FIELDS OF SENSE
A NEW REALIST ONTOLOGY

MARKUS GABRIEL
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As of this writing, Markus Gabriel is probably still best known to Anglophone readers of continental philosophy as a prominent interpreter of German Idealism. His 2009 book *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, co-authored with no less a figure than Slavoj Žižek, is a fascinating work in this subfield. Gabriel’s solo-authored 2013 book *Transcendental Ontology* is another study that uses German Idealism as a speculative launching pad, and one in which Gabriel’s own philosophical voice edges more towards the forefront. In Germany itself, Gabriel’s best-known work is the astonishing bestseller *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (*Why There is No World*), which has made him a German media presence like perhaps no other philosopher since Peter Sloterdijk.

This is not to say that Gabriel was previously unknown in Germany, a country that reveres its philosophers at least as much as France. He was born on 6 April 1980 in Remagen, a twenty-minute drive south of Bonn: in the shadow of the castles of Siegfried and Roland, and close enough to the student fraternity of Friedrich Nietzsche. The reason for evoking this history of the Rhineland is that Gabriel has already written himself into that history in at least one respect. Namely, in 2009 he became the youngest holder of a full professorship of philosophy in Germany, younger even than the prodigious F. W. J. Schelling. While this would make him only an academic curio in the English-speaking world, in Germany it has led to a certain degree of public acclaim. While Gabriel’s unusually warm and commanding personality has made him the centre of increasingly visible activity in Bonn, his uncanny talent for foreign languages has allowed him to function almost ubiquitously on the world philosophy scene. Name a country in the developed world, in either hemisphere, and it is likely that Gabriel has already appeared there in some capacity.
More formal arrangements have made him a visiting professor in Lisbon, Berkeley, New York, Naples, Venice, Fortaleza, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Toulouse and Aarhus, lecturing always in the local language of these places. And now China appears to be next on his list.

At least two other things make Gabriel a unique figure in contemporary continental philosophy (despite his distaste for this term). The first is his nationality. Following the Second World War, the epicentre of the continental tradition shifted from Germany to France; Paris has been the leading factory of new continental theory for the past seventy years. Other than the special devotees of Jürgen Habermas and the late Hans-Georg Gadamer, most Anglophone continental philosophy students travelling to Germany have done so for scholarly purposes rather than to roll the dice on the future of philosophy. Those wishing the latter have generally steered toward the Quartier latin of Paris. But now Gabriel, well connected and with seemingly boundless energy, is quickly developing Bonn into an alternate centre of activity. If Germany re-emerges as a leading site of new continental philosophy, as history suggests it will, it seems likely that Gabriel will play a role in this development. His influential Summer School in Bonn consistently draws the most promising students in the field, and his impressive parade of invited speakers in Bonn sets a standard that is hard to match.

Second, it is difficult to imagine that anyone stands in the midst of more currents in present-day philosophy than Gabriel. The appearance of the present book in the Speculative Realism series bears witness to his serious engagement with this recent school, which he alone has brought into contact with the Italian New Realism of Maurizio Ferraris, that renegade former heir of Gianni Vattimo. But as the present book will demonstrate, Gabriel is also thoroughly conversant with analytic philosophy, devouring the works of Kripke and Putnam, Sellars and Searle, as ravenously as those of Badiou and Žižek. Indeed, many continentally-inclined readers might have the first impression that Fields of Sense is primarily a work of analytic philosophy. But the diverse character of Gabriel’s references, his convincing way of weaving together different traditions, is a probable early signal that the analytic/continental divide (whose end has often been prematurely declared) may actually end in our own lifetimes.

I will end this Preface with only a brief overview of Fields of Sense, since Gabriel is his own best explicator. Gabriel is himself a
realist: a standpoint that has been deeply unpopular in continental philosophy since long before Husserl and Heidegger. Yet Gabriel also rejects what he calls the ‘old’ or ‘metaphysical’ realism. One problem with the old realism is that it cannot account for the grain of truth in relativism: the fact that the existence of entities such as mountains seems to require some individuating work on the part of human-sized beings for whom certain bumps on the surface of the earth are more relevant than others, and who make certain arbitrary decisions about where the bumps end or begin. Another problem is that at least some versions of the old realism insist on mind-independence in such an extreme fashion that they automatically exclude minds from existence, in an attempt to turn everything into just a third-person description of what it is. Gabriel is no eliminativist; he insists that philosophy must come to grips even with the sheer illusions that occur in consciousness, rather than exterminating all naïve ‘folk’ descriptions of reality as the price of doing philosophical business. Gabriel’s position, which he calls New Ontological Realism, is that the constructivism of individual perspectives must be grounded in a reality that is itself not necessarily constructed. As he puts it in his helpful Introduction: ‘The fact that Mount Etna looks like a mountain to me and like a valley to the Martian are relational facts involving Mount Etna itself and not just facts involving me or the Martian’.4 Or more generally, ‘metaphysical (old) realism is exclusively interested in the world without spectators whereas constructivism is exclusively interested in the world of the spectators . . . New ontological realism accordingly occupies middle ground by recognizing the existence of perspectives and constructions as world-involving relations’.5

This is why Gabriel abandons the anti-realist connotations of the word ‘perspectives’ and replaces it with the Frege-inspired term ‘senses’. While perspectives are generally taken to be a matter of how humans look at objects, Gabriel takes senses to be properties of objects themselves. This explains how a book called Fields of Sense can be realist in spirit, rather than defending an epistemology of the senses that things have for human speakers and observers. Unlike object-oriented philosophy, which speaks of a gaping chasm between real objects and their sensual counterparts, Gabriel acknowledges no such gap, and instead treats concepts and objects as cut from the same cloth. In the terms of analytic philosophy, this leads Gabriel to defend a descriptivist theory of reference even in the face of Kripke’s powerful objections to any
such theory. The argument of Kripke is that we can easily refer to objects despite using bad descriptions (such as ‘Columbus is the one who discovered America’ or ‘Einstein invented the atomic bomb’), and therefore that we can refer ‘rigidly’ to Columbus or Einstein even if all of our descriptions of them turn out to be utterly false. But Gabriel counters boldly:

all this proves is that we can refer to objects with bad descriptions, which does not amount to an argument that objects can exist independently of all the descriptions that indeed hold good of them. The claim that there are no objects below the threshold of senses (ontological descriptivism) is not in conflict with Kripke’s insight for a theory of reference.6

Gabriel shows how an entire system of philosophy follows from his initial insight into the uniform status of concepts and objects. Gabriel’s intriguing fusion of realism with descriptivism also helps explain how he can simultaneously defend both realism and German Idealism, an unlikely two-step that he performs quite differently from other contemporary authors. On that note, I leave the reader to enjoy the lucid argumentation of Gabriel’s Fields of Sense.

Graham Harman
Cairo
June 2014

Notes

4. p. 10.
5. p. 11.
Author’s Preface

Luckily, there are many people I have to thank for having contributed in different ways to the publication of this book. There are so many of them, in fact, that I am not able to mention everybody to the extent they deserve. This book was mostly written during my visiting professorship at UC Berkeley in the spring semester of 2013. During that time I had various occasions to talk with colleagues in the department of philosophy, occasions from which I highly profited. I would like to thank Hans Sluga for making my visit possible, for pushing me on many details in epistemology, and for improving my understanding of Wittgenstein. Many thanks to John Searle, who regularly formulated important objections to some of the ideas presented here in his notoriously and profoundly clear manner. It was great to be his office neighbour. I would like to thank the department for inviting me, and all the students who influenced me. Most particularly, I owe a lot to discussions with Umrao Sethi, who was kind enough to provide me with very detailed critical comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

I have presented the ideas that led to this book in various seminars in Bonn, Naples, Beijing, Porto Alegre and Palermo, as well as in lectures in many other places. I tried to accommodate as many of the insights that I was able to bring home from these trips as possible. Many thanks also to my home institution, the University of Bonn, with its International Centre for Philosophy and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg ‘Law as Culture’, which generously granted me a series of sabbaticals.

I also learned a lot from the International Summer School on ‘The Ontological Turn’ hosted at Bonn in July 2012, where I profited from very open-minded and lively discussions with Graham Harman, Iain Grant and Ray Brassier. In Bonn, my thanks go to Wolfram Hogrebe, Michael Forster and my research team Jens
Rometsch, Abby Rutherford, Marin Geier, Dorothee Schmitt and Max Kötter. They all regularly presented me with objections and forced me to clarify my views. Regular discussions on the topics of this book took place in conversations with other graduate students as well. Special thanks go to Marius Bartmann and Conrad Baetzel. Special thanks also to Abby Rutherford for reading so many different drafts of this manuscript, for correcting the language, and for pushing me to acknowledge that metaphysics is still a meaningful practice even if we divorce it from the – in my view – misguided idea that there is such a thing as the fundamental nature of reality.

The final version of the manuscript was written during my stay at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies in the winter semester 2013/2014. I thank the Institute and the University of Freiburg for the invitation and all the colleagues who discussed some of the ideas presented here at the Freiburg philosophical colloquium at FRIAS and during private meetings. I am thinking in particular of Günter Figal, David Espinet, James Conant, Anton Koch, Tobias Keiling and Nikola Mirkovic.

This book also contains repercussions of my time as a DAAD post-doc at New York University, where Thomas Nagel (who was then writing *Mind and Cosmos*) and Paul Boghossian (who was then writing *Fear of Knowledge*) convinced me of the one-sidedness of relativist and constructivist tendencies in my earlier way of thinking about knowledge and justification. I also owe a lot to Crispin Wright and his work in epistemology. This influence crystallised in my book *An den Grenzen der Erkenntnistheorie*, in which I first spelled out the idea that the recent discussion of sceptical paradoxes is substantially related to the German Idealist discussion of the problem of the existence of the world (though not of the external world, which is an entirely different topic!). My ideas about the degree of relevance of German Idealism for contemporary epistemology, ontology and philosophy of mind have also been shaped by recent discussions with James Conant, Robert Pippin, Jonathan Lear, Manfred Frank and Sebastian Rödl.

This book is the much more detailed counterpart to my introduction to the topics discussed here in my *Why the World does not Exist*. Together with Meillassoux' *After Finitude*, Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*, Boghossian’s *Fear of Knowledge* and the work of Maurizio Ferraris from *Goodbye, Kant!*, *Why the World does not Exist* has lead to a renewal of the realism debate in German
contemporary philosophy under the heading of a ‘new realism’. In this context, I would express my gratitude to Maurizio Ferraris, who suggested thinking of the sea-change in contemporary philosophy as it is practiced in Italy, France and Germany in terms of a new realism. Many thanks to all the participants in the international conference on *Prospects for a New Realism*, which was hosted at the International Centre for Philosophy at the University of Bonn in 2012, and which brought renowned philosophers from the USA, Italy and Germany together in an effort to spell out the consequences of the failure of the exaggerated forms of constructivism that have haunted the humanities for decades.

This might be the right place to emphasise that I reject the idea that there are such entities as analytic and continental philosophy. If ‘analytic philosophy’ means a commitment to clearly expressed arguments and the willingness to revise arguments and give up beliefs in light of better counter-arguments, all philosophy is analytic, and what is not is mere rhetoric or metaphor-mongering. Where it means anything more (such as the famous respect for ‘science’, or for ‘common sense’), it usually is just a form of dogmatism or scientistic distortion of the activity traditionally called philosophy. If ‘continental’ philosophy means ‘philosophy’ as it is practiced in continental Europe, there is no continental philosophy, as philosophy in continental Europe is just like philosophy anywhere else: an attempt to deal with concepts fundamental to our self-description as rational animals under the condition that we are able to articulate them in more concise and coherent ways than they are often used loosely in everyday life and in the other sciences. Like a ‘continental’ breakfast you cannot find ‘continental’ philosophy in Europe, just as there is no such thing as a unified ‘Anglo-American analytic’ philosophy. If there were such specific national practices, it would undermine the claim to universal rationality and the willingness to revise arguments in light of better arguments regardless of who presents them. In short, the categories of analytic and continental philosophy are often merely used in order to prevent bad philosophy from being criticised by people who do not belong to the group of those sharing a particular set of beliefs or parochial standards of justification.

It seems to me that there is a climate change in global academia away from the constructivist or relativist idea that somehow our thinking is radically shaped by our various group memberships to the genuinely universalist idea that philosophy can only be
practiced if we believe in the overall unity of reason or rationality, which corresponds to Habermas’ famous phrase of the ‘unity of reason in the diversity of its voices’. Such a commitment to the universality of reason should have repercussions for our thinking about the unity of philosophy as such, and my hope is that the realism-label might lead to a broader acceptance of both: 1. that thinkers somehow stem from local traditions and that this, 2. does not mean that they have to make an irrational or unintelligible leap when confronted with people who were brought up in different circles of philosophers.

Having said that, my own way of approaching the topics presented in this book was shaped during my Heidelberg upbringing as a graduate student. There is a sense in which this book comes from the tradition of German philosophy, where this just means that I am used to taking philosophers such as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Gadamer or Husserl seriously. I neither grant privilege to the living nor to the dead, as long as they can teach me how to enhance my views about the role played by the concepts we traditionally deem central in theoretical philosophy, such as knowledge, being and its modalities, justification or the mind.
Introduction

According to common wisdom, ontology concerns what there is, or rather, what there really is. In one breath, it is often supposed to be concerned with the problem of how reality is regardless of our preconceived opinions regarding its composition. Against this background, it is no surprise that ontology since its very beginnings from the Eleatics onwards is infamous for flying in the face of common sense. The answer to the question of what ‘being’ means is originally presented as a sort of superhuman insight that transcends the mere opinions of mortals who are confounded by illusions such as that some bodies move, that there are mesoscopic stable bodies, or even with the illusion that there are manifold things or objects. Instead, we are told, ontologists get to the bottom of things, they dig out the ‘fundamental nature of reality’ behind the appearances. In this picture, ontology and metaphysics are combined, and ontology is introduced not just as an answer to the question of what it means for something to be or for something to exist (and more precariously not to be or not to exist), but rather as deeply concerned with the opposition of reality and appearance. Since then, ontology and metaphysics have regularly been identified. In the current literature, they are often used interchangeably as names for the investigation into the fundamental nature of reality, where ‘reality’ seems to contrast with ‘appearance’. What is more, reality is treated as a unified domain that goes by the common name of ‘the world’.

Ontology – the investigation concerned with being – in this somewhat unclear division of labour is ancillary to metaphysics, or the investigation concerned with (unified) reality insofar as it contrasts with appearance. Moreover, metaphysics is seen as the most substantive investigation into the very concept of substance, an enterprise that began with the Presocratics and is still with
us today. The manifold twists and turns of ancient metaphysics indeed all hinge on the notion that there is a fundamental distinction between ‘how things really are’ (in one word: being, ὄν, ἐόν), on the one hand, and how our presence among these things potentially distorts them so as to give rise to illusory appearances. Metaphysics and ontology are thereby treated as dealing with the same domain of objects, with what there really is.

Despite prominent efforts over the last two hundred years of philosophy to alter this propensity to think of philosophy in terms of a strict dichotomy of unified reality (a.k.a. the world) and appearance (a.k.a. the mind), from Kant’s dissociation of epistemology from metaphysics to the critique of metaphysics in Heidegger, Carnap, Wittgenstein, Rorty and Derrida (to name but a few milestones in this history), contemporary ontology has returned to mostly materialist variations of Presocratic metaphysics with a hint of Plato and Aristotle. In contemporary ontology/metaphysics ‘the fundamental nature of reality’ is a constantly recurring formulation. Russell perhaps set the tone with his definition of ‘reality’ as ‘everything you would have to mention in a complete description of the world’. Of course, the methods and the degree of logical sophistication underpinning recent metaphysical arguments significantly differ from the era of Democritus. Yet, the world picture we are expected to accept from the outset uncannily resembles the age-old idea of ‘atoms in the void’ aided by the projection of quantificational structure onto the raw physical and in itself neatly individuated material. A good deal of the work that has triggered recent debates – most prominently the ontological and meta-ontological debates found in Carnap, Quine and David Lewis – is premised on the materialist idea that what there (fundamentally) is is adequately defined by physics, such that we now only need to subtract human projections from what there (fundamentally) is in order to unmask reality. Reality seems to be everything but the illusion that it is more than what physics tells us. Of course, claims of this sort need a lot of additional support, in particular, because they will always be forced to accept the reality of the illusions themselves while unmasking them.

The tendency to look for reality on this side of the illusion also explains the ongoing debate about mereological composition, that is, the debate about the question of whether reality in itself consists of any possible composition of chunks of matter including temporal parts of four-dimensional objects. Here the idea is that
if reality is fundamentally physical reality and if the latter is four-
dimensional space-time, then there seems to be a sense in which
my table right now is only a temporal part of my overall table,
which would be a four-dimensional object stretching through
time in the same sense in which it is extended in space. As a lover
says in a recent novel by Ferdinand von Schirach, ‘You are never
totally there. There is always only a part of you, but another part
of you is not there.’

There are various diagnoses as to what has gone wrong for
this discussion to take place. Whereas G. E. Moore substantially
changed philosophy by referring to his hands, making it sober up
from its metaphysical torpor, contemporary ontologists seriously
debate whether in addition to hands there are also fists, or whether
fists are really nothing but hands arranged fist-wise. Sebastian
Rödl has made an interesting case to the effect that the underlying
confusion in such debates results from a misguided conception
of the nature of time. Others, such as Eli Hirsch, argue that
the distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics
should be applied to contemporary ontology as well so that we can
safeguard trivial common-sense existential assertions from onto-
logical destruction. Hirsch, however, continues to treat ontology
and metaphysics as the same investigation, maybe seen from
different angles (the one, ontology, as primarily concerned with
existence; the other, metaphysics, as primarily concerned with the
difference between reality and appearance, say). Object-oriented
philosophers, most particularly Graham Harman, make use of
Heidegger’s insistence that we must not ontologically undermine
‘the thing’, that is, the real things presented to us in meaning-
ful interaction with the world. Interestingly, Harman adds that
besides undermining in the form of the search for a miniscule
fundamental reality, traditionally there are also manoeuvres of
‘overmining’ mesoscopic things by grounding them top-down in
overall general eidetic structures such as transcendental conscious-
ness or what have you.

It is remarkable how many terms Jonathan Schaffer uses to refer
to the big integrated single substance: cosmos, reality, the world
as a whole, the universe as a whole, the whole material universe (= the cosmos). ‘The existence of such a thing claims intuitive
and empirical support.’ Here he refers to ‘the whole material
universe’. I have no idea what the intuitive support for this would
be. In a footnote Schaffer gives his ‘reasons’ for this: “cosmos”
derives from the Greek “κόσμος” for order, and served as a title of a 1980s public television series featuring Carl Sagan’. As Schaffer thereby acknowledges, the Greek word does not refer to the whole material universe, but to a certain conception of order. This leaves us with his second argument for the intuitiveness of the notion: the existence of a 1980s public television series. This argument deserves no comment and almost certainly is intended as irony (or so I hope).

He also briefly tells us what the ‘empirical support’ is supposed to be: ‘Empirically, the cosmos is an entity posited in physics, and indeed the subject of cosmology.’ However, if an entity is posited by some investigation, this certainly does not entail that we thereby have empirical evidence for it. Witches are posited by the investigation called ‘witch hunting’, which does not entail that we have empirical evidence for witches. Lastly, Schaffer hints at a genuine argument when he writes: ‘Only the most radical views of mereological composition, contravening both intuition and science, could refuse the cosmos.’ He has not provided any valid argument to the effect that intuition or science require the kind of thing he posits as a meta-physician, so all his arguments must hinge on the claim that only certain or even ‘the most radical views of mereological composition’ might be able to ‘refuse the cosmos’. But even granted that we can make reasonable metaphysical sense of the almost maximally unclear term ‘the cosmos’ – which I regard as the expression of our ‘oceanic’ feeling of unity with an alleged whole – this still leaves it open to think of the cosmos as only one domain among many, which would come close to the view defended in this book.

On the scale of the investigation associated with metaphysical micro-fundamentalism, or generally the search for ‘fundamental reality’, many issues in contemporary ontology turn on decisions regarding the reality of ‘moderate sized specimens of dry goods’, as Austin famously put it. In a different vein, but with roughly the same intention, Stanley Cavell speaks of the ‘generic object’, whose nature and independent reality has been discussed in philosophy from the ancient towers and bent sticks to the modern apples, tables and chairs. Yet, as Cavell has reminded us, we should not generalise on the basis of these examples such that in the end bubble chambers, governments, or love affairs somehow begin to look ontologically defective to us.

The terrain of ontology is huge, both in its historical and its
contemporary ramifications. Many new disciplines have entered the scene, designed in order to establish common methodological ground, such as meta-metaphysics and metaontology.\textsuperscript{16} Be that as it may, I believe that many assumptions underlying all of the discussions hinted at in the previous paragraphs are fundamentally flawed beyond repair. Against this background, this book is an attempt to shed new light on the questions traditionally dealt with under the heading of ‘ontology’ and ‘metaphysics’ by giving up two ideas: first, the association of ontology and metaphysics, and second, the idea that there is or ought to be a unified totality of what there is, whether you call it ‘the world’, ‘being’, or ‘reality’. In order to begin the actual work of this book, it is crucial that I present you with a preliminary understanding of the terms I will use throughout.

\textbf{Ontology} is the systematic investigation into the meaning of ‘existence’, or rather the investigation of existence itself aided by insight into the meaning of ‘existence’. Of course, there are traditional problems deriving from the concept of ‘being’, and my understanding of ontology as primarily concerned with existence will not solve all of the issues raised in these debates. However, ‘being’ is notoriously affected with ambiguities, such as its different uses in existential and identity statements, not to mention the problem of the copula. Even worse, the distinction between ‘being’ and ‘existence’ is traditionally associated with the modalities ‘possibility’ and ‘actuality’, such that possible objects have at least being, but not existence, which was supposed to help explain God’s capacity for creating new objects or objects at all. These associations, however, are already part of what I reject by dissociating ontology from metaphysics. I give up the concept of being on the ground that it is a philosophical invention designed to account for the quasi-existence of \textit{possibilia}, \textit{impossibilia}, the future, intentional inexistence, or other candidates to be treated as evidence in favour of Meinongianism. I accept the objection most clearly articulated by Kant that ‘being’ is not only said in manifold ways, but that ‘being’ in the existential sense, ‘being’ in the sense of the copula and ‘being’ in the identity sense of ‘\(x\) is \(y\)’, do not jointly make up a category of ‘being’, let alone being as the most universal concept, kind, or genus. In this regard, there is no question of being just as there is no question of banks. Whether you mean by ‘bank’ the bank of a river or the Bank of America, they are not different manifestations of the same thing. Nevertheless,
there are successor problems to the ancient riddle of being, problems I will cast in terms of existence.

Metaphysics is a combination of (a) an account of reality versus appearance, and (b) a theory of totality, a theory I also refer to as the investigation of the world as world. There are many forms this can take.\(^{17}\) Metaphysics can understand totality as an overall entity, for instance, the universe in the sense of a maximally spatio-temporarily extended thing, or it can understand it as some more complicated substance (as we see in Spinoza). It can also understand totality as the totality of facts. It is important to bear in mind that the idea that totality is projected as a regulative idea by our conceptualisation of it (Kant), or that it is an ultimate horizon (Husserl), or that it is a discursive presupposition of successful communication (Habermas) is as metaphysical as the more straightforward idea that totality is independent of us and any of our discursive practices or conditions of awareness. Roughly, metaphysics originates in the desire to uncover reality as it is in itself, where this means reality independently of what we add to it by thinking about it. This typically turns reality into the totality of what is the case anyway, an idea Bernard Williams has summed up as ‘the absolute conception of reality’.\(^{18}\) Even if totality is not always the explicit topic in the attempt to say what reality is in opposition to appearance, the idea will always be that reality is unified, for instance, by being what it is ‘regardless of the activities, if any, of knowing and acting subjects’.\(^{19}\) In this understanding, we have to deal with a dualism of reality and appearance, where the first is unified by being in itself and the second by how it appears to us.

This gives rise to all sorts of familiar manoeuvres either for bridging this gap or for arguing that it does no further harm to theory-building. Nevertheless, even if one tries to retain a dualism of reality in itself and its appearance for us, there will be a further question regarding the domain unifying the two into the overall domain of what there is. Unless one wants to eliminate the appearances by claiming that they do not really exist, one has to accommodate them into a larger world-picture as long as one operates within the metaphysical project.

Metaphysics takes many shapes, but all metaphysical theories arguably agree that there is a unified overall reality, the world, which is at least unified by the fact that everything that exists co-exists in that domain. Depending on further theoretical choices
often relating to our preferred answer to the question of how reality is defined in opposition to appearance, there will be a variety of ways of spelling out what it means for objects to co-exist in the world. A bit more technically, the postulated domain of unified total overall reality corresponds to the idea of unrestricted quantification. One familiar methodological idea in contemporary metaphysics is to think of the world in terms of quantification. Then one might say that the appearances are generated by contextually defined, perhaps vague and messy, levels of restricted quantification. For instance, if one identifies the range of unrestricted (metaphysical) quantifiers with the objects in the domain of the universe and the latter with whatever is studied by microphysics, fridges and beer will turn out to be appearances. They are not real or not really real. However, it makes sense to speak of them in a restricted way. ‘Fridge’ might be shorthand for a complicated description of a space-time region not mentioning fridges. On the adequate metaphysical picture, there really are no fridges, as fridges only turn out to be random mereological sums of the micro-particles they are composed of, such that fridges are not sufficiently different from any old merely disjunctive entity. If we say that there are fridges, we are supposed to say that there are fridges in a way analogous to the way in which we say that there is beer. If we say that there is beer, we usually say that there is beer somewhere, for instance, in the fridge. The question, ‘Is there any beer?’ in common parlance most of the time does not mean, ‘Does beer exist at all?’ but only wonders whether there is any beer in the fridge or, say, close enough to the party location so that someone can go and fetch it.

Unrestricted quantification, on the contrary, is supposed to satisfy the metaphysical desire; it asks after some object or other’s real or ultimate existence by asking whether it or its kind exists—full stop, regardless of the contextual parameters we impose upon that reality by being interested in there being things such as beer and fridges. According to this analysis restricted quantification (the appearances) is contrasted with existence (period!) where the latter corresponds to the notion of ultimate or fundamental reality.

In this book, I defend meta-metaphysical nihilism, that is, the view that metaphysics literally talks about nothing, that there is no object or domain it refers to. I will also call this the no-world-view, that is, the view that the world does not exist. Of course, I do not mean that nothing exists, which would be metaphysical nihilism,
and which according to some readings is still a metaphysical view (whatever it might mean to hold it). I also do not intend to deny that there are meaningful ways in which we can draw a distinction between a reality and mere appearances. Yet, this distinction does not necessitate acceptance of the further claim that all realities are unified by some overall feature (existence or real existence) such that we can draw a clear enough line between how things really are and how we generally represent them.

Depending on your preferred concrete conception of what metaphysics does and studies, you will hear my negative existential assertion – that the world does not exist – differently. For some, I will deny that there is a unified entity, which goes by the names of ‘the world’, ‘reality’, or maybe even ‘nature’.21 For others, I will deny that there is a unified domain of facts, the single all-encompassing ‘sphere of objects’ unified by some conceptual operation or other.22 For yet another group, I will deny that there is absolutely unrestricted quantification or that the stipulation of an absolutely unrestricted universal quantifier has any meaning. For the latter group, I will give somewhat detailed arguments to that effect, which vary in scope and impact, as I do not only deny that there is unrestricted quantification full stop, but more particularly argue that even if there were unrestricted quantification in some sense, this would not lead to any increase of knowledge in either metaphysics or ontology. I do not believe that existence is relevantly tied to quantification at all. I reject the idea that the meaning of ‘existence’ can be fully or relevantly captured by the language of quantification. I also reject the idea that existence is relevantly bound up with the concepts we use in order to understand or practice set theory. Existence is just not a particularly mathematical or logical concept, as there are vague and messy objects of all kinds, and also incomplete objects, like half a cake, that do not immediately fit the bill of the idea of discretely individuated objects spread out in a domain independent of any human activity. Why understand ‘half a cake’ as ‘one half-cake’? The idea that ‘$1/2$’ is unified so as to be individuated as this-rather-than-that-number certainly does not require the mathematical concept of ‘$1$’. Individuating unification is not per se related to the mathematical concept of ‘$1$’.

Despite the fact that I am a meta-metaphysical nihilist and that I will make use of arguments somewhat similar to those sometimes deployed by Hilary Putnam in his fight against metaphysical realism, I am a fully-fledged ontological realist. As a matter of fact,
in this book I will lay out a new realist ontology. The originality of the approach can be brought out with a very simple example. Let us say that we are standing in front of a particular volcano, perhaps Mount Etna in Sicily. To make things simple, follow me in granting that there are volcanoes. Metaphysical (that is, old) realism about volcanoes would traditionally claim that there really is a volcano in this particular space-time region regardless of how we might relate to this fact. This would mean that there is exactly one somewhat complicated description fully individuating the volcano, a story about the volcano that essentially does not involve our ways of individuating it by our sense organs or by anything we add to the mountain in its sheer mountainhood in the semantically cold universe. To be a realist in the old sense is to associate realism with a reality in any sense independent of how we think of it, or even worse, to associate a commitment to realism with commitment to mind-independence. Accordingly, anti-realism about this volcano would insist that we somehow create the volcano by individuating it.

One line of argument for anti-realism about volcanoes could base itself on a general anti-realism about mountains and valleys. Evidently, when we divide a region up into a mountain and a valley, we approach it from a particular perspective, namely from the perspective of creatures standing on planet earth. But what if some Martian came to earth who had evolved in such a way that it walks on its left hand and can defy gravity in unexpected ways. From this spatial perspective, it sometimes will seem as if it walks down a mountain when it approaches what we call ‘the mountain’ from what we call ‘the valley’. This argument is supposed to establish that ‘mountain’ and ‘valley’ are interest relative, essentially perspectival concepts. One of the protagonists in Ferdinand von Schirach’s novel Tabu interestingly makes a case to the effect that Switzerland is almost as big as Argentina. His argument is quite simple: If you stretch the mountains in Switzerland, you would see that its surface is much bigger than its somewhat compact manifestation would make you believe. From this perspective, the mountains dissolve in the concept of the overall surface occupied by a country. They become, as it were, mere modes of a more encompassing substance, Switzerland; they look like bumps in Switzerland without sufficient ontological independence. If realism is tied to maximal mind-independence, one can use arguments from Martians or general ethnological speculation in order to undermine
quite a few categories. In the most extreme case, this amounts to radical constructivism in the sense that we create all things by individuating them (although perhaps out of the prime matter of which they are made).\textsuperscript{24} I take it that anti-realism has a point, but that there is a realist interpretation of that point that does not turn acceptance of mountains, governments, love affairs and electrons into a matter of convention, as Putnam claims. By this I mean that a complete understanding of the existence of mountains and love affairs need not mention any convention according to which we agree that the term ‘object’ can be made to cover these affairs. There is no potentially hidden act of constitution, convention or decision reference to which puts us into a better position to understand the very existence of mountains and love affairs.

There are many reasons why old realism fails. Another important one is that it rules out the reality of the mind by its criterion of reality as the domain of everything that is metaphysically objective, meaning accessible from the third-person perspective alone. But why would the mind be less real than proteins or electrons just because it is evidently mind-dependent in some sense? Why would we even engage in the business of reducing the mind by trying to get rid of the word in our vocabulary designed to give an account of the stock of reality unless we have already decided to treat as real only that which is mind-independent in any sense of the term?\textsuperscript{25} In addition to the fact that subjectivity exists and the fact that it also harbours illusions whose real existence we should not deny, but rather study for the sake of self-knowledge, minds bring with them the fact of conceptual relativity in Hilary Putnam’s sense. The fact that we can describe situations in different ways depending on what we count as an object, as real, or as really existing, needs to be accounted for and old (metaphysical) realism has a hard time allowing for the claim that there is anything conventional or theory-laden in the acceptance of the existence of the denizens of reality.

New ontological realism claims that any perspective on Mount Etna is as real and ‘out there’ as Mount Etna itself. The fact that Mount Etna looks like a mountain to me and like a valley to the Martian are relational facts involving Mount Etna itself and not just facts involving me or the Martian. New realism, then, is the idea that in order to be a realist there is no need to introduce the idea of mind-, or more generally, perspective-independent reality. In my view, then, realism fundamentally contrasts with
constructivism, as the fact that we bring forth (construct) criteria of the identity of objects should be taken as evidence that the objects themselves need not be subject to these criteria. The language of construction serves to introduce a distinction between what we contribute to experience and what the objects or things in themselves contribute. But this overlooks the option that our constructions serve to individuate objects that are not necessarily themselves constructions.

For the sake of an introduction to the view defended in this book, one could simplify further and say that metaphysical (old) realism is exclusively interested in the world without spectators, whereas constructivism is exclusively interested in the world of the spectators (oscillating between phenomenologically bracketing the world without spectators and its outright denial). New ontological realism accordingly occupies middle ground by recognising the existence of perspectives and constructions as world-involving relations.

Of course, the no-world-view ultimately makes it impossible for me to put things as simply as that, given that I reject the idea that there is a world on the one hand and a mind on the other hand from the outset. I do not believe that mind and world can be sufficiently unified each on their own so as to give rise to their even potential duality. This will be defended in this book under the headings of ontological and epistemological pluralism respectively, where these chapters claim that there is neither a unified domain of perspective-independent existence nor a unified domain of (human) knowledge as such. Just as I am not a metaphysical nihilist, I am also not a sceptic. To claim that there is no unified object, which goes by the name of ‘(human) knowledge as such’ need not be to claim that no one knows anything. More precisely, I will argue that the unification of forms of knowledge can at the very least not be achieved via its overall relation to the world, where different forms of knowledge would correspond to different sectors of the world or reality. There are further reasons why knowledge cannot be unified, some of which will be discussed in Chapters 12 and 13, but the main thrust of the argument remains tied to the no-world-view. In my view, epistemological pluralism is a liberal stance in that it allows for a plurality of forms of (propositional) knowledge not unified by any such thing as the method for finding out how things are and of justifying our findings in a privileged discursive practice (in ‘science’).
While fleshing all of this out, I will replace some traditional vocabulary with a suitable ontologically realist counterpart. For instance, instead of ‘perspectives’ I will talk of ‘senses’. The relevant concept of sense derives from a certain (admittedly contentious) reading of Frege. In this reading, first, senses are objective modes of presentation associated with objects, no matter what kind of object is in question. Second, and more contentiously, senses are properties of objects and not ways of looking at them. In my reading, even in Frege the theory of sense is located primarily in ontology and belongs to a reconstruction of the meaning of existence. It is only derivatively part of a theory of knowledge- or information-acquisition, namely insofar as sense also plays a role in our understanding of linguistic meaning, which, however, is not the central function of the concept. Roughly, my idea is that Frege argues that there are no objects on this side of their manifold modes of presentation given that for him, first, to exist is to fall under a concept and, second, concepts are individuated by their senses. Concepts are just more objects. In this reading there is no category gap between senses and objects. We thereby avoid the assumption that there should be a realm of mere extension (the objects merely falling under concepts) below the threshold of modes of presentation. Senses therefore are properties, or ‘features’, of objects, as Mark Johnston has also recently suggested.

In this light, Frege disagrees with logical atomism in its Russellian version, as he does not need to postulate individuals or objects (Gegenstände) whose individuation remains a mystery and who only enter thought by being named, an idea already rejected in Plato’s Theaetetus for similar reasons.

In this context, I will defend an ontological variety of descriptivism and defend it against Kripke’s basic objection. Kripke has convincingly pointed out that unqualified descriptivism cannot be the best theory of reference, as we are able to refer to objects in our environment with bad descriptions, that is, with descriptions that do not hold good of the objects, but that nevertheless put us in contact with them. Once contact is established, we can revise the description, which seems like evidence for there being an objective (to some extent merely causal) contact with objects not mediated by our descriptive conceptions of them. However, all this proves is that we can refer to objects with bad descriptions, which does not amount to an argument that objects can exist independently of all the descriptions that indeed hold good of them. The claim
that there are no objects below the threshold of senses (ontological
 descriptivism) is not in conflict with Kripke’s insight for a theory
 of reference. I will argue that the difference between objects and
 concepts, or rather objects and senses, is functional and not sub-
 stantive, which means that senses are objects, too, depending on
 the function they fulfil. If objects are not generally considered to
 be linguistic entities, why should senses be if they individuate the
 objects? Kripke argues against descriptivism in the domain of the
 theory of linguistic meaning, whereas ontological descriptivism is
 an account of object-identity (regardless of how we manage to refer
 to objects). However, Kripke himself infers from his correct insight
 that there are natural kinds, which is part of his explanation of his
 insight. I reject this part of his explanation as unwarranted given
 that no objection against ontological descriptivism can be based
 on considerations from the theory of reference without further
 ado. At least, there is a gap in the argument. Of course, I do not
 intend to maintain that there are no objects independent of the
 linguistically articulated descriptions we use to pick out objects.
 Rather, my position is that objects are individuated by descrip-
tions that objectively hold good of them regardless of whether
 anyone is apprehending the facts about the objects. Loosely speak-
ing, senses are part of the furniture of reality, which is why reality
 can appear to us without thereby somehow being distorted. That
 the star looks like a tiny speck from here under our neurobiologi-
cal earth-bound standard conditions tells us something about how
 things really are and not just something about how they seem to
 us. This is why there can be objective optical laws, and why we
 can study the sensory equipment of other species without having
 to make a leap of faith into ‘alien subjectivity’.

 Instead of domains of objects I will talk of fields of sense, where
 a field is supposed to lay out structures for objects to appear
 within independent of our projections of criteria of identity. When
 we talk of ‘domains of objects’ or ‘sets’, there often remains a
 tendency to think of the actual demarcations of the domains of
 the sets in terms of predicates we make up or construct in order
 to make discoveries about what holds good in certain domains or
 of sets. Given that I believe that domain-like field-structures are
 laid out independent of how we settle the criteria for identifying
 them, and that this also holds in areas where we explicitly refer to
 our ways of thinking about what there is, I believe that the view
 defended in this book deserves the label of ‘ontological realism’.

 Introduction
More particularly, the new realism I am presenting here is ontological to the extent that it derives from an analysis of the concept of existence.

However, I also defend a form of epistemological realism in line with this ontological realism. Here, another sense of ‘realism’ also plays a role, namely the sense in which we are accustomed to thinking of realism as a commitment to an unhampered access to what there is, which in the best or paradigmatic cases amounts to knowledge. To some extent I agree with an old phenomenological argument according to which even if we are somehow struck by a deep illusion, such as a fairly global hallucination of a Cartesian kind, we are nevertheless confronted with a world to which we have immediate access. Any explanation according to which there are epistemic intermediaries between us and how things really are needs to account for our access to the alleged interface (whatever the specific nature of the interface: sense-data, neural states, or mental representations). Given that the interface is part of how things really are – after all, it is a structure uncovered by the critical or sceptical analysis – even in the sceptical scenario of a fairly global hallucination we are granted immediate access to how things really are. All that interface scepticism is ever able to show is that we mistake immediate access to the interface with immediate access to something else. It can never show that we do not have immediate access to anything.

The very point about introducing sceptical scenarios of the hallucination kind is to offer an alternative explanation to the one we prefer, an explanation we cannot rule out by simply insisting on our prior explanation or its superiority in terms of an inference to the best explanation. The reason for this is quite simple: the best explanation is the one which is true to the facts, and if we are struck by a global hallucination of a Cartesian kind, then the best explanation for why such-and-so seems to be the case to us is via facts involving an account explicitly mentioning the global hallucination. Yet, this is not at all good reason for a sceptical retreat, as it is rather evidence for an overall trust in our capacity to find out what is the case by being immediately confronted with it.

My argument laid out in detail in Chapter 12 is of the following form: given that there is as much reality to be accounted for in the case of a hallucination as in the case of veridical experience, there is no specific epistemological threat to genuine openness to reality in the veridical case. The hallucinatory case is, thus, as open
to reality as any other case, with the difference that the subject involved in the hallucination might not be aware of this and draw misguided conclusions on this basis. But this does not show that hallucinations are not open to reality, as long as we do not define ‘reality’ in a specific way so as to rule out the reality of hallucinations by stipulation.

Let me just briefly illustrate this point with the help of Laura, the perfect futuristic neuroscientist. Laura knows everything there is to know about hallucinations on the basis of her knowledge of the brain. However, poor Laura regularly suffers from a condition that causes her to hallucinate about Mary, the mother of God. In her hallucinations, Mary always wears a blue dress and a golden crown. Now, given Laura’s knowledge, she does not conclude that she sees Mary with her blue dress and golden crown. She is a radical atheist and does not believe in Mary in that sense. However, thanks to her neuroscientific knowledge, Laura is in a position to know something about highly specific events in her brain by being aware of Mary’s blue dress. For Laura, Mary’s blue dress is direct evidence of neural event E or of a cluster of such events C. She is not ‘taken in’ by the hallucination. Her case is, thus, similar to our veridical case where we know that there is a star very far away from where we stand by identifying a speck in the night sky as a star. Why would either of the cases be interpreted as constituting evidence for interface scepticism rather than for direct openness?

In other words, global hallucination scenarios do not really go beyond pointing out our fallibility with respect to what is the case; they do not establish that there might be epistemic intermediaries all the way up such that we are never able to make sense of ‘unproblematic openness’.30

Let us call the upshot of this the argument from facticity, versions of which I see at work both in Quentin Meillassoux’ revival of speculative philosophy and in Paul Boghossian’s major attack on the very intelligibility of constructivism.31 The argument maintains that in any explanation designed to sever any given representational system from what it is supposed to represent (with the aim of establishing that the system might be radically isolated from any kind of environment), we will sooner or later assume that the system has immediate access to some stratum of information or other. All we might hope to show, therefore, is that the nature of the information available to the representational system (be it language, consciousness, thought, cognition, knowledge, justifiable
belief-formation or what have you) might differ from the expectations inherent in the operation of the system. I might believe that my computer appears alongside my table in my subjective visual field because there is exactly a computer and a table causally interacting with my sensory capacities relevant to determining such scenes. However, the real explanation for the representational state I am in will in any event be extremely complicated, even if we look for the most straightforward naturalistic account of how I am in touch with these things, as even this account potentially involves virtually infinite (well, billions of) nerve cells as well as a very long physical and evolutionary story of how some such representational system could ever come into existence. Of course, a full account would also include a history of modern technology based on increased human knowledge, and so on. Thus, any explanation will be more complicated than the phenomenological findings, but that neither undermines their reliability nor even their accuracy given the task at hand.

As I will argue in Chapters 12 and 13, there is no way of unifying human knowledge into the concept of (human) knowledge as such that could then be undermined by some sceptical procedure so as to ground constructivist or more straightforward idealist epistemologies. There is no sense in which we can justifiably come to the conclusion that we are really ‘sealed off from the world’.32 For one thing, I will have argued that there is no such thing or unified domain as ‘the world’, but more importantly this also counterbalances the force of epistemological unification. The concept of maximally unified knowledge is the epistemological counterpart to the metaphysical attempt to unify reality.

It is hard to do ontology without speaking about the modalities. Accepting this challenge, in Chapters 10 and 11 I offer a new account of the modalities in line with the concept of existence defended in the first part of the book, in particular the no-world-view. As you can imagine, I reject the very idea of possible worlds as a remnant of metaphysics. In a certain sense I replace the language of possible worlds with something like a plurality of actual worlds, which I call fields of sense. They coexist, but they do not jointly make up one world of which they would be part or to which they would relate like descriptions to a description-free ‘flat’ world of facts. My fields of sense, therefore, are neither identical with nor fully translatable into Nelson Goodman’s worlds, nor do they serve the function of many equally good descriptions of an
underlying domain, as is the case in Eli Hirsch’s picture of the relation between quantifier variance and realism.\textsuperscript{33} Formulations such as that of ‘our ability – or apparent ability – to conceive of different ways of breaking the world up into objects’\textsuperscript{34} are misleading to the extent to which they suggest that there is a unified domain, the world, whose order we try to trace with our ways of thinking about it. This would then create worries about the adequacy or truth-aptitude of our epistemic activities. In the view defended in this book, such worries are unfounded, as any epistemic activity in any event would have to be part of the domain traditionally called ‘the world’ and even more traditionally ‘the absolute’.\textsuperscript{35} Here I provisionally agree with Hilary Putnam’s ironic remark that ‘mind and world jointly make up mind and world’.\textsuperscript{36} Yet, any such remark has to be further qualified as long as it still makes use of the idea of the world without even bothering to articulate whether there is such a thing or such a domain and what it would mean, for instance, to say of it that it is any kind of totality.\textsuperscript{37}

One way of looking at the problem is via the argument from the list. Although the argument is ultimately less accurate than the ones presented in Chapter 7 where I spell out some of the arguments for the no-world-view, it can serve as a first approximation to the point. Let us imagine that there are exactly three objects: x, y, z. Now let a fact be something that is true of something.\textsuperscript{38} For instance, it might be true of x that it is a bear and of y that it is a rabbit, whereas it could be true of z that it is a forest. There might be further facts in that world, such as the fact that the bear and the rabbit live in the forest, or that the bear regularly tries to kill the rabbit or the other way around (depending on the kind of rabbit you choose). For the sake of simplicity, let us say that there are finitely many facts about the x-y-z-world: F\textsubscript{1}, F\textsubscript{2}, ..., F\textsubscript{n}. Now we decide to write a list including all the facts in this world in which all the objects are embedded. This list would be a representation of the totality of facts, a world-picture. The problem is that the world-picture would have to be part of the world if the world really is the all-encompassing domain and not just a restricted totality such as all the beer in my fridge. In this case, then, the fact that there is a list changes the world quite drastically; it adds more objects (the writer or thinker of the list) as well as more facts involving the fact that there is a list of the totality of facts. There will always be another list we can write in order to achieve a world-picture and any list will (slightly) change the world by
adding facts and objects to it. This incompleteness is not a property of our descriptions of the world, something we could neglect when believing that there has to be a totality of facts for some reason, as this very belief implicitly draws on the idea of a list (a world-picture). Of course, we could say that the world was complete and total before we started thinking about it and our ways of thinking about it at the same time. But that would be an ad hoc change in the meaning of ‘the world’, as we would start conceiving of ‘the world’ as the world before someone tried to describe it antecedent to her description of it. But why in the world rule out the capacity to describe the world from the world in order to regain its integrity? From an ontological point of view this seems to be an arbitrary sense of reality, where ‘reality’ is understood as everything that would have been the case had no one ever been around to notice that we notice things. Why would the epistemic and semantically cold universe be a better way for the world to be itself (namely a totality of facts) than the world described by some of its inhabitants?

My suspicion is that behind the idea that reality should be conceived as something absolutely neutral so that we can be good realists lies a decision to treat the appearance of how things are to be thought of as ontologically ephemeral. Thought with its manifold ramifications sees itself as a minor side-effect of a process it is able to describe after a long ‘history’, or rather after a long in itself meaningless biological time of evolution. But this decision is unwarranted. The fact that for all we know there is no good reason for the universe evolving thinking animals (by underlying teleology, say) is irrelevant for the question of ontology.

I call the idea that understanding being is understanding life and death zoontology (see Chapter 1). Zoontology seems to underpin our evolutionary hard-wired sense of reality. I do not mean to deny that human beings are, among other things, interested in the problem of life and its relation to our epistemic activities. However, these matters are just not central to the question of ontology. It is just a parochial feature of what there is that some objects are alive and even that some objects are engaged in ontology. Nevertheless, it is true on various levels that our human form of life shapes our understanding of what is going on by providing our logical bare bones of describing facts with concretely coloured flesh.

By this I mean the following: Facts can essentially be described as things being such-and-so. More technically, a fact is a constel-
lation of objects held together by a description that holds good of the objects. ‘It is a fact that $7+5=12$’ means that it holds good of $7$ and $5$ that they jointly add up to $12$ given certain semantic restrictions on the meaning of ‘add up’ articulated by the laws of basic arithmetic (that are themselves grounded at a more fundamental level depending on the chosen philosophy of mathematics). Another way of saying that a certain description holds good of $7$ and $5$ is to say that it is true of them, which is a sense of ‘truth’ below the threshold of any representational conception of truth. Facts are truths articulated by descriptions involving objects. Now, many descriptions we gain access to are articulated via our specific sensory or otherwise information-processing equipment. For instance, our visual descriptions of a scene in the objective visual field, that is, in the field defined by what can be seen by average individuals of our species, unfold in coloured and specifically temporality ways. That objects are presented in just this way at this moment in time is how we visually describe them: a visual description is a logical and not a linguistic entity, as words certainly are not literally coloured, but trees and paintings really are. Just imagine, as Herman Melville does in his description of what it is like to be a whale, a different scopic situation, one in which the objective visual field significantly differs by being more panoramic.39 Or even more radically, imagine you had eyes on four sides of your head such that the image made possible by this equipment would always be a panoramic shot of your surroundings. In addition to the visual possibilities (and actualities given the manifold perceptual systems realised on our planet), there are different temporal possibilities and actualities due to the different life spans of animals. As Michael Theunissen has argued in his seminal book about early Greek poetry, the first articulated conception of time (prior to its philosophical fixation as physical time in Aristotle) was in terms of the life span of the human life form.40 The perceptual descriptions involved in being a fly differ from ours also along the lines of their temporalisation. I am referring to these differences only as an example of how the abstract descriptions we use in order to individuate facts come to us in specific sensory forms associated with the differentiation of our ecological niche. However, this does not make our access to an independent reality hopelessly perspectival, as we dispose of abstract descriptions of our sensory perspectives. The descriptions I am giving of our sensory equipment are not themselves sensory,
or more precisely, they belong to a different level of sense, the one associated with thinking (on this see Chapter 13). In one word, I suggest that we generally think of sensation and accordingly of perception as having the form of descriptions. In case these descriptions hold good of the objects they refer to as being a certain way, the descriptions are true of these objects and accordingly true *simpliciter*. Thus, I treat a true thought (including a true visual description of something, say as a green meadow) as a fact. True thoughts are facts, which is not to say that all facts are true thoughts. Many or most (if one could count them) facts are not exactly thoughts, but just truths, that is to say, objective mind- and representation-independent descriptions of objects. That the moon is smaller than the earth is true of moon and earth regardless of whether anyone thinks so. It would have been true of earth and moon had no one ever noticed. A thought becomes a fact by being true of earth and moon. This means that there is no more space to think of true thought (including apt sensory descriptions) as excluded from the manifold domains of what there is. On this construal, the difference between true and false thought is that true thought holds good of its object(s) whereas false thought is in part or entirely dissociated from its object(s) by not holding good of it. A true thought is a fact whereas for any false thought there is a fact to the effect that it is a false thought. A false thought is a fact only by accident, that is, by the further fact that it is a false thought. A true thought immediately is a fact; it is a property of its object(s), whereas a false thought is only a fact despite itself. One might even claim that a true thought is subject-less, which is why we can share it by transparently just referring to what it is about. A false thought, on the contrary, constitutes a subject, someone who is the object of a true thought that consists in an account as to how that subject got it wrong. This is why it is easier to communicate true thoughts, because they are essentially already shared, whereas we need a more complicated account for the emergence of false thoughts involving a theory of subjectivity.

In this book, in the epistemological chapters I will mostly focus on a description of true thought. I agree with the methodology at work in McDowell and subsequent work to the extent to which he sets out from a description of true thought in order to ‘exorcize skepticism’ rather than from a description of true-or-false thought, which might then turn into evidence for sceptical manoeuvres. Further justification for this methodological stepping-stone could
be gathered from the consideration that even false thought is embedded in facts that describe it as false thought. For any false thought or perspectively distorted sensory description there is a possible true thought to the effect that the false thought is false because of — . The description ‘—’ is a placeholder for whatever makes a thought false. What we still lack is a theory of false thought that does justice to the pluralism of the categories of the false, such as ideology, illusions, hallucination, and so on. Maybe there is room for a revival of psychoanalysis within contemporary theoretical philosophy if we start thinking of psychoanalysis not as an instrument of debunking true thought (which has often been criticised under the heading of ‘psychologism’), but rather as an instrument typically deployed in the service of descriptions of the realm of false thought. The same holds for other forms of ‘critical theory’ directed at an articulation of the manifold pathologies of human thought. Something similar might also hold for phenomenology, which would thereby restore the eighteenth and nineteenth-century meaning of the term, where ‘phenomenology’ was introduced as a name for an overall theory of error and its manifold forms. However, any such revival must live up to the standards of contemporary epistemology, which first and foremost means that it has to be re-described in terms of the achievements of realism. Staring into the abyss of false thought (and its manifold manifestations) should not lead us to the false thought that thought as such somehow tends to falsify itself or to ground itself in opposition to reality.

It is fair to say that the upshot of twentieth-century philosophy is an overall realist turn uniting all traditions of (Western) philosophy. In particular, the constructivist ‘orgies’ of constant sceptical self-denial of truth, deferral of commitment, meta-reflexivity, higher-order *epochê*, or language game relativism turned out to be misguided, as they could not accommodate the argument from facticity. If there will always be a point where we have to stop digging deeper or climbing higher, any methodology which presupposes that we could in principle always ask another question is not an option anymore.

Elisabeth Anscombe pithily remarked that we need to draw a distinction between the fact that there is always a point where we have to stop asking from the fact that we always have to stop at the same point.
Ancient and medieval philosophers – or some of them at any rate – regarded it as evident, demonstrable, that human beings must always act with some end in view, and even with some one end in view. The argument for this strikes us as rather strange. Can’t a man just do what he does, a great deal of the time? He may or may not have a reason or a purpose; and if he has a reason or purpose, it in turn may just be what he happens to want; why demand a reason or purpose for it? And why must we at last arrive at some one purpose that has an intrinsic finality about it? The old arguments were designed to show that the chain could not go on forever; they pass us by, because we are not inclined to think it must even begin; and it can surely stop where it stops, no need for it to stop at a purpose that looks intrinsically final, one and the same for all actions. In fact there appears to be an illicit transition in Aristotle, from ‘all chains must stop somewhere’ to ‘there is somewhere where all chains must stop.’

There is no overall point where we have to stop or even where we typically stop. In a more classical language, we can say that there is no ἀνυπόθετος ἀρχή, which is what Plato and Aristotle were looking for. In this sense, the ontology defended in this book is a form of anarchical realism, realism without an overall principle that organises everything, unless you want to call the no-world-view a (methodological?) principle. This might be fair to say to the extent that it defines a limited space of orientation by claiming that no move is permissible that leads to or is grounded in a world-picture.

Let me stress in conclusion that I deem it important that we not forget Heidegger’s well-justified reminder that we need to overcome ontotheology. In my understanding, ontotheology is the association of metaphysics (theory of unrestricted totality, of the world as world) with ontology (the systematic investigation into the meaning of ‘existence’). Thus, ontotheology is very much with us today, as it underlies many arguments in ontology and metaphysics that are often not separated but almost treated as synonyms. I take it that the critique of metaphysics in Heidegger and post-Heideggerian French philosophy was right to the degree to which it was explicitly directed against ontotheology and false where it turned into ‘postmodernist’ constructivist hyperbole. I leave it open whether any alleged French protagonist of ‘postmod-ernism’ in philosophy (such as Lyotard, Lacan, or Derrida) really ever was a postmodernist in this critical sense, whereas it seems
rather obvious that, at least, Richard Rorty had his fully-fledged postmodernist moments. In that sense, it seems to me that postmodernism really was an American invention, if it ever took place at all. Maybe it was just a fleeting simulacrum apparently claiming that everything is a fleeting simulacrum.

Be that as it may, Heidegger and in his wake Hans Blumenberg were right in pointing out that ontotheology still shapes our current world-pictures in virtue of the very fact that they are world-pictures. Like Wittgenstein, who made similar observations in his discussion of world-pictures and their relation to mythology, they came to the conclusion that philosophy should not be presented as a series of arguments or as a theory. Here I disagree. Being informed about the failure of ontotheology presupposes insight into fallacies involved in the formation of ontotheology. Overcoming ontotheology just means giving different arguments in the regions opened by ontotheology. We need to replace metaphysics by relevant successor disciplines, such as ontology, as metaphysics does not only affect philosophy. It largely structures our overall ways of looking at things by suggesting that there has to be a good world-picture out there. As long as we think that there are two competing ways of explaining the world, that of science and that of religion, there will always be a struggle between the two, which is both a misguided philosophy of science and even more so of religion. I am not making a relativist point of equal validity here; I am saying that neither science nor religion can amount to world-pictures. If they were essentially tied to the possibility of world-pictures (which I do not believe), we would have to consider them as erroneous and replace them with different practices.

In this book, I will leave open how we have to think about more specific ways of grasping facts assembled under the heading of ‘science’, ‘art’, or ‘religion’. I will only deal with ontology and some parts of epistemology in order to sketch the outlines of a new realist ontology, the ontology of fields of sense. Some arguments and trains of thought presented in this book will most likely turn out to be defective or not sufficiently laid out, but the book has not been written under the presumption that every single word is in its right place and that every single argument is a knock-down of its actual or potential opponents. No book, philosophical or otherwise, can achieve this, which is part of the argument of this very book. The spirit in which I think of the relation between my
interlocutors and me (including future temporal parts of me) is rather the mode of the opening of an actual dialogue, as I do not claim to have exhausted the field of ontology itself. As Schelling nicely writes towards the end of his *Freedom Essay*, which despite its romantic and somewhat inaccessible format is still among the most important works in the history of ontology:

In the future, he will also maintain the course that he has taken in the present treatise where, even if the external form of a dialogue is lacking, everything arises as a sort of dialogue. Many things here could have been more sharply defined and treated less casually, many protected more explicitly from misinterpretation. The author has refrained from doing so partially on purpose. Whoever will and cannot accept it from him thus, should accept nothing from him at all and seek other sources.\(^{45}\)

Of course, I claim knowledge by putting forward theses and analyses of philosophical concepts. This presupposes that I define their meaning to a certain degree, where the degree is determined by contextual parameters of clarity. There is no absolute clarity. As Leibniz nicely spelled out in his *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas*, there is no absolute clarity, as this would presuppose adequate intuitive knowledge of all semantic atoms articulated in the definition of the philosophical concepts we use in our analysis of other concepts.\(^{46}\) Given the impossibility of this ideal, it cannot be our driving idea of what philosophy, or any other science for that matter, is. Each philosophical argument and each philosophical train of thought is and remains one path through the indefinite jungle of possibilities. Its plausibility derives from the clarity we achieve by going through it in light of the possibility of change of entrenched but harmful ways of thinking.

I thoroughly believe that the era of world-pictures that has followed us since the axial age is governed by harmful habits of thinking that we need to overcome in the same way in which we overcame other forms of dogmatism and blindness so as to achieve a ‘progress in our consciousness of freedom’.\(^{47}\) This book provokes objections, and objections are needed in order to clarify the terrain laid out by my account.
Notes
2. See, for example, Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism*, in particular pp. 209–36.
5. Rödl, *Categories of the Temporal*.
8. Harman, ‘On the Undermining of Objects’, pp. 24–5. Ben Caplan explicitly assumes ‘that the microphysical is the fundamental’, a view he calls ‘micro-fundamentalism’ in ‘Ontological Superpluralism’, p. 108. He opposes this view to Jonathan Schaffer’s view, who holds that ‘it is the whole cosmos itself that is fundamental’. On this see Schaffer, ‘Monism’, ‘Fundamental Reality’. This discussion of ‘fundamentality’ is a nice example of the Scylla of undermining (micro-fundamentalism) and the Charybdis of overmining (metaphysical holism). Both aim at unmasking the illusion of us mortals that some ordinary things are as fundamental as need be.
10. Ibid., p. 74, fn. 12.
11. Ibid., p. 74.
12. Ibid., p. 74.
13. Let it be noted in passing that Schaffer’s constant reference to Spinoza’s concept of substance is misguided given that Spinoza’s concept of substance is not at all identical with any such thing as the whole material universe. If anything, the material universe for Spinoza would be an attribute of the substance, not the substance itself. In other passages, Schaffer points out that his views about the cosmos are based on the ontologically neutral conception of his priority monism. ‘The claim that whole is prior to part is only a claim about the dependence ordering amongst concrete objects, and is neutral on how concrete objects stand with respect to further entities such as properties and abstract objects’ (‘The Internal Relatedness of All Things’, p. 344). For him, this leaves room for different instances of priority monism. But why opt for monism if the arguments do not hinge on the conception of the cosmos as the entire material universe? Schaffer’s arguments make use of mereological considerations, and it is not clear what it would mean to apply mereological...
considerations to the composition of a poem or a nightmare. It seems to me that his arguments already presuppose what he calls 'thick particularism', that is, the view that concrete things come first in any metaphysical explanation.

16. See, for example, Chalmers et al., *Metametaphysics*, and van Inwagen, 'Meta-Ontology'.
17. Of course, there are many other conceptions of metaphysics out there. The most minimal one is to think of it in terms of an 'acceptance of a more than-physical – that is, transcendental – significance in a large number of thin sheets of wood-pulp covered with black marks such as are now before you' (Schrödinger, *My View of the World*, p. 3). In this minimal sense, this book is an exercise in metaphysics, nay, a defence of metaphysics against physicalism. I also accept a number of versions of a reality/appearance distinction. In this sense, I am also a metaphysician. However, I wholeheartedly reject any attempt to develop a 'view of the world'. Given that the totality assumption or belief in the existence of the world is probably the focal point of metaphysical theorising, I prefer to regard the discipline to which I want to contribute with this book as that of ontology as opposed to metaphysics.
19. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, p. 208: ‘The thought [my emphasis, M. G.] that that world is always already there anyway, regardless of the activities, if any, of knowing and acting subjects, has always stood as the most fundamental objection to any sort of idealism.’
20. This is suggested by Eli Hirsch. See, for instance, his *Quantifier Variance and Realism*, p. 138: ‘Our common-sense selection function [meaning: our ordinary criteria of identity for objects, M. G.], as far as one can make it out, seems to be an amorphous and intractably complex mess, containing in all likelihood disjunctive conditions and grue-like expressions.’
21. As you will see later, I do not intend to imply that nature does not exist. In my view, nature is a local domain unified by being the domain of objects investigated by whatever is the best natural science or set of natural sciences, depending on how one thinks of the unification of physics, chemistry, biology, and so on. I leave this open in this book. For an interesting defence of nihilism about nature, see Hampe, *Tunguska oder das Ende der Natur*. 


24. For an attempt to defend radical constructivism see Luhmann, ‘Erkenntnis als Konstruktion’.

25. On this see also John Searle’s arguments against both materialism and dualism in *The Rediscovery of the Mind*.

26. I evidently disagree here with the tradition of reading Frege most prominently defended by Michael Dummett in Dummett, *Frege*. One of Dummett’s achievements was that he closed the gap between Frege and Wittgenstein to the extent that he was able to see Frege as being interested in the conditions of asserting and acquiring knowledge even on the level of his semantic analysis. This reading makes him look much less like a Platonist in an objectionable sense. However, any such reading tends to be in conflict with Frege’s realist commitments. His insistence that the criterion of good thought is that all senses are anchored in what there is (that they refer in his sense of ‘Bedeutung’) was directed against the very possibility of creating the idea of thought as fundamentally different from what is the case. It is unclear to me if there really is a straight road from these commitments to untenable assumptions in our theory of meaning.

27. Cf. Johnston, ‘Objective Minds and the Objectivity of Our Minds’, p. 256: ‘But modes of presentation are not mental; they are objective, in that they come with the objects themselves as the very features of those objects that make them available for demonstration, thought and talk. And they are individuated by the objects they present.’ See also Johnston, *Saving God*, chapter 10.

28. Markus Gabriel, *Die Erkenntnis der Welt*, Ch. 2.1, pp. 45–64. For a discussion of similar issues see Gilbert Ryle’s paper on this, ‘Logical Atomism in Plato’s Theaetetus’.

29. For a recent version of this argument, see McDowell, *Mind and World*. However, McDowell’s version of the argument differs in that McDowell further derives from it reason to deny the possibility of us ever suffering from a global hallucination. This seems to be a decisive point of difference between McDowell’s disjunctivism and Husserlian phenomenology. See John McDowell, ‘The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Material for a Transcendental Argument’. However, one might attempt to read Husserl’s concept of ‘evidence’ in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* along those lines. If I understand McDowell correctly, one step in his argument is that any understanding of the very objective purport
of experience must come to terms with the possibility that we sometimes achieve direct access to objective reality. Husserlian ‘evidence’ is premised on this feature of McDowell’s disjunctivism and the notion that repeated confirmation of the structure of a given appearance speaks in favour of objective purport really being intended. In this light, Husserl secures a basis for the kind of transcendental argument McDowell envisages, a basis he takes for granted in his paper (as he believes that it can be ascribed to the sceptic herself). See McDowell, ‘The Disjunctive Conception of Experience as Material for a Transcendental Argument’, p. 380ff.

30. McDowell, Mind and World, p. 155: ‘So languages and traditions can figure not as “tertia” that would threaten to make our grip on the world philosophically problematic, but as constitutive of our unproblematic openness to the world.’ On this see Gabriel, An den Grenzen der Erkenntnistheorie, §11, pp. 297–314.

31. Meillassoux, After Finitude; Boghossian, Fear of Knowledge; and my afterword to the German edition of Paul’s book in Boghossian, Angst vor der Wahrheit, pp. 135–56. See also Gabriel, Der Neue Realismus.

32. Cavell, Claim of Reason, p. 144.

33. Hirsch himself introduces the ‘doctrine of quantifier variance’ as the claim ‘that there is no uniquely best ontological language with which to describe the world’ (Quantifier Variance and Realism, p. xii). This formulation serves the function of distinguishing his view from the view ‘that language creates reality’ (p. xvi), which he ascribes to ‘some post-modernists’ (p. xvi) he does not bother to mention by name. Against any such position he maintains: ‘What varies in quantifier variantism is only the language; everything else remains the same’ (p. xvi).

34. Hirsch, Quantifier Variance and Realism, p. 132.

35. On this see Gabriel, Transcendental Ontology, pp. 8–21.

36. Putnam, Reason, Truth and History, p. XI.

37. Remarkably, McDowell only mentions his understanding of ‘the world’ in passing. All he tells us about the world in his book on Mind and World is that it ‘is everything that is the case’ (p. 27). It remains unclear what exactly he believes about the totality-structure of the world involved in this formulation, as he is only interested in securing access to those facts by arguing that ‘there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought’ (p. 27).

38. Umrao Sethi has remarked that this definition makes it look as if mere properties were already facts on my construal. Yet, the differ-
ence is that we think of mere properties as contingently instantiated. The property of being a blue cube is contingently instantiated. It need not be true of anything. If it is instantiated, however, it is indeed a fact.

39. See Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Ch. LXXIV. For an actual biological account of the species-relativity of time-experience see Healy et al., ‘Metabolic Rate and Body Size are Linked with Perception of Temporal Information’. Thanks to Abby Rutherford for pointing this out to me.

40. Theunissen, *Pindar*.

41. McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. xxii: ‘I have tried to make it plausible that the anxieties I aim to exorcize issue from the thought – often no doubt only inchoate – that the structure of the logical space of reasons is *sui generis*, as compared with the logical framework in which natural-scientific understanding is achieved.’ See also, Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* and Rödl, *Categories of the Temporal*.


44. For a sketch of my overall approach to these areas see the chapters on science, art, and religion in *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt*.


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