that law is, or should be a *code*, an organized system of laws governing all conduct. Assmann points out that it is precisely in Exodus (the book in which is constituted the "kingdom of priests," the "priestly" type that both so vexes and so fascinates Nietzsche) that we see the extension of the law to cover heretofore indifferent areas of human activity.[17]

While of course in the West the idea of legal code, in the sense of systematic, rational, and total system of law, is often taken to be a Roman achievement, it should be noted that the main initiative for the *codification* of Roman law comes, if not directly *from* then certainly under the *reign*, of Christian rulers. So, for example, the Theodosian Code, while not the very first collection of laws, is the first to collect all of them as comprehensively as possible, with the important proviso that it collects only *general* laws; individualized directives, specific favours, and dispensations from the emperor, that had been included in earlier collections, were excluded.[18] It is a codification that, precisely, aims at the most complete and general coverage, such that more narrow, particular judgements can be derived. That is, it is systematic. And this systematization itself "was inspired by a moral or rather religious goal; this collection was intended to be a preliminary step toward a second code that would 'show everyone what things are to be done, and what are to be avoided' and would 'undertake the regulation of life'" through the articulation of the "True Religion."[19] It is not surprising, perhaps, that the systematic articulation of authoritative norms must make a special claim to transcendent truth. As Assman puts it, "If Hobbes ascertains that *auctoritas non veritas facit legem* ('authority, not truth, makes the law,' *Leviathan* ch. 26), then at Sinai, *auctoritas* and *veritas* are one and the same."[20]

15 Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, 107; Assmann, *The Invention of Religion*, 333.

16 These two points are roughly paraphrased from the opening passages of Goodrich, "Law and Modernity."

17 Assmann, *The Invention of Religion*, 207.

18 Hermanowicz, "Textual Adventures," 99.

19 Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in Book 16 of the 'Theodosian Code'."

20 Assmann, *The Invention of Religion*, 209.

So this religious-moral form of normativity is expressed in a form of rationalized legalism, and – at least on many views – this sort of legalism is but the form of practical reason: the deduction of specific imperatives – as sensitive to the unique and idiosyncratic features of context as they may be – from more general laws, ideally perhaps from but one, which governs all. And, in particular, this form of normativity must be intolerant of "false" or competing views; truth, here, must be one. But, as mentioned, I take it that the idea, for Nietzsche, is that the moral form of normativity has colonized rational normativity as such, which includes not just practical but also *theoretical* reason. The ideal at work in the rule of law finds its highest expression not in practical affairs but in theoretical endeavours and in arguably the highest achievement of modernity, namely, the modern scientific enterprise.

It is uncontroversial to note that Christianity, in contrast to other religions and wisdom traditions, is particularly *doctrinal*; while ritual and practice have been, and can be, dimensions of crucial importance, Christianity as it is a religious form that hinges first and foremost on *belief*, a commitment to a representation of the world *as it is* and – given the force of the monotheistic, Mosaic event – to there being *just the one representation*. And the effects of this emphasis on doctrine – and its systematization into principles and laws – on our way of knowing the world have been profound.

Historians of knowledge like Stephen Gaukroger have shown that the systematic, doctrinal ideal of knowledge provided both motive and form for the development of early modern science or natural philosophy. As he puts it, by this time, Christianity had largely become identified with its "cognitive content."[21] Insofar as Christianity had become inextricably linked to accountability to what is, and to providing an accurate accounting, this makes sense. And insofar as this accountability would be well-suited to a systematic doctrine, it would have to account for the entirety of the world as it is. Thus, for the early mechanists, the Christian ideal of systematic doctrine allowed for the reconciliation of Christian views with natural–philosophical conceptions of the world in a "permanent body of truth," with the early modern mechanism being at least in part motivated precisely by its total, systematic scope.[22]

However, I take it that the key way in which this religious normativity has spread into our modern scientific ways of knowing is through their most characteristic aspiration, that is the aspiration to objectivity. It's worth taking a moment here to be clear about what is meant by "objectivity" in this context. First, to say that something – some claim or object, depending on your idiom – is "objective" means above all *not* that it is in fact correct but rather, simply, that one can or could be *wrong* about it: objective falsehood is just as possible as objective truth and arguably the intelligibility of the latter hinges on the former. The point is that my assent is not, in general, a truth-maker; objectivity is independence and, more particularly, *independence from the will*.[23] And objectivity, this ideal of independence, leads, over time, to the adoption of more substantial norms of inquiry and knowledge-production; in particular, it leads to norms of inquiry that lead the knower to efface their presence, or involvement, in the production of knowledge.

Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, in their now-classic work *Objectivity*, provide what remains the best example of this in practice. While they focus their account on the practice of producing images in natural-historical atlases, the general point travels. And the general point is that, in the project of producing successful representations of the world (and what is a belief or a scientific theory but a purportedly successful representation of the world), one must adopt a certain kind of *ethos*, a way of conducting oneself. According to them, the history of "objectivity" over the past several centuries is (among other things) a history of transforming conceptions of the *moral* roles of the scientist in the production of knowledge. If getting the world "right" in eighteenth-century natural history was a matter of activating an inquirer's skill, in order that their graphical representations be "true-to-nature," ignoring the imperfections and artefacts of our visual processes, the advent of photography, and the mechanical objectivity it made possible called for the scientist to *erase* herself from the process of representation: where morality called for *askesis* in

21 Gaukroger, "The Early Modern Concept of Scientific Doctrine and Its Early Christian Origins," 96.

22 Ibid.

23 I do not pretend to be giving necessary and sufficient conditions here.

extinguishing the idiosyncrasies of one's own will and desire in practical matters, the epistemic project of science called for extinguishing the will of the scientist in knowledge:

> [...]it became a commonplace across... a range of sciences to say... that the greatest obstacle on the path to scientific objectivity was the uncontrolled, disordered will.[24]

In being answerable, both practically and cognitively, to what is, one finds oneself in a bind. One must exert one's will, precisely in order to peer behind the veil of Isis, discover what is, to avoid illusion and bias, deception and self-deception. But at the same time, one must silence that will, remain a passive surface for what is to impress upon. It is perhaps not surprising that in their history of scientific objectivity, Daston and Galison turn to Nietzsche to express the contortions of the self this required:

> Objectivity and the scientific self that practiced it were intrinsically unstable. Objectivity demanded that the self split into active experimenter and passive observer... Nietzsche smelled the acrid odor of burnt sacrifice when the ascetic turned will against will: the objective man of science stood accused of inauthenticity, of self divided against itself. These were ethical reproaches.[25]

If morality demands our answerability to what is, we should expect to find that the systematic, professional pursuit of the truth itself requires an ethic of self-sacrifice.

What I've tried to do is to outline a religious form of knowing, an ascetic sacrifice of the self to what is, grasped in universal and systematic form, that one might plausibly see as colonizing the modern epistemic and practical project, governing them in accordance with what I've called the normativity of the cross. In the following, we will see how, for Nietzsche, subjecting ourselves to this form of normativity plays out in the culmination of what he called "European nihilism."

2.3 The Unliveable: The Truth about Value and the Value of Truth

In some interpretations of the significance of Jesus' passion, the key element is *kenosis:* the "emptying out" of the Divine in order to participate fully in human life. If God is not to remain forever a transcendent, inaccessible mystery, and be made manifest in ways that we can grasp – indeed, that we can *model* ourselves after – that is, if He is to become, in a sense, human, he must be humbled. As we shall see, the normativity of the cross that has governed the will to truth is transfigured in a similar act.

Despite its name, the *Genealogy of Morality* only presents an explicit genealogy of morality in its first essay; the culmination of the work is a probing interrogation of ascetic ideals. And, for Nietzsche, it is the history of asceticism that results in nihilism. Moreover, despite tracing the roots of our contemporary asceticism back to a religious form of normativity birthed in a slave revolution against "noble values," the third and final essay, after discussing the role of *askesis* in artistic creation, concludes with a probing interrogation of the nihilism, precisely, of those who *do not* believe in God. Even our atheism is infected with religion, for Nietzsche, insofar as it is an atheism bound in *truth*.

The basic idea here is that, insofar as morality makes us answerable to what is, then the *will to truth* embodied in secular, scientific atheism is just a wizened variant of that morality. We now submit to an authority – the world as available to human beings and knowable through scientific reason – without transcendence; our old ideal, in becoming this-worldly, has emptied and humbled itself. And the name of this humbling is *naturalism*:

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24 Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 190.

25 Ibid., 250. Admittedly, being good historical epistemologists, in their monograph Daston and Galison deny that mechanical objectivity is the actual pinnacle of the progress of representation in modern science. Even in the twentieth century, it has been surpassed by "trained judgment," aiming at "finding patterns" in nature. But that is not the last word; while it is not the same as earlier "mechanical" objectivity, Galison notes that the "algorist's dream" of selfless objectivity through machine learning is on the rise. Cf. Galison, "Algorists Dream of Objectivity."

> No! – open your eyes! – this 'modern science' is, for the time being, the best ally for the ascetic ideal, for the simple reason that it is the most unconscious, involuntary, secret and subterranean! The "poor in spirit' and the scientific opponents" of this ideal [that is, atheists and freethinkers] have up till now played the same game... The ascetic ideal was decidedly not conquered, it was, on the contrary, made stronger, I mean more elusive, more spiritual... Its noblest claim nowadays is that it is a mirror, it rejects all teleology, it does not want to 'prove' anything any more; it scorns playing the judge, and shows good taste there, – it affirms as little as it denies, it asserts and 'describes'... All this is ascetic to a high degree; but to an even higher degree it is nihilistic, make no mistake about it![26]

Whether we think of naturalism in ontological or methodological terms, that is whether we consider the legitimate objects of knowledge, and hence the basic inventory of reality, to consist solely of the beings known by natural science, or whether we abjure metaphysics and simply hew to the meta-scientific imperative to know the world only in natural-scientific terms, the naturalist encounters the "moral problem."[27] Our moral beliefs are supposed to be objective and practical, but insofar as they are *objective*, it is not at all clear how they are supposed to be practical, that is *motivating* on their own, and insofar as they are supposed to be *motivating*, it is not at all clear that they can be objective.[28] If *auctoritas* and *veritas* were one at Sinai, the history of knowledge has torn them apart.

Note here that the naturalist is not ruling out the *existence* of *purported moral facts*, nor are they committed to the rejection of moral discourse.[29] There may *be* facts about what is right and wrong. But nothing about there being so need incline us to act. Or we might agree with Mackie and think that the existence of moral facts would entail that they *would* motivate us, but deny his error theory; given that the descriptive methods of moral science preclude us from knowing such facts, we could simply accept that we are morally lost. Or, on yet a third hand, we might accept that moral discourse is a legitimate form of discourse that expresses our motivations, at the cost of its objectivity, that is we might adopt a limited non-cognitivism in the realm of ethics.

In either case, we find that the foundations of morality – the commitment to some sort of representational truth in submission to a divine command or mandate – are undermined by the very project of morality. The atheists and freethinkers that Nietzsche excoriates are ascetic insofar as even their ability to find meaning beyond "truth," beyond being "mirrors" of the world, has been extinguished. More than this, it is through them that we see precisely the very "meaning of nihilism. That the highest values devalue themselves."[30]

For Nietzsche, the most *radical* nihilism lies in "truthfulness." It is our commitment to truth that make "untenable," that is, *unliveable*, one's highest values.[31] Which is just to say, it is our incredible valuation of truth that leads us to realize that truth is, in itself, of no value: to the extent that our commitment and valuation to truth is a *moral* attitude, it need to be grounded in the authority of the world or, more broadly, of what is, but insofar as our moral attitudes are grounded in the truth, we must recognize that what is makes no claim on us whatsoever.

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26 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 114–6.

27 See Smith, *The Moral Problem*. Smith's own solution to the moral problem is a form of rationalism that falls short of what the nihilist would require. For Smith, moral beliefs are both objective and motivating insofar as they are ultimately about *ourselves*: true beliefs about what we would want to do if we were perfectly rational. But it's not clear that these can or should be motivating to the nihilist because, in the disenchanted world, why would we care about being rational? Smith takes it for granted that something like the systematic tracking of truth is valuable, but that is precisely what is in question here.

28 This is in part because of the basic "belief + desire" folk psychology that a naturalist might attribute to human subjects. For reasons of space, I take it for granted and do not explain further here, except to note that the distinction between two fundamental kinds of *representative* and *motivational* states can be rich and sophisticated without surpassing the basic framework.

29 That is to say, the sort of nihilism that I am interested in tracking in nihilism is not "moral nihilism" in the sense that, e.g., Pigden cares about, namely, the falsehood of moral claims or the non-existence of ethical features of the world/facts/states of affairs/what-have-you. See "Nietzsche, Nihilism, and the Doppelgänger Problem."

30 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 9.

31 Ibid., 10.

This is a position that cannot be *lived*, at least not with the most profound self-deception. If we aim to live reflectively, that is informed by rational commitments, we will find ourselves teetering between the need to affirm our will to know, and an absolute denial of that will, or between the affirmation of the meaningless of our values, *truth foremost among them*, while desperately attempting to nevertheless orient our lives by them.

On the one hand, I've tried to very roughly sketch some key Nietzschean themes of the religious form of knowing, and the moral compulsion to know in the history of religion, law, and science. On the other, I've attempted to articulate an even more radical approach to nihilism. For Nietzsche, truth was but one of the "forces cultivated by morality." More, truth's destiny in nihilism is, for Nietzsche, a function of the *failure* of the traditional concept of objective truth-as-correspondence, that is the view hinges on Nietzsche's own commitments to substantive views like perspectivalism and interpretivism about truth. As I've construed it, however, the commitment to (religious) morality *is* a commitment to the traditional concept of truth, and one need not think the traditional concept of truth is faulty or defective in order for it to undermine nihilism. It's also worth noting that nothing I've argued for implies any sort of *epistemological* critique of nihilism. I am not at all interested in cheaply escaping the threat of nihilism by undermining the project or deliverances of modern science; while we no longer share the sciences of Nietzsche's time, I am still, like him, committed to naturalism.

Ultimately, this unliveable situation resolves, for Nietzsche, into a "will to nothingness."[32] Being all too human, we cannot cease to will, but we can take this contradictory active drive to passivity, to being a mere mirror, even further. In the next section, we will see how the will to nothingness reaches its most extreme theoretical articulation in the early work of Ray Brassier. While the following will inevitably be quite critical, it is only because Brassier's work is so rigorous as to demand an equally rigorous response; I remain in awe of the creativity of his vision and deeply sympathetic to the Promethean politics that he thinks requires the deeply antihumanist rationalism he is best known for.[33]

3 Becoming Nothing

3.1 Bodhisattva

"I am a nihilist because I still believe in truth."[34] If any of the *bons mots* of those associated with "speculative realism" have become notorious, this has. In his early *opus Nihil Unbound*, Brassier expounds upon this, weaving a dense and continuous argument to the effect that not only does the nihilistic "will to know" arise from the *trauma* of being alive, but also aims, precisely, at *dying*, not in the classical Platonic sense of transcending the world of appearance in order to grasp the intelligible, but in the altogether bleaker sense that it aims at expunging purpose, drive, will itself in order to return to the unexcited inorganic from which it arose, a simulacrum of the heat death of the universe.[35] I have no qualms with bleakness or the aesthetic of cosmic horror that seems to animate much of the new metaphysics in Continental thought. However, what I'd like to do in this section is to show that Brassier's well-known phrase should be reversed and still further modified. While I don't want to speak to the author's actual motivations or inclinations, it should be said that, after reading *Nihil Unbound*, it seems that the dogged commitment to *something* like truth is not the motivation for, but rather the result, of finding life radically unliveable.

This is a point worth stressing. For Brassier, it is those who hold out hope for a life worth affirming, a meaningful life, who are in fact weak and "pathetic," making use of philosophy only as a "sop" to the

32 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 66; 89; 120.

33 Cf. Brassier, "Prometheanism and Its Critics."

34 Brassier and Rychter, "I Am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in Truth."

35 Brassier himself seems to reject "speculative realism" as a title or classification, but at least in this early work his nihilism issues in what is indeed a very speculative commitment to realism beyond scientism and naturalism.

"twinge of human self-esteem."[36] It turns out that the Enlightenment has transformed philosophy – and the use of reason more broadly – from a means of human sense-making into an "organon of extinction."[37] Where for Nietzsche, the distinctively religious morality of the West was born out of weakness and *ressentiment*, leading to a slavish – and ultimately incoherent and unliveable – devotion to what is, Brassier takes his form of nihilism to be born from the corrosive power of Enlightenment reason: modern science is an expression of this reason, and through it reason has thoroughly disenchanted the world. This disenchanted world is one without values, without meaning, and the reason that has disenchanted it us offers no redemption, as, for example idealist philosophers might have hoped. Brassier takes it that contemporary science has not only shown us that the world is devoid of moral values but also of mind: intentional and semantic concepts don't survive Enlightenment's devastation. It is unclear as to whether he sees his role as continuing, or completing, the unfinished work of Enlightenment, or simply as adjusting our attitudes to accord with the world that Enlightenment reveals. In either case, it seems that the dual tasks he presents himself are (i) to eliminate alternative strategies for viewing human existence as meaningful or purposive in light of reason's ravaging of reality. Indeed, he hopes to eliminate any traditional conception of "the human" whose existence might be found meaningful. And (ii) to articulate – at least in outline – how we might conceive of the *objectification* of thought, that is of thought becoming *adequate* to the mute reality that nevertheless speaks through it.

I hope to show, to the contrary, that the legacy of the Enlightenment is much more ambivalent, and in largely ignoring the centrality of *truth* – rather than reason – Brassier leaves open the door for a much more robust conception of human thought and life, even in the face of naturalist disenchantment. In other words, nothing about this more contemporary articulation of nihilism suggests that our commitment to the truth of natural science, to a truly disenchanted worldview, to a reality that outstrips human powers both practical and epistemic, need to commit us to nihilism. Ultimately, it seems that Brassier – along with other post-human rationalists like Peter Wolfendale and Reza Negarestani – *hopes* for an inhuman reason in order to validate their abjection of the organic.

In this, I take it that, despite potential protests, Brassier's nihilism is *profoundly* Christian and profoundly moral, in the sense that Nietzsche describes the roots of nihilism as Christian. It is so Christian, in fact, that it is Buddhist, again in Nietzsche's peculiar sense.[38] According to Nietzsche, Buddhism reaches the same endpoint as Christianity, but earlier.[39]

> I saw the beginning of the end, standstill, mankind looking back wearily, turning its will against life, and the onset of the final sickness becoming gently, sadly manifest: I understood… morality …casting around ever wider to catch even philosophers and make them ill, as the most uncanny symptom of our European culture which has itself become uncanny, as its detour to a new Buddhism? to a new Euro-Buddhism? to – nihilism?[40]

Here, for Nietzsche, Buddhism *just is* nihilism. The Buddhist worldview, as he imperfectly understands it, expresses precisely the attitude that life, as we endure it, is unliveable. Buddhism, however, has the benefit of at least being clear-sighted about the world, and what is required:

> general disenchantment with its radical cure, nothingness (or God: – the yearning for a *unio mystica* with God is the Buddhist yearning for nothingness, Nirvâna – and no more!)[41]

It matters little that this general disenchantment – this Enlightenment – is achieved through the scientific enterprise or the Noble Fourfold Path. In brief, Nietzsche takes the Buddhist conviction that life *is* suffering,

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36 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, xi.

37 Ibid., 239.

38 I do not in the least pretend to be an authority on Buddhism here, nor do I presume that Nietzsche characterizes it accurately on the whole; like Christianity, Buddhism is not a monolith. I simply maintain his language to emphasize the conceptual resonances.

39 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 119.

40 Ibid., 7.

41 Ibid., 16.

and that suffering lies in attachment, and that that attachment can be overcome, in large part by being "right-minded," that is in recognizing the *falsity* of all beliefs and *unreality* of all things, to be nihilism. Brassier's thought resonates here: against the *irritation* of life, the *trauma* of being ripped from insensate matter, thought must objectify itself, return to nothing, in the truth of extinction.[42] In his militant service to Enlightenment, Brassier serves as a Bodhisattva: delaying his own dissolution in order to share the harsh light of knowledge with us.

Accordingly, I will focus my attention initially on Brassier's first task, to eliminate competing visions of reason and its place in the world, insofar as it both seems most crucial to his missionary work, preventing his total self-objectification, and, I think, is at odds with his drive to articulate the truth of nihilism.

3.2 Manifest, All Too Manifest: Brassier's Anti-Naturalism

Brassier begins his task, wisely, with an engagement with Wilfrid Sellars. This is because Sellars's famous distinction between the "scientific" and "manifest images" of the world, and of the human being in it, remains one of the most durable attempts to reconcile a robust conception of rationality and normativity with a thoroughly disenchanted, naturalistic worldview.[43] The scientific image is, clearly, a meta-representation of the latter, while the "manifest image" is a meta-representation of the meaning-laden competitor to the scientific image. In each, being *images* or *representations* of what is, we get an inventory of the types of being furnishing the world, the manifest being an image of the world as populated by persons with minds, and thoughts in those minds, who can engage rationally with each other and the world in the light of values. It has two essential characteristics. First, it is the "framework of persons," where persons are the fundamental, central, or bedrock concept around which the manifest image is organized, and this is a concept of a *person* as a unified agent, capable of being governed by rules or norms:

> [...]although men have many different types of ability, ranging from those he has in common with the lowest of things, to his ability to engage in scientific and philosophical reflection, he nevertheless is one object and not a team[...][44]

Second, it makes use of "correlational induction:"

> Thus, the conceptual framework which I am calling the manifest image is, in an appropriate sense, itself a scientific image. It is not only disciplined and critical; it also makes use of those aspects of scientific method which might be lumped together under the heading 'correlational induction'. There is, however, one type of scientific reasoning which it, by stipulation, does not include, namely that which involves the postulation of imperceptible entities, and principles pertaining to them, to explain the behaviour of perceptible things. (PSIM, p. 7)

In the scientific image, there are simply the objects described by the mature natural sciences. Sellars himself seemed to endorse a reductionist view of the ontology of the scientific image; what there is, whether chemical or biological, could ultimately be explained, and hence reduced, to particles. So the scientific image will not include the mid-sized dry goods of everyday experience which populate the manifest image, of course, nor will it include moral facts of the kind discussed in §2.3, which must be objective and motivating. It remains an open question as to whether or not *persons* and *minds* will find a place in the scientific image; it was, at least, Sellars' hope that they would.[45] And this, he thinks, is because the scientific image gives us the "true" account of what is:

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42 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 234–8.

43 It is worth noting that if, as seems possible, Brassier himself has distanced himself from the view of *Nihil Unbound*, he has done so by attempting to develop Sellarsian concepts. See, e.g., "Concepts and Objects;" and "Nominalism, Naturalism, and Materialism."

44 Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," 11.

45 See his gestures towards a "synoptic" image in the closing passages of "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man."

> [...]in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not.[46]

Given this (at least potential) discrepancy in their respective catalogues of existence, and given that the scientific image and the manifest image both lay claim to completeness, they are *rival images*. If they conflict, one will have to give way. Needless to say, Brassier's hope is to see the manifest image do so.

This has existential ramifications. For these are not only "images" of the world, but also of "man-in-the-world," and the means by which we, being the reflective beings that we are, "get around in" or navigate the world in which we are. Unsurprisingly, the "manifest image," which seems to reflect our everyday, common-sense ontology and sense of ourselves, predates the contemporary "scientific image." It is the refinement of an "original image" in which *everything* was a person, a primitive animistic worldview. Our most basic and fundamental self-understanding is of ourselves *as persons*, and that is made possible by the fact that we *have an image* or framework in which persons are conceptual bedrock:

> [The manifest image] is the framework in terms of which, to use an existentialist turn of phrase, man first encountered himself-which is, of course, when he came to be man. For it is no merely incidental feature of man that he has a conception of himself as man-in-the-world, just as it is obvious, on reflection, that 'if man had a radically different conception of himself he would be a radically different kind of man'.[47]

So if the contemporary scientific image replaces or destroys the manifest image, that is if the scientific image can dispense with the bedrock concepts of the manifest image, then meaningful human life – the life of persons – goes with it. The nihilist wins, as Enlightenment reason disenchants to the point of disabusing us even of our selves. Unsurprisingly, this is the heart of Brassier's strategy. After presenting Sellars's account of the manifest image, he explains the eliminative materialism of Paul Churchland as the nihilist culmination of the Sellarsian approach to human-being-in-the-world.

Though Brassier does not present it this way, the seeds of his approach to erasing the manifest image have been sown in its elaboration. The concepts of our folk-psychology that we take to underpin or ground our concepts of persons – contentful mental states and properties, like beliefs, motivational states and properties like desires – are *revisions* and *updates* of our original, correlational "image" of the world. But, at least for Sellars, these are *theoretical posits*: they are, after all, not publicly accessible or quantifiable in the right ways. As he puts it, they are "concepts by analogy."[48] In brief, Sellars treats our common-sense mental ontology *as a theory*; thoughts and ideas are "internal" or "private" analogues to "external" or "public" speech acts, posited precisely to explain the latter, which we treat as being governed by norms and calling us to (normative) account. Thus, the manifest image as Sellars describes it is *not one* in which the basic building blocks of intentionality are to be found; rather, the scientific image already begins to infect the manifest.

Sellars had hoped that, by construing the concepts-by-analogy of representational thought in *functional* terms, we might be able to reconcile the manifest and scientific images, with the *substantive* concepts of the scientific image ultimately playing the functional roles we expect of thoughts, and hence being identified with them, at least as types if not tokens. This is classical reductive physicalism about the mind. However, Brassier, following Churchland, thinks that this is unlikely and proposes an *eliminativist* alternative. Here, I simply cite Brassier at length, because he puts it as succinctly and clearly as one could wish:

Churchland's formulation of the eliminativist hypothesis can be boiled down to four claims:

1. Folk-psychology (FP) is a theory, hence susceptible to evaluation in terms of truth and falsity.
2. FP also encodes a set of practices, which can be evaluated in terms of their practical efficacy *vis-à-vis* the functions which FP is supposed to serve.
3. FP will prove irreducible to emerging neuroscience.

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46 Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 83.

47 Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man," 6.

48 Ibid., 33.

4. FP's neuroscientific replacement will exhibit practical as well as theoretical superiority over its predecessor.

Given these premises, Churchland cites three basic regards in which FP has shown itself to be profoundly unsatisfactory:

1. There are a significant number of phenomena for which FP is incapable of providing either a coherent explanation or successful prediction: e.g. the range of cognitive fractionation engendered by brain damage, the precise aetiology, and typology of mental illness, the specific cognitive mechanisms involved in scientific discovery and artistic creativity.
2. FP is theoretically stagnant, it has conspicuously failed to develop in step with the rapidly accelerating rate of cultural evolution or evolve in accordance with the novel cognitive requirements imposed by advanced technological societies.
3. FP is increasingly isolated and anomalous with regard to the corpus of the natural sciences; specifically, it is conceptually irreducible to the emerging discourse of cognitive neuroscience.[49]

Churchland's own alternative is a neurocomputational theory, on which thoughts are replaced – and not functionally identified – with patterns of activation across networks of neurons, with learned connections of synapses transforming the vectors of activation: a prototype vector activation (PVA) theory. We won't dwell on the details here because they are, in effect, besides the point, which is that Brassier thinks this is a salutary development, scientifically and philosophically, but also culturally; the "future of human self-understanding" ought not include things like *meanings* which could be expressed in the thoughts and beliefs and norms of a superseded folk theory with its accompanying folk ontology. Life is meaningless – indeed, life is *just death transformed* – and our commitment to truth demands we recognize this and live it. Indeed, his nihilism goes a step further than what Nietzsche envisioned; in the wastelands of defeated theories, one finds not only the concepts of phlogiston and values, but also our common-sense *semantics*: "representation no longer operates under the normative aegis of truth-as-correspondence" because whatever is going on in our brains, it is not the sort of thing that "corresponds" or mirrors the world. So Brassier and Churchland's nihilist no longer even aims to be a *mirror*, as Nietzsche thought, but only a vessel.[50]

However, Churchland does not go far enough for Brassier. While Brassier is not worried by common charges of self-refutation against the PVA theory or this sort of eliminativism more generally, he *does* think that Churchland cannot "account" for the theory or show that it is necessary to reject the folk psychology of the manifest image in favour of an eliminative materialism.[51] The issue, for Brassier, is "metaphysical":

> The most serious problem … resides in the latent tension between… commitment to scientific realism on one hand, and … adherence to a *metaphysical naturalism* on the other.[52]

In giving up traditional notions of "truth" and "reference" as spandrels of an earlier view of how the mind represents the world, Churchland must account for the "superiority" of the PVA theory in terms of how it instantiates other theoretical, "superempirical" virtues, such as "adaptational efficiency" or "success."[53] I assume that this means efficiency in improving reproductive fitness. These evolutionary-pragmatist criteria will take the place of representational truth; our successful neural representations will manifest these virtues, and thus, whatever justification we have for accepting the PVA theory will hinge on its contribution to our reproductive fitness.

The problem is that there is no reason to see why the neurological structure of the brain, as information-processing network, should serve to make the *organism* which houses such a processor better adapted and

49 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 10–1.
50 Ibid., 18.
51 Ibid., 14–6.
52 Ibid., 18.
53 Ibid., 18–20, 22, 33–4.

more fit. As Brassier puts it, to *guarantee* this fit between theory and reality – which has become a correspondence between brain and world – Churchland (and, one takes it, eliminativists and other extreme naturalists like him) need to either adopt a metaphysical idealism on which the computational structure of the brain constitutes the structures of the external world it represents *or* allow that the external world *reaches into* the brain to impact it. For Brassier, these are both no-gos. The former, being a form of idealism, is at odds with the entire spirit of Enlightenment reason; the latter is tantamount to giving up representationalism completely and just viewing neural processing as the result of causal processes that extend through skin and skull, rendering the human and its neural life completely continuous with and determined by the world it pretended to "know."

It's worth wondering, here, why these are unsatisfactory. On the one hand, a neurocomputational idealism would certainly be an *antihumanist* idealism, an inhuman rationalist idealism, insofar as whatever computational processes are at work in the brain do not have their root in human subjectivity and need not provide anything like "meaning."[54] On the other hand, seeing the human brain as being a fundamentally non-representational object part and parcel of a fundamentally non-representational nature seems like the absolute triumph of the "scientific image" or, at the very least, the complete erasure of the manifest image.

For Brassier, as I've noted, the issue is metaphysical. As he puts it, the "trouble with Churchland's naturalism is not so much that it is metaphysical, but that it is an impoverished metaphysics, inadequate to the task of grounding the relation between representation and reality."[55] While I hope to avoid both the genetic fallacy and accusing Brassier of guilt by association, given that I have suggested that Brassier's nihilism is, in a Nietzschean sense, deeply Christian, it is perhaps not surprising that Brassier's objection to Churchland's naturalism evokes Plantinga's argument against evolutionary naturalism more broadly, which has its origins in the 1987 Gifford Lectures in Natural Theology. As Plantinga puts it there, in precisely the context of grounding the relation between representation and reality, "naturalism in epistemology flourishes best in the context of supernaturalism in metaphysics."[56] More specifically, it flourishes in the context of "a theistic view of human beings... a supernaturalist anthropology."[57] Obviously, this is a result Brassier would reject. And yet. In §3.3, I unpack the metaphysical, and specifically rationalist and foundationalist, commitments that put Brassier in this surprising company, before pointing out deeper issues in §3.3 and outlining a naturalist alternative in §4.

3.3 The Extinction of Truth and the Truth of Extinction

Despite his offhand remarks that he is a nihilist because he still believes in truth, a reading of *Nihil Unbound* suggests that it would be more accurate to say that Brassier no longer believes in truth but he cannot let it go. In any case, the implicit account of truth and its vicissitudes has serious consequences for the anti-naturalist, metaphysical nihilism he wants to articulate.[58]

To begin, consider the tension between the claim that the naturalistic, scientific image bequeathed to us by Enlightenment reason no longer operates "under the aegis of truth-as-correspondence" and the demand that there be some criterion to distinguish between better and worse *theories or representations*

54 This, I take it, is something like the view (or was at some point the view) of Peter Wolfendale and Reza Negarestani, and I hope to address it in more depth in a future article. Cf. Wolfendale, "The Re-Formatting of *Homo Sapiens*;" and Negarestani, "The Labor of the Inhuman."

55 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 25.

56 Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, ix; 46; 194; 215; 237.

57 Ibid., 46. In brief, for Plantinga, securing the reliability of evolved epistemic capacities in a naturalistic framework requires that those capacities have objectively proper functions, the product of supernatural design.

58 My reading here accords, I think, with the explication provided by Harman in the first chapter of *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*. However, Harman frames Brassier's concerns as fundamentally concerned with salvaging *realism*; I think he is more concerned with the successes of Enlightenment rationality, and the vision of human-being-in-the-world it provides, with the defence of realism being merely a consequence.

of the world. While a criterion like *truth*, in the traditional correspondence sense, is an obvious candidate, insofar as it marks the success of a representation in virtue of its accuracy and precision, this has been foreclosed. Nor can an Enlightenment nihilist appeal to something like van Fraassen's "empirical adequacy," insofar as that criterion hinges, precisely, on the absolute ontological primacy of the manifest image and the instrumentalization of the scientific.[59] But most importantly, it would not do because the constructive empiricism in which empirical adequacy finds its home sacrifices the literal truth of scientific discourse to a robust anti-realist humanism. And Brassier is so committed to the role of a fundamental, authoritative truth that he needs something to continue to play the role. This is why pragmatist or naturalist criteria like evolutionary efficiency or practical success will also not do. As criteria, they do not track the distinctly representational success that Brassier is after. In other words, Brassier refuses to settle for a one-way direction of fit, from world-to-brain or brain-to-world; at the very least, he rejects Churchland's naturalism on these grounds, but still hopes to do without the concept of truth that has traditionally done that work.

And so Brassier coins a new term to bear this metaphysical weight, while leaving it unexamined: "adequation."[60] If the PVA, and the scientific image more generally, cannot be preferred because it is true, in a conventional sense, it can be adequate. And if the reason it cannot be preferred in virtue of its truth is that whatever our thoughts turn out to be – or whatever replaces or succeeds "thoughts" in our ontologies – are not the sorts of things that "correspond" to an exterior world, then we can still hold on to "adequation without correspondence."[61] As we shall see, though the term appears only a handful of times throughout the text, it is ultimately crucial for Brassier's nihilism.

Given that adequation, the fit between theory and world, cannot be ascertained or evaluated by means of traditional semantic concepts, it is not surprising that Brassier valorizes instead a corrosive conception of (Enlightenment) Reason. But this puts him in a difficult position. On the one hand, a thin notion of normativity as *truth-tracking* will not do, insofar as there is no truth to track. On the other, the fundamentally normative conception of Reason or rationality at work, for example in the Sellarsian notion of a "space of reasons" and articulated by Robert Brandom as a matter of tracking the entailments we endorse from our shared commitments, belongs to the manifest image of the world that Brassier wants to avoid. What remains, I take it, is a conception of reason as tracking *necessity*, a broadly Fregean picture of logic as the laws of thought. In this, we might hear the echoes of the nihilistic drive for unity and systematicity; we also might worry what guarantees the *harmonia praestabilita* between the laws of logic and the laws of the world. We cannot return to Sinai.

One can read Brassier's engagement with the speculative rationalists Quentin Meillassoux and Alain Badiou in the light of this endeavour to render reason adequate.[62] Meillassoux is of course well-known for coining the term "correlationism" to describe those philosophical views on which being or what is necessarily structured so as to be intelligible, that is as a correlate of thought.[63] So, for example, the first horn of Churchland's dilemma above would be undoubtedly "correlationist." Meillassoux's attempt to break the "correlationist circle" is organized around the claim that all being is necessarily contingent; there *is* no necessity to the world, to its laws, or the laws of thought; what is outstrips intelligibility. Brassier's critique, thus, is that because Meillassoux needs to *rule out* the possibility of the falsity of the central claim that everything is necessarily contingent, the adequation he seeks cannot be merely contingent, hence rendering it necessary and either risking incoherence or suggesting that thought transcends and structures the

59 More precisely, van Fraassen rejects the idea that the manifest image *is an image*, and gives absolute priority to the (existentially rich) world of experience to which the manifest image attempts to do justice. See §4.2 below.

60 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 18–9.

61 Ibid., 239.

62 I leave Badiou aside here; the concept of "subtraction" that Brassier draws from his work is tangential to the discussion here, and Meillassoux wears his rationalism more proudly, providing a clearer object lesson.

63 As is well known, the rejection of correlationism is what the various, otherwise wildly different, streams of speculative realist philosophy share. One can consult any introduction to the loose "movement" to confirm. Even if Brassier later came to reject the label, it is part of why he was an original participant at the seminal 2007 Goldsmiths *Speculative Realism* conference.

world it describes. As I understand it, the dilemma foisted upon Meillassoux hinges on the conflation of *epistemic* and *metaphysical* necessity. After all, if it is contingent that all things are necessarily contingent, it is unsurprising that our knowledge of it is likewise contingent. And I, for one, don't see the problem here. The issue is in searching for a *foundational or certain ground* for this unfounded contingent knowledge, which one would need to do if one could only establish adequation by establishing necessity.[64] Brassier ultimately finds Meillassoux unsatisfactory because in order for being to be (contingently) intelligible, that is to guarantee the bidirectional fit between thinking or theory or brain and world or being or what is, Meillassoux must ultimately appeal to some sort of "intellectual intuition," pushing Reason close to a supernatural power. After all, Kant thought intellectual intuition was left to God and denied to finite beings; Plantinga's supernaturalism looms.[65]

Ironically, in order to find a more adequate account of adequation, then, Brassier moves *beyond* rationalism, to the gnosticism of François Laruelle.[66] I won't pretend, here, to explain or to understand any more than the absolute basics of Laruelle's project of "non-philosophy." The difficulty of deciphering his language is well known, and perhaps justified in the context of his project of moving beyond "philosophy" as such, and the language and conceptual schemes that follow in its train. But in the absolute broadest and most basic strokes, Laruelle begins – somewhat axiomatically – from a position of *radical immanence*; thought does not transcend what is – what Laruelle calls "the One" – in order to represent it. And philosophy – more precisely, philosophical systems or stances – misunderstands this radical immanence in its characteristic acts of "philosophical decision." These philosophical decisions are, for Laruelle, the foundations of any philosophical system insofar as they consist in what he calls an "auto-position," or self-positing as detached from reality, so as to gain a privileged perspective on it, providing a conceptual master key (whether this be "being" or "becoming" or "difference" or "life" or "process").[67] In Sellarsian terms, philosophical "decision" or self-positing is the first instance of the positing that constitutes the scientific image.

For Brassier, Laruelle's singular achievement lies in his characterization of radical immanence, objective or material reality or being, to which the knowing subject belongs and which "unilateralizes" it. The latter is a term of art, but the basic idea is this: given absolute immanence, the immersion and continuity of the One, or what is, the subject is "determined-in-the-last-instant," that is, somehow determined or objectified, *by* the real:[68]

> It is no longer thought that determines the object, whether through representation or intuition, but rather the object that seizes thought and forces it to think it, or better, according to it. As we have seen, this objective determination takes the form of a unilateral duality whereby the object thinks through the subject.[69]

This is precisely the "non-correlational adequation" between thought and reality that Brassier has been after; an accounting for the fit between what is and the structure of thought – or whatever succeeds thought in the scientific image – that does not simply reduce the object of thought to the correlate of thought, but rather turns thought into the instrument of a reality that outstrips and exceeds it.

While Brassier is sceptical of the scope of Laruelle's characterization of philosophy as such, this conception of unilateral adequacy is the key to his nihilism:

> In becoming equal to it, philosophy achieves a binding of extinction, through which the will to know is finally rendered commensurate with the in-itself. This binding coincides with the objectification of thinking *understood as the adequation*

64 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 89–90.
65 Ibid., 92–3.
66 Incidentally, Laruelle was a central figure in Brassier's dissertation, and the quasi-epistemic "gnostic" intuition of the world features importantly as a paradoxically an-archic grounding of cognitive strategies to combat capitalism. See Brassier, *Alien Theory*. It is unclear how much of that view survives into *Nihil Unbound*, but in our closing remarks, we will return to it.
67 See Ch. 1 of Smith, *A Stranger Thought*.
68 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 138–40.
69 Ibid., 149.

> *without correspondence* between the objective reality of extinction and the subjective knowledge of the trauma to which it gives rise. *It is this adequation that constitutes the truth of extinction.* But to acknowledge this truth, the subject of philosophy must also recognize that he or she is already dead, and that philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction.[70]

Brassier draws on both Levinas' conception of the manner in which exposure to what is alien actually produces subjectivity through trauma and Freud's postulation of a fundamental drive to return to an originary inanimate condition. In light of these two insights, and given the revelation of the cold, inorganic cosmos by Enlightenment reason, Brassier takes the Real or the One or what is to have the character of dead matter. More importantly, we have discovered how to render ourselves answerable to what is, to submit. And the *ethos* of knowing embodied is beyond the strictest asceticism, not just suppression of subjectivity but the "mimesis of death"[71] Nihilism is completed, and reason vindicated.

3.4 Transcendental Inadequacy: Radical Behaviourism, the Democracy of Thought, and the Spectre of Naturalism

Or is it? There seem to be two important caveats with respect to Brassier's position. The first concerns the unilateral adequation that Brassier finds so valuable. Though he wants to give the Real a determinate character – the dead cosmos – the unilateralization of thought, its determination by the real, "adequation" in the sense that Brassier wants it, in brief – *truth* – is going to be fundamentally *plural*. What Laruelle hoped to effect in rejecting the sufficiency of philosophical auto-positioning is a *democratizing* thought, which is to say, a *democracy of thought*.[72] As John O'Maoilearca puts it, for Laruelle "all thought is equalized… when regarded as raw material for non-philosophy, that is, as part of the Real or the "One"… and not as 'representations' of it."[73] So, for example, the discourse of Enlightenment reason or post-Enlightenment science is an example of the objectification of thought with a corresponding *askesis* of complete self-abnegation. But, at the same time, so is every other discourse and practice an objectification of subjectivity, determined by what is: from theatrical performance to astrology. There is no normative criterion by which any particular discourse can be evaluated as more or less adequate than any other; to try to do so is precisely to reintroduce the philosophical decision or auto-position. And this is because they are not, fundamentally, representations of the world. They are behaviours.

What we encounter in Laruelle is a *radical* behaviourism. This is not the behaviourism of a Skinner, for whom we can cash out mental states in terms of conditioned responses. Rather than analysing discourses in terms of *truth*, the non-philosopher approaches discourses as matters of *behaviour*, of *posturing* and *acting*. One might describe a discourse, rather, as a *stance*:

> If one maxim of philosophical behaviorism was that "the human body is the best picture of the human soul," then Laruelle's behavior-without-behaviorism would tell us that posture is the Vision-in-one of philosophy. That said, we know that there is no one "best picture" of philosophy – nor indeed one best picture of non-standard philosophy either: there are only the myriad forms of postural mutation.[74]

Radical behaviourism approaches radical pragmatism. This is Laruelle's own view or at least was at one point. He "makes non-philosophy… a *pragmatic theory of philosophy* in terms of man as last-instance."[75] In

70 Ibid., 238, emphasis mine.
71 Ibid., 45.
72 It is important to note that the democracy of thought is not the same as the democracy of objects espoused by Object Oriented Ontologists like Levi Bryant and Graham Harman.
73 Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts are Equal*, 9.
74 Ibid., 162.
75 Laruelle, *Principles of Non-philosophy*, 58; cf. Ch. 4 of Smith, *Francois Laruelle's Principles of Non-philosophy*.

other words, the way to understand stances, philosophy, and science among them is not in terms of representational adequacy but in terms of what they do and what we do when we adopt them.

So, from this point of view, Brassier's Enlightenment *ethos* of extinction looks less like the culmination of Enlightenment reason and more like a way of living, a form of life itself, which works to single out a stark ontology better suited to its exercises, attempting to mimic death ever more closely. Because it is crucial, for Brassier, that the objectification of thought issue in the deliverances of disenchanted post-Enlightenment science, he thus needs to ground the superiority of the (eliminativist) scientific image over the manifest. But from a Laruellian perspective, it seems rather that it is in finding life traumatic, or unliveable, that one objectifies oneself and one's thought, adopting the posture of death in thought.

Indeed, one might suggest that there Laruelle's unilateral determination-in-the-last-instance, the objectification of thought, in fact harbours within it a transcendental *inadequacy*. *No* discourse, scientific, eliminativist, or otherwise, is adequate, in the normative or evaluative sense that Brassier requires, to the real from which it issues. And this is because they are not in the business of representing, or being otherwise adequate to the real; mimicry is unnecessary. This is the cost of establishing a realist metaphysics that extends beyond science: one either admits that nothing can guarantee the truth of our representations or their adequation to what is, or one finds God, the unity of authority and truth, in whatever form, to establish that adequation.

We have returned, then, to the problematic that led beyond Churchland in the first place. Why should we endorse eliminativism over, say, phenomenology? Why the scientific image over the manifest? Indeed, we seem to be even worse off; where Brassier had posed a dilemma between explaining the fit between brain and world in terms of either the computational structuring of reality or the causal determination of the world upon the brain, taking the neurocomputational stance, precisely, *as* a stance opens it up for explanation by any host of discourses. But there is a third option available to us, namely, following through on the promise of unilateralization and abandoning representation *without* metaphysics. And so the spectre of naturalism continues to haunt Brassier's metaphysical intensification of nihilism. In the next section, I can only sketch the outlines of the constellation of relevant naturalist considerations I take to be useful, but I believe that elaborating them will open a horizon beyond the impasse in which we find ourselves.

4 Being Wrong

4.1 *Non Serviam*: Enlightenment without Metaphysics

As I stated in Section 1, my aim is to both maintain a commitment to naturalism, a broad stance towards making sense of the world and our place in it, and overcome the kind of nihilism that Nietzsche claimed was naturalism's shadow, cast by our continuing faith in a concept of truth that would be at once descriptive and authoritative. Brassier's work is an attempt to *secure* that nihilism by going beyond mere naturalism, to guarantee the extinction of meaning by securing scientific realism through a *metaphysics of nihilism*:

> While vague talk of rendering philosophy consistent with 'the findings of our best sciences' remains entirely commendable, it tends to distract attention away from the amount of philosophical work required in order to render these findings metaphysically coherent. The goal is surely to devise a metaphysics worthy of the sciences, and here neither empiricism nor pragmatism are likely to prove adequate to the task. Science need no more defer to empiricism's enthronement of 'experience' than to naturalism's hypostatization of 'nature'.[76]

Here Brassier seems to echo a similar claim from Meillassoux that "science itself enjoins us to discover the source of its absoluteness."[77] For both, this means *going beyond* science, venturing into the murky realms of metaphysics. Both seem to take it that there is something beyond the deliverances of science that needs to

76 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 25.
77 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 28.

be secured, some sort of theory–world relationship on which the sciences depend and which it is the business of metaphysics to ensure is in proper order. Brassier takes it that science need not submit to empiricism or metaphysical naturalism, but it must indeed still submit. For neither, despite appearances then, can science be autonomous.

But what if it nevertheless was? What if naturalism didn't "hypostasize" nature? What if science needed no grounding? What if, instead of submitting, it remained unbowed and unbroken? Remember that Laruelle's notion of unilateralization and determination-in-the-last-instance, so attractive for Brassier's nihilism, was, at base, a way of viewing thought, or cognitive or mental behaviour, *as real*, without recapturing this reality as a subject in some form of absolute idealism or *Naturphilosophie*. If this is a stance to which one is open, then why not allow science to characterize science? Why not allow ourselves to characterize what is in terms of what we know of what is? Why can we not eschew metaphysics completely?

This is the basic position of Quinean naturalism, which provides at the very least the inspiration for the view I am proposing, by clearing room in conceptual space for a naturalism that is, too often overlooked in Continental and post-Continental philosophy. The latter tends to view naturalism as mere "scientism," a deficient understanding that resolves into more sophisticated forms of empiricism and positivism on the one hand or, as with Brassier, materialist or realist metaphysics. Both are meant to serve as *justificatory* projects, vindications of the theories or concepts of science. But a Quinean naturalism vitiates the need for such projects by demolishing the sense of ontological division between subject and object and disabusing us of the pathological yearning for guarantees.

In the seminal "Epistemology Naturalized," Quine's target is the historically specific philosophy of the logical empiricists, specifically, the work of rational reconstruction by Carnap that aimed to "elicit and clarify the… evidence for science," that is, to provide justification, creatively producing conceptual and inferential links between what is and our thought about it.[78] But Quine had reservations:

> But why all this creative reconstruction, all this make believe? The stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has had to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture [or theory or image] of the world. Why not just see how this construction really proceeds? Why not settle for psychology [or whatever science you like]? Such *a surrender of the epistemological burden to psychology* [*or the sciences*] is a move that was disallowed in earlier times as circular reasoning. If the epistemologist's goal is validation of the grounds of empirical science, he defeats his purpose by using psychology or other empirical science in the validation. However, such scruples against circularity have little point once we have stopped dreaming of deducing science from observations. If we are out simply to understand the link between observation and science, we are well advised to use any available information, including that provided by the very science whose link with observation we are seeking to understand.

While Quine was limited by the psychology of his time to understand our relation to the real in terms of sense data understood as impacts on our sensory receptors and characterizes the epistemic grounding of science thinly in terms of "deducing" from those impacts the content of our science, we need not be hamstrung by his particular commitments. And he was rejecting, precisely, the *positivist* and *empiricist* epistemological project, at the time most powerfully articulated by Carnap. But the general point stands, and it does so just as firmly against the pretensions of metaphysics as against positivism and empiricism, namely, that these creative speculations should give way to actual explanations of the thoughts we have. Indeed, the virtuous circularity of the naturalist explanation of science by and through the means of science should be welcome to those who reject subjectivism and idealism. It is structurally the same as Laruelle's unilateralization: the objectification of thought by its object.

Brassier seems sympathetic to, and aware of, the affinities and resonances of Quine's thought with Laruelle's, though he comes at the matter focusing on another of Quine's provocative theses, the indeterminacy of translation, with a view to demolishing the privilege of our first-person authority over our minds and with it the authority of phenomenology and other articulations of the manifest image.[79] I leave aside the

78 Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 75.
79 See Brassier, "Behold the Non-Rabbit," 59–67.

details of the argument save to note that Brassier recognizes that Quine's naturalism rejects the idea that there is a separation between our theories and the world they aim to articulate and seems sanguine about the prospect; if there isn't a privileged word–world relationship or bridging of these two domains, then "meaning" construed as what links them must fall by the wayside.

Here, we have the stirrings of what Robert Brandom, in explicating the work of Richard Rorty, calls a "second Enlightenment" that is really only the extended practical and cognitive elaboration of the first.[80] The first Enlightenment was the rejection of the unfounded authority of Church and State, and the recognition that authority could only be grounded in the assent over whom authority was claimed. It was a call to refuse to submit. The second Enlightenment, or the expansion of this revolution against purported authority, is precisely a rejection of Nietzschean nihilism; if modern science cast off the shackles of God, its next step is to cast off Science, the hyperbolic and mythologized caricature of our best practices of knowing. More precisely, it is to overcome the idea that our answerability to the world or – better – to the facts as they present themselves is absolute. Rather, it is a matter of making those facts *authoritative* in our discursive practices; our answerability, and hence "truth," follows from our practices and the normative attitudes we express in them. It is only because we have obliged ourselves that we have an obligation to represent things accurately, indeed, that our representations count as being about things at all. And by recognizing that these normative practices of evaluation and obligation as such in fact precede our obligation to facts, to what is, we are already beyond the nihilistic form of the will to know as Nietzsche characterized it.

It should go without saying that in the context of a discussion of scientific naturalism, asserting the priority of normative practice as such to norms of truth need not and does not result in any sort of anything-goes relativism. Once one (conditionally) subjects oneself to truth and makes oneself answerable to what is, one is in fact constrained by the facts. The point is not to unleash cognitive anarchy, but the emancipation of thought from the religious form of knowing.

So we can pose to Brassier the prospect of a continued Enlightenment, indeed, an Enlightenment about Enlightenment, that respects the autonomy and authority of science without apotheosizing it. The central legacy of this Enlightenment is a tension between the insubordination of thought and the discipline of scientific knowing, messy and historical as it is.

4.2 Nothing Takes Place: The Practice of Truth

One might worry, though, that this form of naturalism cedes too much to the manifest image. But that would be a mistake. To adopt the naturalist perspective is to erase the manifest image *as image*. The theoretical posits of mind, belief, and thought no longer need to be entities to which we are committed, that is, that we take to be features of the world. Rather, they are simply features of the way we express normative attitudes we take up when we encounter others as persons, in ethical life, which is not a matter of representation.

We encounter here what might be called the manifest "stance" or "posture." For Sellars, once one begins making use of theoretical posits in one's theoretical practice, one is already within the scientific image, and this includes posits like those in our folk-psychology; all the varied and splendid forms of motivations and representational states we attribute to one another. And, as van Fraassen pointed out many decades ago, in treating the manifest image as rival to another scientific image, it is inevitable that the former be replaced.[81] But the folk-psychological concepts to be replaced are *explanatory* posits, used to make intelligible our preceding *practice* of *taking others as persons*, agents capable of making claims upon

80 Brandom, "Linguistic Pragmatism and Pragmatism about Norms," 112. Brandom even shares with Brassier an admiration for and inspiration from Jonathan Israel's account of "radical Enlightenment." Cf. *Nihil Unbound*, ix.

81 Van Fraassen, "On the Radical Incompleteness of the Manifest Image," 341.

us. And that practice is not, first and foremost, in the business of providing descriptions. But where van Fraassen construed the manifest "image" as something like a phenomenological lifeworld and thought that this might give us license to completely *instrumentalize* the scientific image, we need not.

To begin with, we might still adopt, like Rorty, an eliminative materialism; Rorty famously argued that, for example, classical Cartesian minds and the sorts of entities they contain do not have a place in the catalogue of what is, whether material or immaterial, but are rather features of the sorts of authority we ascribe to persons, namely, authority over the veracity of their first-personal reports about mental life. As contemporary neuroscience chips away at that authority, so it chips away at the mind itself. We need not be subject to inherited visions of the human. Further, where for van Fraassen science simply serves to provide empirically adequate explanations of an untheorized lifeworld, the naturalist considers the practices and norms expressed through the manifest stance to be perfectly tractable by scientific explanation; action and attitude as behaviours are objects like any others.

This is as respectable a position for, say, a Laruelle as it is for Rorty and other contemporary naturalists like Huw Price. In fact, it lies at the heart of Price's "global expressivism."[82] Indeed, the problem that besets Sellars, and which frames Brassier's entire nihilistic project, is, as Price puts it, "a problem of 'placing' various kinds of truth in a natural world."[83] While the phrase "natural world" might be inauspicious, here it simply means a world comprised solely of those objects deemed respectable by the natural sciences. So how might things like truth, reasons, and even persons, all rich in normativity, be "placed" in the scientific image? Price identifies three common strategies: reductionism, eliminativism, and fictionalism.[84] Sellars' synoptic vision was reductionist, insofar as he hoped that the *functional* roles of our mental and normative could be fulfilled by the entities populating the scientific image. Churchland's was clearly eliminativist. The final is "fictionalism," which is beyond the scope of our interrogations here, dissolves the problem by denying that our talk about naturalistically disreputable entities is supposed to be literally true at all. Price's preferred naturalist strategy, and the one I think we ought to embrace, is simply to reject the game of placing items in images entirely.

In general, the placing problem occurs because, as Price puts it, the number of truths we are committed to far outstrip the truthmakers we want to include in our ontologies and images. But this is an artefact of the traditional correspondence theory of truth, which in combination with the powerful *will* to truth described by Nietzsche, lies at the heart of Western nihilism. And while something like this theory of has been, implicitly, dominant throughout the history of philosophy, it is entirely optional. We now have a variety of theories of truth at our disposal: besides correspondence, coherence, functionalism, and pluralism, pragmatic conceptions of truth as verifiability or justifiability. And at least some of these drop the pretence of attempting to match ostensibly referring terms to entities. So, for example, for the coherentist, truth is a property of propositions that it has in virtue of standing in relation to other propositions that one believes.[85] But someone with realist sympathies will, of course, likely find that most of these skew too idealist, hewing once again too closely to the manifest image. Our beliefs play an untenably central role (especially if, ultimately, there are no beliefs). Similarly, verificationism allows human cognitive capacities far too much power to shape the limits and structures of truths. More to the point, these all take truth to be a *substantive semantic concept*.

But we have no need of these; we have minimalist, deflationist concepts of truth at our disposal. To say that "'p' is true" is just to say that *p*. We are again moving beyond the Nietzschean problem here. What's worth noting is that this concept of truth implies neither realism *nor* anti-realism; whatever makes "p" true is just what makes *p* the case. So if it's true that it's windy and thunder-storming, it's just because a low-pressure front and cold front met at this particular point in the atmosphere, etc. No reference to either the

82 See Price, "Moving the Mirror Aside" in *Naturalism without Mirrors* as well as his *Expressivism, Pragmatism, and Representationalism*.

83 Price, "Moving the Mirror Aside," 6.

84 Ibid., 6–7.

85 "Propositions" here does not need to be a metaphysically loaded term, but simply picks out whatever it is that bears truth values.

constitutive powers of the mind or the contributions of external reality is required. Which is what we should expect, if we are to reject the manifest image and its semantics.

Indeed, the scission between realism and anti-realism, realism and idealism, emerges largely due to our attempts to analyse what it is for something to be true, to treat "truth" as a component of the scientific image and investigate it. Truth is taken to link two domains; the realist demands a suture to the real, whereas the idealist finds truth spilling forward from the mind. The minimalist or deflationist simply denies this; there is no problem with placing disreputable referents in the world, because nothing is placed. That's not what truth does.

And what the naturalist should be doing is analysing how we use the concept, our conceptual behaviour, and, above all, what "truth" *does*. And Price's naturalist answer to this question is profound. The use of truth in our practices serves not to guarantee certainty, or accuracy, but rather *to safeguard falsity*, to encourage dissent, and to make possible genuine error.[86]

Truth, that is, is an artefact of our practices of disagreeing, part of a conceptual duo that includes error or falsity. And the import, here, lies with falsity, our ability to disagree, to express how the world outstrips what we know of it, even what we have justification or reason to believe about it. Without truth, we could not hold each other accountable for the facts. But without a concept of falsity, we could not disagree with each other, or even with ourselves; there would be no need to hold each other accountable. It's not clear that we could, in fact, make ourselves answerable to the world. And so, with this conception of the role of truth in our practices, we are already beyond correlationism. What is need not conform with what we think of it. Indeed, to think is to confront the excess of what is.

What this mean, however, is that our normative practices of holding each other accountable are prior to the truth; truth, thus, cannot be the source of normative authority, and so we are poised to move beyond nihilism. Nietzsche, unable to think beyond a theological concept of truth, berated his contemporaries for not being strong enough to bear the *lie* of value. For the naturalist, the step beyond nihilism is a step past truth not into deception but into error.

4.3 Naturalism Revitalized: Life as Error

I opened this essay by noting that, for Foucault, nihilism was an episode in the history of how we relate to truth. I've aimed to describe how a certain kind of theological relationship to truth gives rise to the unliveable condition that Nietzsche describes as nihilism and tried to suggest that Brassier's hypernihilism, his scientific realism, cold rationalism, and metaphysical suicide are the most extreme expressions of that theological relationship. Adopting a minimalist view of truth, and replacing the will to analyse truth with a project of explaining our linguistic and practical behaviour, including our use of truth is clearly a different relationship with the truth and a different understanding of our practices of knowing.

I've also argued that despite radically changing our relationship to the truth, we can uphold the legacy of, rather, a warm and jovial but nevertheless anti-humanist Enlightenment, without backsliding into superstitions about minds and reasons, through a radical naturalism. This is an Enlightenment organized around the liberation of thought. In the final article that Foucault approved for publication in his lifetime, Foucault placed himself in that Enlightenment lineage, and I think that the naturalism I am presenting here belongs as well.

For Foucault, the legacy of Enlightenment in French thought is what he calls the "philosophy of the concept," to be distinguished from a phenomenological philosophy of "experience," that is a philosophy of the manifest image.[87] This philosophy of the concept is carried out, precisely, in the interrogation of "truth-telling," our different modes of relating to the truth. And the central figure for this approach is Canguilhem,

86 See Price, "Truth as Convenient Friction."
87 Foucault, "Life," 475.

who carries out this interrogation in the form of a historical investigation of the sciences and, specifically, the life sciences.

As Foucault puts it, this shift in philosophical concern from physics, in, e.g. Bachelard but also the logical empiricists, not only brings philosophy down to earth, so to speak, but "also raise, in a peculiar way, the philosophical question of knowledge."[88] Note that this is not a traditional epistemological question – "How can we know? What can we know? What is knowledge?" Rather, it is, precisely, the sort of naturalist interrogation we might expect, an attempt to "determine the situation of the *concept in life*."[89] That is, it is an attempt to figure out how the drive to conceptuality, and *ipso facto* to normativity, figures into the existence of the sort of being we are. There is nothing idealist or metaphysical about this; living in and through conceptual normativity is just a contingent form of life. Naturalism may be revitalized, but it is not vitalist.

I take it that this focus on the life sciences, and the circular, naturalist investigation of the place of our conceptual behaviour within it, is an example of what Price calls "subject naturalism" in contrast to "object naturalism."[90] Object naturalism, as Price construes it, is something like a naturalistic metaphysics, perhaps not *a priori* but nevertheless universal in its scope, and subject to the placement problems discussed above in §4.2. It is the sort of naturalism that, not inaccurately, Brassier ascribes to Churchland; though I suppose in principle an object naturalist need not be a rabid physical reductionist, it seems to be the obvious route to take. The basic idea is that the only entities there are are those countenanced by our best current science; we might debate what those are, as whether or not intertheoretic reduction even between, e.g. physics and molecular biology, is plausible remains an open question. Subject naturalism, on the other hand, descends from Hume and Nietzsche and interrogates our practices, including our practices of science, in terms of the behaviour of the sorts of beings our best sciences tell us we are. It is indeed possible, then, that subject naturalism could come into conflict with object naturalism, namely, insofar as object naturalism leads us to either the metaphysical naturalism of a Churchland, the metaphysical supernaturalism of a Plantinga, or the nihilist metaphysics of a Brassier.

That said, subject naturalism can also dissolve problems. So, for example, since the molecular revolution we have come to view life in terms of information theory, as a matter of information encoded in genes, which in turn provide a program for replication, and more generally for the transmission of information between an organism and environment.[91] Accordingly, the choice that Brassier posed for Churchland, between an idealism on which the computational mind structured the world capable of acting upon it or the elimination of an important difference between the representing mind and the world represented, in order to account for the truth of eliminativism, falls away; what biological beings *do* is process information, and the world is full of it. There is no issue of connecting the brain to the wider world it inhabits. This of course does not guarantee that the information that cells and molecules and organisms process is veridical – there is always, crucially, room for error – but it does allow us to make sense of the place of the information processing brain in the broader context of biological life and its behavioural, developmental, and metabolic exchanges with its environmental milieu.

As Foucault points out, the (at the time recent) integration of cybernetics and information theory into molecular biology forms the framework of Canguilhem's naturalism. And it is in this framework that, like Price, Canguilhem can make *error* not only the foundation of knowledge, but also of *life itself*: life is "that which is capable of error."[92] So, contra Brassier, it is not the case that life is always already dead, that extinction has always already taken place, but rather that, insofar as the transmission and transcription of genetic codes and messages can go wrong, life is always already in error, going wrong. Life and thought

88 Ibid., 474.

89 Ibid., 475.

90 Price, "Naturalism without Representationalism," 185–7.

91 See, e.g., Kay, *Who Wrote the Book of Life?*. According to Mayr, the idea of information has been implicit in biological concepts since Aristotle but it was only with the rise of computers that concepts like genetic "programs" were legitimated. See *The Growth of Biological Thought*, 56.

92 Foucault, "Life," 476.

thus belong entirely to the world but are at the same time capable of going astray and, importantly, of correcting themselves. There are many different ways that we correct ourselves, in response to misprisions both internal and external. Our cognitive practices of holding responsible, and of truth and falsity, then, can be seen as variants of a more general, and more fundamental, feature of life. Again, there is nothing vitalist about this, no secret power, no positivity coiled beneath or within living things, just information transmitted and mistakes made.

> Nietzsche said that truth was the greatest lie. Canguilhem, who is far from and near to Nietzsche at the same time, would perhaps say that on the huge calendar of life it is the most recent error; or, more exactly, he would say that the true/false dichotomy and the value accorded to truth constitute the most singular way of living that has been invented by a life that, from the depths of its origin, bore the potential for error within itself. For Canguilhem, error is the permanent contingency around which the history of life and the development of human beings are coiled. It is this notion of error that enables him to connect what he knows about biology and the manner in which he does history, without ever intending to deduce the latter from the former... It is what allows him to bring out the relationship between life and knowledge and to follow, like a red thread, the presence of value and the norm within it... In opposition to [the] philosophy of meaning, the subject, and lived experience, Canguilhem has proposed a philosophy of error, of the concept of the living, as a different way of approaching the notion of life.[93]

For the naturalist, as for Nietzsche, the value of truth and the value of life are intimately connected. And it is the naturalist who has carried the revaluation of truth, subordinating it to error, which in turn allows one to view life, and the practices of knowing and truth-telling internal to it, in a new light.

5 Concluding Remarks: A Noble Life, a Thing of This World

To sum up an already unfortunately long discussion, I have presented an account of nihilism, following Nietzsche, as a sort of colonization of our thinking by a religious form of normativity, grounded in our submission to truth as correspondence, in the idea that the facts themselves could be binding upon us. I then presented Brassier's radicalization of nihilism and showed how it both remained subservient to this ideal of truth. I argue, further, that rather than showing how a commitment to Enlightenment reason and science demands a cold metaphysics of death, in dismissing the irreducible plural ways in which what is determines thought, the attempt to secure a fit between thought and disenchanted world, suggests, that the view is an expression of the unliveable condition of nihilism, rather than its proof. Finally, I presented a form of naturalism that makes legitimate claim to the legacy of Enlightenment and dispenses with the problems animating Brassier's nihilism by radically transforming the concept of truth and how we relate to it. There is still much more to be said about the latter, and I have only given an outline.

However, before concluding, it is important to note that it is not unreasonable to find life unliveable, for any number of reasons. And being clear and explicit about this need not be depressive, or merely an expression of despair. Indeed, for Foucault, political activism began with the perception of "the intolerable" or the unliveable.[94] And so it's worth briefly considering the possible *political* dimension of Brassier's nihilism.

At the conclusion of *Alien Theory*, Brassier characterizes his realist position as "gnosis."[95] To see thought as the manifested force of the One, or what is, without thereby turning the latter into a conceptually determinate object of thought would, after all, require something like mystical insight. And, at least in that early text, he took it that this gnosis was, or could be, a political force, especially in the circuits of communicative capitalism: "the construction of rigorously meaningless and epistemically uninterpretable utterances... engendering a mode of cognition that simultaneously constitutes an instance of universal

93 Ibid., 476–7.
94 Foucault, "I Perceive the Intolerable," 78.
95 Brassier, *Alien Theory*, 220–2.

noise as far as the commodification of knowledge is concerned."[96] In a nutshell, gnosis manifests as a mode of becoming-unintelligible in the context of the capitalist domination of all cognitive experience.

In this, Brassier is expanding on a theme shared by contemporaries like Gilles Grelet, inherited from Jambet and Lardreau by way of Laruelle. Gnosis is a form of absolute rebellion against the world as it is. The basic idea is that organized forms of rebellion, structured by ideological commitment, tend to be co-opted; nevertheless, as Mao put it, it is nevertheless always "right to rebel." The problem is that the articulation of this sort of rebellion, insofar as it is an absolute refusal of the world as it is, *must* be unintelligible, and in becoming unintelligible to this world must make use of theological concepts: one must "pass from Rebel to Angel."[97] Articulated by James and Lardreau, committed Maoists in the post-1968 period, in the wake of the failure of the Cultural Revolution, the Angel signifies the absolute revolution that will not be co-opted.[98] It must be *otherworldly*. I think that there is much to recommend in this stance of radical revolt. But revolt must be this-worldly. And so I conclude by gesturing at a way of thinking about truth, again drawn from Foucault, that might orient thought in this direction.

Nietzsche thought that nihilism was a form of revolt, yes, but of slave revolt. He thought of it as the expression of an *unhealthy* being, a kind of sickness. In contrast, he posited an original, healthy "noble" morality, not of good and evil, but of good and bad, a morality that was based in the affirmation of one's own form of life *as good*, without appeal to some other authority. Given the force the norms of health exert over our lives in the bio-present, we might ask ourselves whether or not an affirmative political ethos could be grounded in something like health. If not, we might further seek an alternative.

To return to his final courses at the Collège de France, Foucault was deeply engaged in thinking through the history of the connection between forms of life, or styles of existence, and our relations to truth. He spends a good deal of time exploring the Cynical mode of relating to truth, which he called "manifestation." Far from *representing* the world, the Cynical mode of life was, in its very form, a *challenge* to the world, manifesting as an "irruptive, violent, scandalous… part of revolutionary practice."[99] One's life becomes an exemplary form of conduct which stands opposed to prevailing norms of action and speech, a correction to a fundamental error. The basic idea here is, I think, the same as Nietzsche's noble; one can affirm one's life *as the truth*, in start contrast to the world in which one finds oneself, a truth which must, then, remake that world. Again, we have the outline of a stance of absolute revolt, but one which is not otherworldly. Like truth itself, politics is "a thing of this world," and as such we could do worse than beginning our politics with a commitment to the rigorous work of elaborating the concept in life.

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96 Ibid., 224–5.

97 Laruelle, *Struggle and Utopia at the End Times of Philosophy*, 211.

98 See Smith, "The Speculative Angel," 54.

99 Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 183.

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