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# Through Irony to Realism: An Essay Review

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**Abstract:** This article aims to reconstruct the discourse of Ernesto Castro on speculative realism connecting it to the role of irony in the philosophical matter. Irony is shown to play an ambiguous role in the history of thought parting from the figure of Socrates and arriving to contemporary speculative philosophers. The differences between post-modern thought and realistic one in the way to treat irony are explicated. The author also makes an attempt to state the key points of the debates within speculative thought and to outline Castro's position in relation to them.

**Keywords:** Ernesto Castro, speculative realism, post-modernity, irony, metaphysics, universals.

Review of: Ernesto Castro, *Realismo poscontinental: ontología y epistemología para el siglo XXI* (Segovia: Materia Oscura, 2020).

## After postmodernity

In what sense can we talk about realism today after the years of postmodernity and so called "linguistic turn"? Practically to answer this question Spanish philosopher Ernesto Castro has written a dissertation where nowadays Speculative Turn is analyzed as post-continental and as realistic.

The title post-continental is chosen not only due to the fact that there is no concordance among the representatives of the speculative turn about how to call themselves, as long as their projects have more differences than common, but also due to the own research interests of the author, one of whose first works "Against the Postmodern" is devoted to a critical look at the postmodern era. Indeed, without the optics of postmodern it is difficult to comprehend and reconstruct the role of modern philosophical currents emerging from it in one way or another.

"The normative advantage that postmodernism extracts from this situation of crisis and uncertainty consists in not taking a step back in the twilight of idols. Stay in the gap"<sup>1</sup>. It is this in-between that is the litmus test of the postmodern era, which tends to treat symptoms rather than address the root of the problem. "We are the heirs - whether we like it or not - of that gesture of submission that marked the era"<sup>2</sup>. The state of stalemate and the end of metaphysics, a dead end generated by the phantasms of the Enlightenment, in which postmodernism is bogged down, struggling with imaginary enemies and suffering defeat. Indicative in this context appears "hauntology", that has become a full-fledged philosophical movement, the main conceptual characters of which are ghosts/spectres. Neither alive nor

dead, they are in no hurry to leave, but obsessively return. Ends that do not end, a past that intrudes into the present because of the insufficiency of the work of sorrow. If the spectres of Jacques Derrida are sovereignly present in their absence, the spectres of Quentin Meillassoux receive a temporary indulgence by divine non-existence.

The way out of the impasse of postmodernity cannot be done directly, simply by saying "we will not do this, we will do it differently". One way or another, it is necessary to continue the tradition, not to result anachronists.

## Oscillation

In metamodern exists such a concept as oscillation. It means fluctuation between several traditions at the same time, for example, between modern and postmodern. In modernity, reality is still cognizable, while in postmodernity it is no longer. Addressing the language of Jean Baudrillard – subject does not have instruments to distinguish copies from originals. We have access only to simulacra that have become "detached" from the originals, calling the latter into question. Oscillation makes it possible to unite the seriousness of the modern and the non-seriousness of the postmodern. Post-continental realism also fluctuates: between continental and analytical, academicism and popularization. When Meillassoux formulates the problem of correlationism, the next step he takes is to overcome correlationism from within, by its own methods. This is an ironic overcoming of correlation, which ultimately makes it possible to speak about the Great Outdoors. According to Gilles Deleuze's definition<sup>3</sup>, if irony is the art of depth and height, then humor is the art of the surface. So, G. Harman prefers humor, which corresponds to his method of overcoming correlationism - not from the inside, but by extending the correlation to the relationship between all objects. Criticism through the creation of distance, for Harman, must recede in favour of a closer contact with things<sup>4</sup>, accordingly, irony must give way to humor, which does not rise above things, but glides over them. Both irony and humor are nevertheless united by the fact that they allow you to talk about things without exhausting them.

## The irony of history

In the history of philosophy, one of the first ironists was Socrates, a figure that opposed himself to common sense through an ironic attitude. The posture of common sense or the pre-ironic position consists in non-reflexive, non-critical adherence to practical and theoretical guidelines,

habitual frames of action and thought. The pre-ironic position is characterized by naivety, that is, a certain inability to look at oneself from the outside. Socrates for Greek society was a form of ironic self-awareness - taking the position of the unknowing, he called the inhabitants of the polis to a dialogue and provided an opportunity to express their position, so that through leading questions and the procedure of maieutics, they could test their opinion for strength and coherence. As a rule, everything ended with the opponent's position being revealed as self-contradictory, not coinciding with itself. Controversy is an invariable component of the ironic operation - what seemed to be one turns into another. Another important component of irony is temporality - irony is revealed after the fact happened, and that makes it related to the way Shelling understands history, which is in the making and is perceived as necessary only after it has happened<sup>5</sup>. The ironic attitude of Socrates allowed him to keep a distance between truth as an absolute, to which thought aspires, and its final incarnation. Thus, truth and thought were affirmed as processual and not reducible to the steps through which they unfold.

Nevertheless, it is not so easy to maintain balance here, it requires the agility of a rope-walker, so that when philosophizing with a hammer, not to be buried under one's own philosophizing. Thus, in the history of irony, outlined by Søren Kierkegaard<sup>6</sup>, its positive and negative aspects were revealed. If irony is restrained, it ennobles thought and life, frees them from the fetters of rigidity. But if there is «too much» irony, then it becomes a nihilistic force, a force of negation and a herald of despair. Irony can move forward, revising obsolete concepts and schemes, or vice versa, limit and become a cage.

The nihilistic potential of irony is disclosed in the form of an enlightened false (or unfortunate) consciousness, revealed by Peter Sloterdijk<sup>7</sup>, whose main character is a cynic, that is, a person who knows what is right, but does the opposite. In the case of the cynic, irony is not productive, but reinforces the gap between action and knowledge, as well as between an individual and social whole.

The position of the cynic is adjacent to the position of the liberal ironist, described by Richard Rorty<sup>8</sup>. For Rorty, a pre-ironist is someone who unconsciously describes the world in terms of a finite vocabulary and is unable to go beyond it; alternative dictionaries are comprehended by the pre-ironicist in terms of his final vocabulary. The ironist, on the other hand, remains in the state of unrootedness because he can move between vocabularies and does not think that one can be closer to reality than others, the choice of the vocabulary is guided by convenience. This makes him relativist, since vocabularies are equal in their inability to correspond to the state of affairs, they are equally conditioned by the contingency of the language, and the existence of a meta-vocabulary is impossible. He is sceptic since there can be no criteria to prefer one vocabulary to another, everything can be redescribed and justified by this redescription. He is nominalist as long as for Rorty nominalism means sanity.

The position of the ironist is opposed not only to the position of the pre-ironist, but also to the position of the metaphysician. The typical strategy of metaphysician is very similar to the conceptualization of the philosophical method criticized by non-philosophy of François Laruelle<sup>9</sup>

- thus, the metaphysician operates by revealing contradictions between two positions, which the theory proposed by the metaphysician removes or resolves. Metaphysical theories are denounced as pragmatic solutions that produce temporal limited vocabularies rather than reveal reality (still the idea of productive nature of thought does not deny its realistic dimension - as we see in Iain Hamilton Grant<sup>10</sup>, for example). Hegel, according to Rorty, opened the era of continental, ironic philosophy, which is driven not by the desire for truth, but by constant self-renewal, the renewal of vocabularies. This renewal does not have rational limits, it reminds hermeneutic circle. But if the world can't be totalized in a meta-vocabulary does this mean we can't have access to it? So, for Meillassoux as well as for his teacher Alain Badiou the world as totality does not exist as long as a part has more reality than the whole - principle derived from the set theorem of Cantor according to which each set is less potent than the set of its subsets. More or less, affirm non-existence of the world as all-encompassing unity is a general tendency within speculative thought.

The concept of vocabulary, in our opinion, might be compared to the concept of Markus Gabriel's fields of sense or the concept of Castro's *generos*. All three figures are united by epistemological pluralism, with the essential difference that Rorty is closer to nominalism and textualism, insofar as he resorts to strong linguistic analogies and deprives vocabulary of access to reality. While Gabriel and Castro are closer to realistic naturalism, insofar as fields and *generos* are not reducible to sign systems or language games and within them hard facts do exist.

Here, the card being played is historicity, or rather, how we understand the mutability of forms - from the duality of creation/discovery, a pragmatic conclusion about the utilitarian nature of knowledge does not necessarily follow. In the conditions of temporality, finitude and contingency of vocabularies does not exist a sort of continuity between them? Otherwise, the translation won't be possible. Let's remember the example of Don Quixote made by Gabriel - an object Don Quixote created by Miguel de Servantes plays the role of directing sample, directing sense which unifies the versions of Don Quixote of Avellanda and Pierre Menard but does not determine them completely. Example that suggests Castro is one of the significances of the Left: The Left in Spain in 2021, the Left of Pablo Iglesias Primero and the Left of Pablo Iglesias Segundo. Despite the fact that the significances are obviously different there is a concrete historical/accidental continuity between them as one between father and son in Aristotle. These examples may help us to get a different look on how Rorty treats figure of Rene Descartes - as a creator of completely new philosophical vocabulary, who has broken up with previous ones. The continuity, affirms Rorty, is constructed by philosophical society in an artificial way. Nevertheless, the language of Descartes was developing in the tension and conflict with his Jesuit background - so rupture goes alongside with succession.

The position of the liberal ironist and philosophy as art seems to give ambivalent results - by removing the pretensions of mind from metaphysical areas, does not happen exactly what Meillassoux warns against? Philosophy becomes a private matter, as Rorty expressly affirms, and by withdrawing itself from public debate, turns into a form of

escapism. If philosophy does not get involved in the formulation of metaphysical statements, metaphysical statements will not disappear, they will continue to be formulated by other public institutions – metaphysical questions will simply be outsourced.

The undermining and revision of the contents of collective consciousness are also carried out in the project of Ray Brassier, who continues the projects of eliminative materialism of Paul Churchland, Wilfrid Sellars and Robert Brandom, but does it with amendments taken from non-philosophy. On the similitude between Rorty's and Brassier's projects points Artem Morozov suggesting that contradiction between «inventing» eliminativism of the first and «revealing» eliminativism of the second could be removed – if eliminativism becomes an «every day» practice, then Descartes and his contemporaries will retrospectively get rid of Cartesian subjectivity<sup>11</sup>. One more time we confront the idea of re-description of history and not surprisingly as well as Rorty Brassier pays tribute to the Hegelian concept of history as a series of errors that are discovered as such only after happened, but are necessary to free subject from the myths of the given. Philosophy works in this historical gap of demystification, in which the thing in the process of self-differentiation reveals itself. Thing can reveal itself because though concepts depend on subject, objects do not, as long as the relation between being and thought is conceptual<sup>12</sup>. Brassier writes that the classic gesture of correlationism is to reduce epistemological difference between rational/sensual and to reduce metaphysical difference between things/concepts – seems that which Rorty does. There is a delicate moment that concerns the nature of these differences – identity and difference within concept do not found identity and difference within object. The recognition of non-equivalence between concept of difference and conceptual difference is the base for transcendental realism.

For all postmodernity, Rorty subtly understood and expressed the difficulties that fall on the shoulders of any philosopher who faces the task of finding his language and his Self through the re-description of the previous tradition. Irony plays a key role in this process, allowing not to be identified with the discourse of the Other, but to maintain a backlash. So, for Castro himself, irony becomes an important tool for distancing both from postmodernism and from the post-continental, which he by renaming with the prefix “post” collocates within tradition showing that realists still have a lot to do in order to ensure that their projects meet their stated goals. And it's not only about the contradictions between them or voluntaristic interpretation of philosophers of the past, but about the internal contradictions of each.

## Realism?

The book of Castro is structured as a sort of graph where as starting point we have classic definition of what is it this realism about which we are talking about. Because you can name yourself in whatever way you want, but in order to talk not about arbitrary philosophical decision it is necessary to start from a certain criterion. So, realism is defined as a position according to which “exists a reality

independent of us, which can be known in some way”<sup>13</sup>. Respectively, as the enemies of realism are outlined nominalism, skepticism and idealism that are opposed to the propositions of existence, knowability and independence. Since Castro has had a certain formation in scholastic philosophy realistic debates are reconstructed starting from categories of Aristotle and the question raised by Boethius's commentary on Porphyry's introduction to them about universality of genera e species (in this perspective kenotypes of Meillassoux and traces of Maurizio Ferraris are shown as the resolution of the question of universals). The problem of universals will further migrate and transform into the problem of substantiating the reality of the external world and will have a turning resolution in Kantian antinomies that open the epoch of the image of the world and give birth to continental philosophy. Thus, Ferraris as well as Meillassoux and Grant assess negatively the Copernican turn, all for different reasons and offering different alternatives.

So, in the work “Good Bye, Kant”, Ferraris accuses Kant of mixing ontology and epistemology with the resulting relativism, subjectivism and constructivism. However, to say that Kant's existence coincides with representation would be a mistake, and the constructive abilities of the transcendental subject are limited by the causality of the thing-in-itself – argues Castro. Ferraris formulates the criterion that distinguishes reality from appearance as “*unamendability*” and bases it on naive physics such as visual experiments of observing the sun. The reality of the Great Outside is substantiated through this kind of aesthetic experimentation<sup>14</sup>. However, Ferraris himself confuses ontology and epistemology, for example, mixing experience with culture, in particular with myths, an operation that renders experience subjective and corresponding more to the inner world than to the outer one.

According to Meillassoux, Kant gave birth to correlationism, a logic that absolutizes the subject-object correlation and makes it impossible to think outside of it. If the position of naive realism characteristic of pre-Kantian philosophy was before Kant was fraught with ideological dogmatism, then the problem of correlationism is to feed skepticism and religious fanaticism. The end of metaphysics, depriving the mind of claims to the absolute, took the form of a heightened return of the religious. The necessity to restore access to the absolute is realized throughout the principle of factuality that presumes contingency of laws of nature, not eternal, but continuous in the course of indeterminacy. From the fact that time can actualise any possibility without sufficient reason to do so emergentist positions of Meillassoux derive.

Grant, in turn, accuses Kant (as well as Heidegger and Aristotle) of naturicide, he prefers Plato and Shelling who, according to his interpretation, do not reduce nature to the set of actions of individual bodies. This kind of reduction he calls *somatism*, and illustrates by an example of Aristotle's conceptualization of movement – the source of movement is collocated outside matter, the act precedes potency, and it leads to a passive conception of nature. On the contrary, nature is more like a multiplicity of forces and these forces are not exhausted in the objects that produce. This additive idealism or inflationary realism of Grant permits him to give a genetic answer to Kant's question about the

conditions of the possibility of cognition. A thought is real because it is a continuation of reality, an idea is a stage in the process of reality formation, therefore we cannot cognize reality completely, since the very attempt to cognize it, changes it.

Castro underlines the role of set theory in the speculative thought and the key role of Alain Badiou who introduced mathematics as ontological ground into continental tradition. We find the thesis of non-existence of the world as a whole in Meillassoux as one of the figures of factuality, in Gabriel in a more radicalized way because set theory according to him still has the implicit idea of the whole due to the fact that each quantitative totality presumes some qualitative criteria that stabilize this totality as such. In the words of Jocelyn Benoist it presumes “the myth of colorless objects”<sup>15</sup>. Gabriel offers the alternative of fields of senses that unlike sets are not organized throughout relations of inclusion/exclusion and do not have hierarchy. To exist as an object means to appear in a certain field of sense: “witches exist or appear in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*; Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* exists or appears in my library; but witches do not exist or appear in my library”<sup>16</sup>.

With such definition of the object would disagree Harman as long as for him the object is first of all the surplus and substantial unity irreducible to its relations and interactions with other objects. Despite the fact that Gabriel admits the existence of the governing sense or prototype that at the same time does not determine completely the apparitions of the object, the problem of identity of the object remains. As mentions Arjen Kleinherenbrink: “This leads to the strange conclusion that an infinitely large stack of governing fields that govern governing fields is required for Arnold to remain the same individual during the simple act of leaving his living room and walking into his kitchen”<sup>17</sup>. Moreover, the main characteristic of the field of sense is that it exists as much as it appears in some other field of sense and this leads to the infinite deferral (not the same as infinite regress). This means that the things never gain enough specificity to appear as such<sup>18</sup>.

For the same relationism Harman criticizes Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory that dissolves objects in their relations. Still Latour for him remains one of the main *vis-a-vis* in tension with whom he forms his *OOO*. According to Harman almost all traditions of philosophy represent different grades of occasionalism. Hume collocates interaction between two entities in human consciousness in the form of habit, Kant – in the categories of reason. Latour’s actor-network theory is revolutionary as long as it secularises causality “–it is Joliot who links neutrons and politics, not God”<sup>19</sup>. So, for two objects to interact there is a need for a third one that will play the role of mediator. Castro finds it problematic because where is third there is forth and so on to the infinity. But we see some similarity between vicarious causation and example that Castro derives from Aristotle about relations between substances of father and son which are effectuated throughout accidents of “having reproduced with a woman (in the case of the father) and that of having been given birth to by that same woman (in the case of the son)”<sup>19</sup> – in both cases the causality is indirect. Moreover, as writes Morozov – Harman precisely to avoid the paradox of the third man appeals to

the relation between real and sensible object that is the only one that does not need mediation but is direct<sup>20</sup>.

After being analyzed, the representatives of speculative turn are collocated within the suggested framework of nominalism/idealism/skepticism/realism. Almost no one satisfies the criterion of being a realist completely. Meillassoux though providing access to Great Outdoors appears nominalist inasmuch as collocates the principle of identity of the sign in arbitrary, iterable and empty kenotypes<sup>20</sup>. Brassier in all three periods of his philosophical course remains nominalist since refuses existence of phenomenal entities. Nominalism of Brassier is radical and warlike – phenomenology, the main brainchild of idealism in the philosophical field, represents anthropocentrism and pathological narcissism, operating with categories similar to phlogiston. The subjectivist ideology, fueled by phenomenology, serves the purposes of capitalism by convincing consumers that they are sovereign individuals endowed with freedom of choice. Polypsychism of Harman balances between realism/idealism and the problem of existence of external world is not posed since he moves in coordinates of Heidegger’s thought for whom the world is not an object, but a mode of being. Ferraris turns out to be nominalist as well as Meillassoux regarding universals: “universals are *traces* or *tracks*—that is, occurrences that can indefinitely iterate so that the complete series is nevertheless fully *present* nor entirely absent, but rather, in hermeneutical terms, is something that comes from the *past* and points towards the *future*”<sup>21</sup>. Grant and Gabriel, on the one hand, share the thesis of the non-existence of the world. On the other hand, Grant is realistic in the sense of reality of universals because things are not separated from ideas, Plato’s *eidos* are not the forms of things (such an understanding is a consequence of Aristotle’s formal interpretation of Plato), but the natural causes of things, ideas are as real as things. Gabriel has dedicated his second dissertation to ancient skepticism whose positions he disputes on the base of German idealism, so he does not share skeptical positions.

Summing up, we can make a conclusion that his work could be defined as a real philosophical investigation, since the main goal of philosophy is to clarify the words that we use unconsciously and habitually in order not to be enchanted by them, like in the cases of myth or ideology. Such demystification should not be, however, limited only by the fields of common sense or collective consciousness. Philosophical systems themselves should be revised in this way from time to time, even if, as remarks Whitehead<sup>22</sup>, philosophical system is never refuted, but only abandoned.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ernesto Castro, "Contra la postmodernidad" within "Memorias y libelos del 15M", 2021, Arpa, p. 232.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 233.
- <sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Logic of Sense", 1990, The Athlone Press, London, p. 9.
- <sup>4</sup> About negative side of irony and preference of humor: Graham Harman, "Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything", Penguin Books, 2017, p. 224-225.
- <sup>5</sup> Ernesto Castro, "Realismo poscontinental: ontología y epistemología para el siglo XXI", 2020, Materia Oscura, p. 270.
- <sup>6</sup> "Irony is a healthiness insofar as it rescues the soul from the snares of relativity; it is a sickness insofar as it cannot bear the absolute except in the form of nothing" – Søren Kierkegaard, "On the concept of irony", 1989, Princeton University Press, p. 77.
- <sup>7</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, "Critique of cynical reason", 1989, Cambridge University Press, p. 3.
- <sup>8</sup> R. Rorty, "Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity", 1989, Cambridge University Press, p. 73.
- <sup>9</sup> Ernesto Castro, "Realismo poscontinental: ontología y epistemología para el siglo XXI", 2020, Materia Oscura, p. 129.
- <sup>10</sup> About "additional realism" of I. Grant: Ernesto Castro "Realismo poscontinental: ontología y epistemología para el siglo XXI", 2020, Materia Oscura, p. 220.
- <sup>11</sup> Artem Morozov, Neopragmatism and Speculative Realism // Omsk Scientific Bulletin. Series Society. History. Modernity. 2020. Vol. 5, no. 2. pp. 129-136.
- <sup>12</sup> Ray Brassier, "Concepts and objects" within "Speculative turn: Continental realism and Materialism", 2011, Melbourne, p. 47.
- <sup>13</sup> Ernesto Castro, "Realismo poscontinental: ontología y epistemología para el siglo XXI", 2020, Materia Oscura, p. 19.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 242.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 278.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 292.
- <sup>17</sup> Arjen Kleinherenbrink, "Fields of Sense and Formal Things: The Ontologies of Tristan Garcia and Markus Gabriel", Open Philosophy, 2018, p. 133.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 138-139.
- <sup>19</sup> Harman G., *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Melbourne, re.press & Graham Harman, 2009, p. 102.
- <sup>20</sup> Artem Morozov, Fetishism today, Philosophical and literary journal "Logos", 3 (93), 2013, pp. 193-200.
- <sup>21</sup> Ernesto Castro, "Realismo poscontinental: ontología y epistemología para el siglo XXI", 2020, Materia Oscura, p. 385.
- <sup>22</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, Free Press, 1978, p. 6.